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Young people from St Rose of Lima Primary School

Poverty, attainment and wellbeing: Making a difference to the lives of children and young people

Key Messages & Implications
Policy Community Focus
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Setting the Context

In Scotland, 2018 was designated the Year of Young People. Yet, we know that for many children living in poverty their life chances are significantly reduced, reflected in poorer mental health and wellbeing [1] and academic outcomes [2]. Focussing on attainment alone will not solve the problem: an holistic focus upon children and their wellbeing within the contexts of public policy, families, schools and communities is essential [3]. We have chosen to focus on early adolescence as this represents a critical stage in children's development [4, 5] when peer victimization [6] and mental health issues [7] often come to the fore, impacted by adverse childhood experiences [8, 9].

This is a complex international problem [10-12], articulated within the United Nation's global goals for sustainability [13], requiring a multi-disciplinary focus. The seminar series focussed on one of the Scottish Government's key policies – the Scottish Attainment Challenge, addressed through a wide range of legislation and initiatives [14, 15].

Through hosting a series of three international seminars (one held over two days) and working with children and young people in St Rose of Lima Primary School, Glasgow City Council and Inverclyde Academy, focussing on their sense of belonging to school, we have sought to cast light on this complex problem.

Programme Aims and Objectives

The seminar series sought to:

- Examine, through multiple disciplines and drawing upon the perspectives of academics, early adolescents, practitioners, the 3rd sector and policy makers, how the relationship between poverty, attainment and children's mental health and wellbeing is currently understood, particularly as it pertains to early adolescence, and how this understanding might be extended.
- Examine how a child's sense of belonging to school impacts upon their mental health and wellbeing and attainment.
- Enable new insights to inform international and national policy about how to address the attainment gap associated with poverty.
- Create lasting networks to foster partnership working and to create opportunities for future collaborative research.

Three International Seminars

The seminars systematically explored the relationships between poverty, attainment and children's mental health and wellbeing in order to understand the drivers of these relationships, lying at the intersection, as illustrated in figure 1. Seminar 1 explored the relationship between poverty and attainment; seminar 2 the relationship between poverty and the mental health and wellbeing of children; and seminar 3 examined the intersection between poverty, attainment and wellbeing with a specific focus on our sub-theme of a *sense of belonging to school*. The series concluded with a focus on Scottish educational policy and an exploration of the implications of what had been learned from the seminar series to inform public policy, children's services and schools.

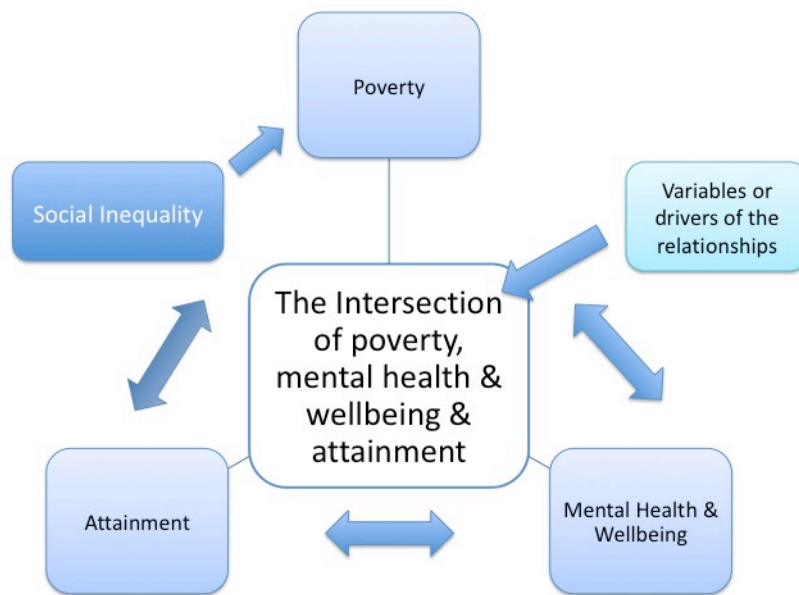


Figure 1: The relationships explored within the seminar series

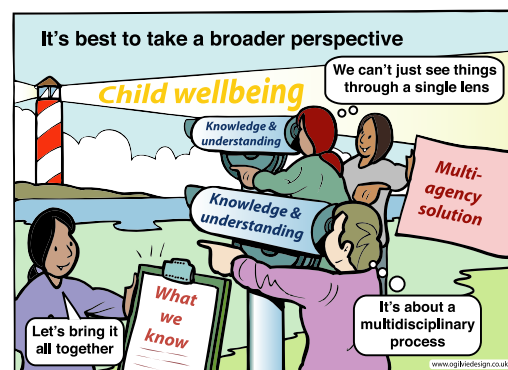
Key Insights and Implications for policy and practice

Understanding the Problem

Insight

The importance of furthering understanding of poverty and its impact on the lives of communities, families and children through a multi-disciplinary lens.

Implication



We require a multi-disciplinary perspective on the problem.

The quest to 'close the gap' requires a political solution which has an holistic focus on all aspects of public policy which have a bearing on the problem. Invest in universal public services – education, health, social, housing and employment. There is no single solution.

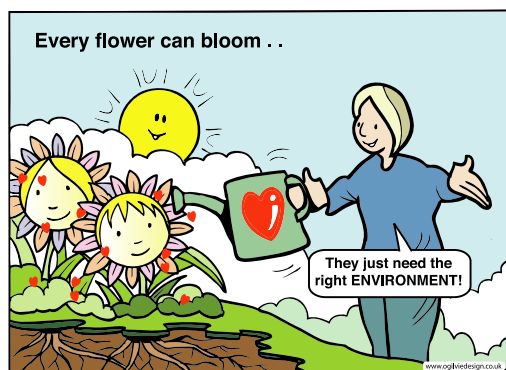
The complexity of the problem.

The attainment gap manifests itself before children commence formal schooling [16]. Disparities in mental health are in evidence when children enter

Investment in early years education should continue to be a national priority. Recognise the importance of play and play-centred pedagogy. Support caregivers through the services of health

primary school and magnify thereafter [1].

The relationship between poverty, attainment and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is complex.



The more unequal a society, the greater the impact on inequitable outcomes across the population as a whole. On a range of indicators - health, education and life satisfaction – there are poorer outcomes for children living in unequal societies [18].

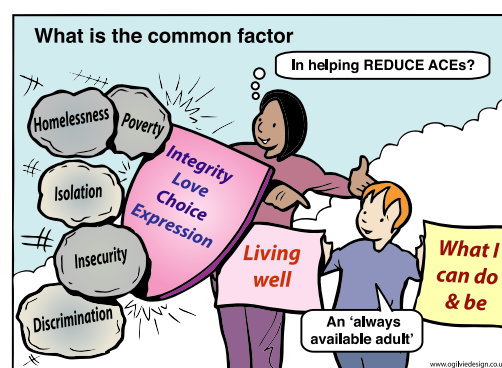
One third of children in the lowest decile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation also have Additional Support Needs (ASN) and/or are Looked After. Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs (SEBN) are significantly represented within this category [3, 19] but least likely to have a co-ordinated support plan [20].

Pupil wellbeing underpins achievement [21].

Whilst data is important to evaluate progress and inform future learning, ultimately the quest is about people and the quality of their lives. The data does not define the child and nor should labels.

workers and home-link workers.

Avoid over-simplistic solutions which individualise the problem (the answer being ‘make children more resilient’) and do not take account of the environment. The socio-cultural and political context shapes the experience of communities, families and children and may be a critical factor in the production of ACEs. A focus on nurturing capabilities may, in the long-term, be a more effective solution [17]. ‘When a flower doesn’t bloom you fix the environment, NOT the flower.’



The quest to close the poverty-related attainment gap needs to be understood within the broader framework of inequalities in society, requiring a fiscal solution.

Universal provision is important but we need to direct targeted resources towards meeting the needs of children who intersect poverty, ASN and Looked After Children and who are multiply disadvantaged, particularly those who have SEBN.

Reframe the narrative around poverty, attainment and wellbeing and prioritise health and wellbeing for all pupils – improved attainment will follow. ‘Better wellbeing – Better relationships – Better learning.’

Human relationships should be seen as pivotal in all that we do and the language that we use matters. Reflect this in the language of policy documentation but also in everyday encounters with children, young people and care-givers.

The Change Process, Impact and Sustainability

Insight

Change and impact take time.

Significant investment has been invested by the Scottish Government through the Scottish Attainment Challenge. How do we know that the funding is utilised in such a way that it is building capacity within the system (rather than short-term fixes or compensating for cuts in services elsewhere) and that interventions are sustainable?

Given the significant investment of the Scottish Government, it is only right that there are checks and balances within the system. However, there is a need to balance autonomy with accountability.

There is much stellar work going on in schools to close the gap, supported by the dedicated team at Education Scotland, and indications of progress but it can appear to be over-whelming. This can give a sense of a lack of co-ordination and overview.

A collaborative approach

Insight

Schools cannot through their efforts alone solve the problem.

Impact is dependent on strengthening inter-professional, inter-sectoral and inter-agency links such that shared understandings and common goals emerge.

Parents are central to closing the gap. Strengthening parental engagement in children's learning is a clear tenet of the Scottish Government's approach.

Implication

Investment needs to be long-term and sustainable beyond the term of a government. There is therefore a need for cross-party political consensus to ensure sustainability.

This is an appropriate point to take stock and commission independent evaluative research to ascertain impact and set the future direction of policy.

Avoid over-centralised governance of schools at all levels. Schools need to have sufficient autonomy to be able to set their own priorities and respond to local needs.

Further and strengthen the work of Education Scotland to build a coherent picture of practice. Evaluate and disseminate good practice and impact. Tell the good news stories and celebrate success.

Implication

Build strong infrastructures and networks of support around communities, families and schools with access to age-related and appropriate services at time of need [3]. Invest in services such as CAMHS, educational psychology, counselling and home-link workers.

Create the spaces and opportunities for inter-professional, inter-sectoral and inter-agency work to take place. This requires investment by the Scottish Government and intent and goodwill on the part of professionals.

Strengthening parental engagement should continue to be a priority in Scottish Government policy and in the practice of schools.

The need for research-informed practice

Insight

Public policy and practice to ‘close the gap’ needs to be research informed.

The dangers of being over-reliant on meta-studies derived from ‘big data’ which may tell us the ‘what’ but not the ‘why’ and may not be relevant to our own specific context or circumstances.

Higher Education has an important role to play in furthering understanding of the nature of the problem and its potential solutions. Also to strengthen opportunities for knowledge sharing which is multi-directional.

A skilled, reflective workforce with a rich understanding of the complexities of the problem and who have empathy towards children living in poverty is key.

The need to build capacity for research to inform practice within the system.

Implication

Invest in multi-disciplinary research and knowledge exchange to inform developments and evaluate the efficacy of public policy and interventions on the ground.

Give due consideration to mixed-methods or qualitative studies, the latter of which give insight into the experience of children, parents and school communities within their initial settings.

Strengthen the role of HEI in the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Invest in and develop Initial Teacher Education and lifelong learning opportunities for professionals which cross disciplinary boundaries, are research informed and develop understanding of poverty and its impact on wellbeing and attainment.

Foster a research culture in schools through the championing and support for practitioner and pupil enquiry, supported by the HE community and Education Scotland working in collaboration with schools.

Support for families and building on the assets of the community

Insight

Poverty is a political choice. Schools cannot remove poverty but they can work with their communities to alleviate its impact and reduce stigma through their culture and actions.

Recognition of food poverty and the need to support families outwith normal school terms.

Recognise the power of communities and work respectfully with them.

We should not be working in isolation with children without involvement from families.

Implication

Poverty proof the school through interventions such as ‘The Cost of the School Day.’ Direct families to appropriate services and raise awareness of the impact of stigma on children and young people’s lives.

Alleviate food poverty through initiatives such as breakfast and holiday clubs.

Listen to the voices of communities and recognise and build on their strengths. ‘It takes a village ...’

Adopt an holistic approach when working with children and young people to meet their needs, involving their families.

Support for schools

Insight

Schools are committed to closing the gap.

Implication

Rationalise educational policy at a national level

However, leadership teams and their staff are under increasing pressure from a multiplicity of (sometimes competing and contradictory) policies which make it very difficult to steer a clear path. Can schools be fully inclusive if success is measured by narrow attainment outcomes which take little account of the wider achievement of pupils and measure their attainment against somewhat arbitrary standards?

There can be a disjunct between policy rhetoric and reality.

Reflective and responsive practice is key.

with a clear sense of priorities emerging to guide the policy and practice of regional collaboratives, local authorities and schools. Give greater consideration as to how we can recognise the wider achievements of children and remove barriers to inclusive schooling.

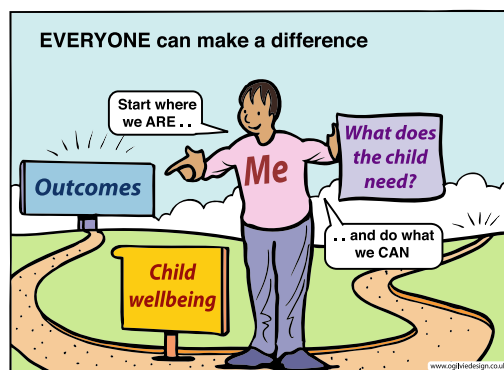
Recognise the professionalism of teachers and give credence to their voices and judgement.

Create the time and space within schools for teachers to be able to reflect on their practice and to build relationships with pupils, parents and colleagues. This may require consideration of pupil-teacher contact time and timetabling arrangements in schools.

We can make a difference

Insight

Poverty is a structural issue but we can make a difference.



Everyday interactions with children and families make a difference.

The scale of the problem is significant. However an optimistic outlook is more likely to lead to success.

We all have a responsibility towards the welfare of children and young people.

Implication

We have individual and collective agency to make a difference at an individual and community/societal level to the lives of children and young people living in poverty.

Focus on happiness, love, care, understanding, listening, kindness and connection to ameliorate the negative impact of poverty in children and young people's lives.

Be optimistic in outlook and fierce champions of children and young people.

A rights agenda should underpin our work in closing the gap and inform all of our actions.

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<https://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/OpenCall201819/PEAW.aspx>