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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

Schools Focus
Key Messages & Implications
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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.

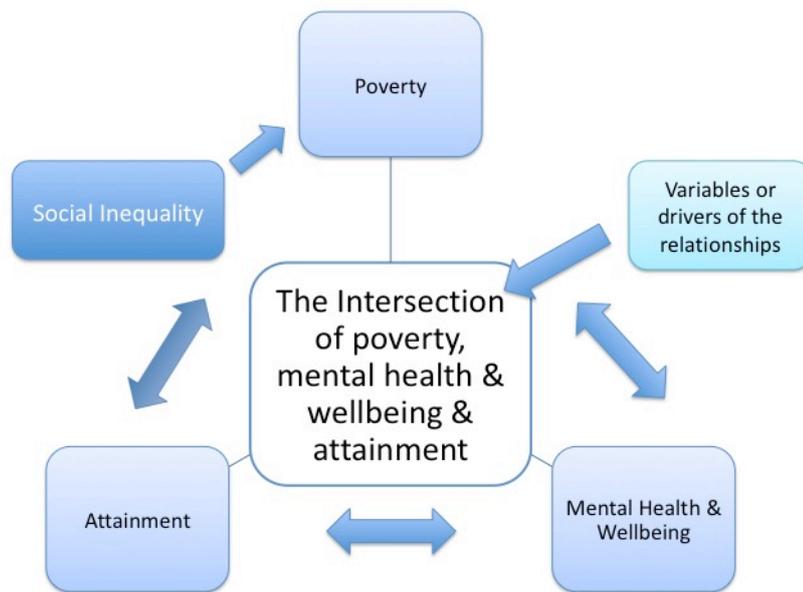


Figure 1: The relationships explored within the seminar series

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.

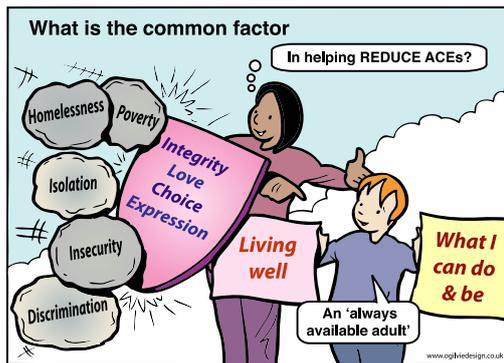


The attainment gap manifests itself before children commence formal schooling [16]. Disparities in mental health are in evidence when children enter primary school and magnify thereafter [1].

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

Investment in early years education should continue to be a national priority. Recognise the importance of play and play-centred pedagogy. Strengthen partnerships between home and school and invest in services such as 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.’

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, 18] but least likely to have a co-ordinated support plan [19].

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 with SEBN.

The Change Process, Impact and Sustainability

Insight

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.

Implication

This is an appropriate point to take stock and evaluate interventions to ascertain impact and sustainability and set the future direction of policy.

Schools need to have sufficient autonomy to be able to set their own priorities and respond to local needs.

Build a coherent picture of practice. Disseminate good practice and impact. Tell the good news stories and celebrate success.

A collaborative approach

Insight

Schools cannot through their efforts alone solve the problem.

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, speech therapy, counselling and home-link workers.

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.

Create the spaces and opportunities for inter-professional, inter-sectoral and multi-agency work to take place.

Continue to build effective partnerships with parents, strengthening parental engagement in their children's learning.

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 interventions on the ground.

Recognise the value of smaller-scale mixed-methods or qualitative studies in building a research base and in informing practice.

Build partnerships with Higher Education to inform the direction of work and support it.

Invest in 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.

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 ...'

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

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. 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.

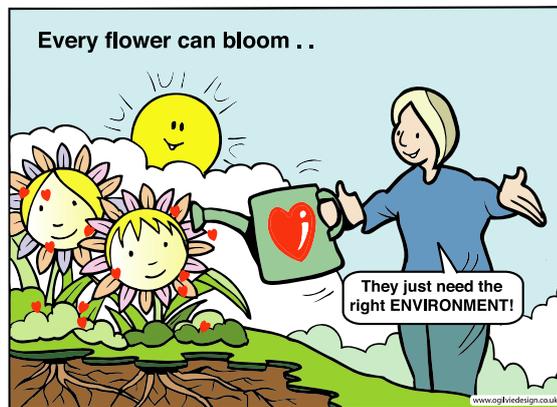
Implication

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.

School leadership, ethos and climate



Insight

A sense of belonging to school has emerged as a key variable impacting on a range of outcomes relating to pupil wellbeing and academic achievement [20].

Build capacity within the school.

Implication

Senior leadership teams need to foster a culture of trust: of respectful and affirming relationships within the school community in which all children are equally valued for who they are and there is no discrimination.

Provide opportunities and support for staff and pupils to exercise leadership across and beyond the school.

There can be no meaningful, sustainable change without authentic engagement with parents and children.

Pupil wellbeing underpins achievement [20].

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.

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.

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Parents and children need to be active agents in the change process and have a voice which is meaningful.

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.

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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All materials relating to the SUII Seminar Series can be found at:

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