

Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage

Round-up
Reviewing the evidence

September 2007

Children growing up in poverty and disadvantage are less likely to do well at school. This feeds into disadvantage in later life and in turn affects their children. To break this cycle, we need to address the attitudes and experiences that lie behind social differences in education.

This paper:

- looks at the experiences of children from different backgrounds and their attitudes to education
- summarises the messages from the first eight projects in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Education and Poverty programme

Key points

- Low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance.
- White children in poverty have on average lower educational achievement and are more likely to continue to under-achieve. Boys are more likely to have low results than girls, especially those of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and black African origin.
- Just 14 per cent of variation in individuals' performance is accounted for by school quality. Most variation is explained by other factors, underlining the need to look at the range of children's experiences, inside and outside school, when seeking to raise achievement.
- Children from different backgrounds have contrasting experiences at school. Less advantaged children are more likely to feel a lack of control over their learning, and to become reluctant recipients of the taught curriculum. This influences the development of different attitudes to education at primary school that help shape their future.
- Children from all backgrounds see the advantages of school, but deprived children are more likely to feel anxious and unconfident about school.
- Out-of-school activities can help build self-confidence. Children from advantaged backgrounds experience more structured and supervised out-of-school activities.
- Many children and young people who become disaffected with school develop strong resentments about mistreatment (such as perceived racial discrimination). Work with disaffected young people is most effective where it makes them feel more involved in their own futures. Equality of educational opportunity must address multiple aspects of disadvantaged children's lives.
- These factors are at the heart of the social divide in educational outcomes, but have not been central in solutions so far. Measures to improve the extent to which disadvantaged children engage in education are elusive, but cannot be neglected.

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Introduction

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's ***Education and Poverty programme*** has looked into the experiences and attitudes of children from different backgrounds. The findings, summarised here, show that socio-economic differences are associated with a wide range of influences on children's learning.

Some influences are felt inside school, including in the classroom, where the learning environment can interact with children's attitude towards school. Others occur outside school, but are nevertheless important for learning and development. Across these settings, children from different backgrounds have diverse experiences and develop different attitudes, despite also having many things in common. The research reported here draws not just on adults' observations, but also on children's own perceptions, considering what shapes their attitudes and how they perceive social difference.

Only by understanding these varied factors influencing social differences in education will it be possible to design effective responses in policy and practice. A key message of the evidence summarised here is that equality of educational opportunity cannot rely solely on better delivery of the school curriculum for disadvantaged groups, but must address multiple aspects of disadvantaged children's lives.

Education and poverty: a crucial relationship

The UK has one of the steepest socio-economic 'gradients' in education among similar countries (OECD 2001). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds do worse than those from advantaged backgrounds by a greater amount than elsewhere. For example, only about a quarter of students receiving free school meals gain five good GCSEs or equivalent, compared to over half of the overall population (DfES 2006). In Scotland, being in a family poor enough to qualify for free school meals halves a young person's chances of getting to Level 5 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (Scottish Executive publications 2006).

Socio-economic circumstances in childhood which result in low qualifications in adulthood help transmit poverty across generations. A primary cause of child poverty is a lack of opportunities among parents with low skills and low qualifications. Such parents are less likely to work, and if they do work they are more likely to have low earnings. The task of balancing the economic demands of raising a family and the need to find time

to devote to children is much harder for people in low-paid jobs with limited power to negotiate working arrangements. Where parents have to make a choice between low income and long hours, it is difficult to give children good life chances.

Research has shown that someone who has grown up in poverty is disadvantaged well into adulthood. This is to a large extent because people from disadvantaged homes are less likely to get good educational qualifications. There is also a separate correlation between poverty and success in mid-life. Controlling for qualifications, people in their 30s who experienced financial hardship when growing up are less likely to be doing well in the labour market (Blanden and Gibbons 2006).

Thus, the relationship between poverty and low achievement at school is part of a wider cycle in which family disadvantage is passed on from one generation to the next. Closing the opportunity gap in education is an important part of combating long-term causes of disadvantage. Yet it cannot be seen in isolation from other features of disadvantage. Some of these need to be brought into an analysis of why it is that children in poverty have worse chances at school.

The research

Cassen and Kingdon, *Tackling low educational achievement*

Quantitative analysis of PLASC, NPD and associated Census data to analyse the factors underlying low achievement, with a survey of other research in this area.

Frankham et al., *School exclusions: learning partnerships outside mainstream education*

Qualitative study examining how mentors and teachers can work productively with children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school.

Horgan, *The impact of poverty on young children's experience of school*

Qualitative study examining how poverty impacts on younger children's experience of school and looking at life in primary schools from a child-centred perspective in Northern Ireland.

Kellett and Dar, *Children researching links between poverty and literacy*

Exploration of what can we learn about education and poverty through children's own eyes when we empower them as active researchers, with recommendations for a number of approaches to increase literacy opportunities for children living in poverty.

Raffo et al., *Education and poverty: a critical review of theory, policy and practice*

Literature review including analysis of how education and poverty has been researched and the types of policies that tend to be used in addressing it.

Sutton et al., *A child's-eye view of social difference*

Participatory study of children's own views and experiences of poverty, wealth, and 'social difference', involving children from a disadvantaged housing estate and a private school.

Thomson and Russell, *Mapping the alternatives to permanent exclusion*

Examination of the scope, site, nature and enrolments of programmes on offer to young people permanently excluded from school, or those at risk of permanent exclusion.

Wikeley et al., *Educational relationships outside school: why access is important*

Qualitative study based on interviews with 55 young people living in both low-income families and more affluent circumstances to discover how they spent their time when not in school.

For full details, see References.

Which aspects of student background matter?

The risk of leaving school with low achievement varies greatly in different groups. A review of these differences (Cassen and Kingdon 2007) shows that among low achievers, boys outnumber girls by three to two. Students from Afro-Caribbean origin are the least successful, and those of Indian and Chinese origin most successful in avoiding low achievement – although numerically the great majority of low achievers are white. Children are more likely to have low achievement if they receive free school meals and if they live in poor urban areas.

These well-known factors associated with lower achievement interact in particular ways. For example, being on free school meals is a stronger predictor of low achievement for white pupils than for other ethnic groups. Also, where white children under-achieve early on in their schooling, they are most likely to persist in under-achievement. Conversely, not speaking English at home is only a short-lived disadvantage for most students. African and Asian children commonly overcome its effects by secondary school.

These results suggest that where white children face poverty and other disadvantages, they are least likely to overcome their negative effects. Thus, while it is important to address the very high disadvantage faced by some minority ethnic groups, the situation of disadvantaged white children cannot be neglected. Nearly half of all students with low achievement are white boys. However, gender differences are particularly marked among certain other ethnic groups: Bangladeshi, Pakistani and black African children.

These differences do not mean that a student's background is the only influence on school outcomes. Studies have shown that only around 14 per cent of variation in achievement is attributable to identifiable features of school quality. The much greater amount of variation explained by other factors underlines the need to look at the range of children's experiences, inside and outside school, when seeking to raise achievement among those who perform least well.

What makes a difference in a child's world?

Early experience

Educational achievement is strongly influenced by the attitudes of children towards learning, and these attitudes start developing from an early age. Qualitative research talking to children from different backgrounds about their attitudes and experiences suggests important differences in this respect between children from different social groups.

One study, from Northern Ireland (Horgan 2007), points in particular to boys as young as nine or ten becoming very disenchanted from school and starting to disengage. This evidence points towards the interaction of educational disadvantage faced by children growing up in poverty, the difficulties faced by teachers in disadvantaged schools, and differences in the way boys and girls are socialised, leading to boys being particularly failed by the education system. The study showed that perceptions of teacher behaviour varied by student background. Children in disadvantaged schools complained that they were shouted at by their teachers, whereas those in more advantaged schools did not mention this.

The study found that children were highly aware of their social position and the limitations it placed on them from an early age. This high level of awareness of social difference was mirrored in another study based on interviews with children (Sutton et al. 2007). This research involved children aged eight to 13, some living on a disadvantaged housing estate and others attending a private school. The more advantaged children described a much richer set of experiences in school, inside and outside the curriculum, while for the disadvantaged children issues such as discipline and detention were more apparent.

Sutton et al. 2007

Interviewer: "Is life more unfair to some children than others?"

Girl (early secondary school) "Yes, it is. It's unfair for us because we have to just listen to teachers all the time."

Interviewer: "But isn't that the same for all children?"

Girl: "No. It's not, because if you're rich you get to go to a posh school where the teachers probably teach you with respect."

Attitudes and relationships

In the above study (Sutton et al. 2007), children had developed clear stereotypes of 'chavs' and 'posh' children. These were extreme images applied in a derogatory context to other children rather than describing themselves, but demonstrated an early awareness of social difference.

As well as being aware of the importance of social background, children interact with the education system in different ways. A study by Kellett and Dar (2007) explored these interactions by inviting eleven-year-old children to carry out their own research projects on the links between literacy and poverty. The children concluded that a key factor was the relationship between confidence, self-esteem and literacy skills,

What ten and eleven year olds think about school (Horgan 2007)

Advantaged Schools

"I don't think there is very many bad things about school."
(Ten-year-old boy)

"It can be good to learn if they make things fun to learn."
(Ten-year-old boy)

"I don't like school so much, for one reason that every kid doesn't like school, there's too much work but a bigger reason is I don't like taking work home because ... it's hard work and you don't get out to play."
(Ten-year-old)

Disadvantaged schools

"I don't like school, 'cos you have to work. I think it's too long."
(Ten-year-old boy)

"No one likes it in our class, none of the boys like it, don't they not?"
(Ten-year-old boy)

"I hate school, doing work and teachers shouting at me."
(Ten-year-old boy)

"If you don't go to school, your Dad will go to jail."
(Eleven-year-old boy)

with children who had been able to develop reading and writing confidence outside school having a strong advantage. Across a number of research projects, a recurring theme was that children from less advantaged backgrounds felt less in control at school, because they were under pressure to perform required tasks in which they lacked confidence. School often did not give them the space to build co-operative relationships with teachers and other adults: they saw it as controlling and coercive (as in Sutton).

Both studies asking children directly about their attitudes to school (Sutton et al. and Horgan) found that belief in the importance of education was strong among students from advantaged *and* from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, negative attitudes were not based on children feeling that education does not matter, but rather on lack of confidence in their own ability to thrive within the system. This suggests that if children were to have better opportunities and experiences, their attitudes to school would become more positive.

Studies looking at out-of-school activities (Wikeley et al. 2007) and at efforts to help disaffected children to re-engage with learning (Frankham 2007 and Thomson and Russell 2007) also emphasised the importance of building the right kinds of relationships. For example, a key feature of successful projects working with excluded children (a small minority of those facing social disadvantage) was to build close relationships, not just with young people but with their families, addressing the family circumstances as well as the child's learning needs, and making education a shared enterprise between family, educator and child. This work relies on highly skilled and dedicated workers, often without professional qualifications but able to put the required level of commitment into building productive

relationships with families living in tough circumstances (Frankham 2007).

The research also shows that in order to understand and relate to children who have become disaffected with school, it is important to take account of their past history and past resentments, for example about stigma or perceptions of racial discrimination. Those who feel that they have been let down by authority need to have these feelings addressed before they can re-engage with the system (Frankham 2007).

A related finding is that programmes offered to children excluded from school need to be carefully handled to avoid reproducing the factors that caused them to become disaffected with school in the first place. Thomson and Russell found that there is no single formula for such programmes, but a number of

Mother of permanently-excluded child taking part in support programme (Frankham et al. 2007)

"There were these meetings [with the support programme staff] every month and a half or so, where Carl knew where he was going wrong and we knew where he was going wrong. But we also knew where he was going right and we were not at that meeting to hear 'he has shouted at that person or he hit that person last week', it was also to hear what positive stuff he has done."

elements are important:

- small groups with individual attention;
- the negotiation of programme content with participants rather than its imposition;
- flexibility of content to meet changing needs; and
- staff who are skilled at communicating and negotiating rather than just 'instructing'.

Activities outside school

Learning that takes place in activities outside school tends to be seen as auxiliary to the education process. Yet evidence from this programme (especially Wikeley et al. 2007) suggests that it is crucial. Such activities can help children develop confidence in learning, to become active learners and to develop a different kind of relationship with adult instructors or supervisors than in a more formal school setting. In out-of-school settings, they become used to seeing learning as a partnership, rather than as something that is imposed upon them.

It is therefore of considerable relevance for education that children from all social backgrounds have better experiences of out-of-school activities. Wikeley found that young people from families in poverty participate in fewer organised out-of-school activities than their more affluent peers. Through their lack of participation in out-of-school activities, young people in poverty are denied important learning experiences which may affect their engagement in the more formal learning in school. Sutton found that private school children's free time was structured and organised, involving a wide range of cultural and sporting activities (Sutton, 2007). For children from a deprived estate, in contrast, free time was dominated by unsupervised street play and socialising with friends.

The study by Wikeley emphasised that in order to replicate the learning relationships observed in these activities, for example through extended schools, they must feel distinct from classroom-based, compulsory learning. This difference, and most particularly students' perceptions of the adults involved as co-learners, is what helps enrich children's perspective of learning. The study found that, where extended schools are seen as just a longer school day, with children still in uniform attending activities on site, children's perception of them as different, voluntary forms of learning can be compromised. An implication of this conclusion is that if extended schools are to help to enrich less advantaged children's learning experiences outside the main curriculum, they need to be sufficiently differentiated from the school context in the way they are structured and run.

Homework

Another theme that recurred in several of the studies was the importance of homework, and the extent to which children from different backgrounds had different experiences of doing schoolwork at home. This theme was particularly prominent in the projects devised by children themselves, in Kellett and Dar's study: the children saw homework differences as a crucial aspect of why poverty and disadvantage affected literacy development.

Very few children from the primary school in a more deprived area got help with homework from a parent on a regular basis and some got no help at all. When children did get help, this was commonly restricted to five minutes and only for subjects such as Maths which could be dealt with quickly. Children in the better-off area studied had opposite experiences, with parents invariably helping and going the extra mile to offer views and opinions to stretch their children's thinking and speaking skills.

The impact of affluence and poverty was also evident in children's reflections on the kind of environments they liked to do their homework in. Better-off children had their own bedrooms or gardens to escape to, contrasting with crowded, noisy conditions with distractions that affected the homework conditions of many disadvantaged children. Television also tended to be a greater distraction, and less systematically regulated for children from the more deprived school.

This research did not imply that poorer parents don't care about their children's education. Many parents on low incomes lack the resources that allow them to help out, to provide conducive environments or to access relevant services.

Contrasting experiences of homework, aged eleven (Kellett and Dar 2007)

"I'm in the kitchen and it's very tempting to ask for help from all the people that are around me. So, I do get quite a lot of help. I tend to go to adults, rather than use books, but I have books around the house that I can use if I want to, like dictionaries, and I can go on to Wikipedia."

"I go to Homework club on Fridays after school. We get homework on Fridays. That's for everyone. I go because at home just my mum and step-dad sometimes won't understand the work and can't help me. Whereas at the homework club, the teachers are there so you can ask for help."

Conclusions and key requirements of policy and practice

The above findings emphasise that the social gap in educational experiences and outcomes arises both from what happens within classrooms and what happens across children's lives. Students from different backgrounds experience different relationships with teachers and with other adults. They have different learning experiences outside school and in particular engage in different kinds of activities that contribute to their learning and different experiences of homework.

A key feature of this difference is that children from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to feel a lack of control over and less involvement in their learning, and so have a greater tendency to become reluctant recipients of the taught curriculum. This relates both to children's attitudes towards learning and to their relationships with adults.

These factors are at the heart of the social divide in educational outcomes, yet they have not been at the heart of solutions so far. Many policy initiatives have focused on improving the quality of schools and of teaching. Measures to improve the extent to which disadvantaged children engage in education are more elusive, but cannot be neglected. The government's strategy for giving wide-ranging support to disadvantaged children was set out in *Aiming high for children: Supporting families* (HM Treasury 2007). Turning the focus of the education system in such directions is a long-term process.

The above research shows that an over-arching aim of the system should be to create a learning atmosphere with better adult-student relationships, especially in the formative primary school years. Three more specific challenges for policy and practice initiatives are:

- To create environments outside mainstream school that allow children to develop new learning relationships. In particular, the advent of extended schools offers the opportunity for disadvantaged children to experience some forms of out-of-school learning that better-off children often obtain through clubs and other after-school activities. However, it is not inevitable that extended schools will produce these benefits: this depends on having an imaginative range of activities in which children are able to develop positive relationships with supervising adults and feel more in control of learning than they do at school.

- To improve the homework experiences of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A key objective of homework is to build a capacity for independent learning, but at present it all too often builds that capacity for those who already have it but undermines confidence for those who do not. New approaches may be needed, which offer better support for the least advantaged students. A key requirement is a co-operative relationship between school and home, supported by good communications.
- In working with children who are excluded or at risk of being excluded from school, to build new relationships that address their feelings of powerlessness and disengagement from the world of education. This requires intensive interventions and may require the involvement of parents.

Specific measures of this kind will not in themselves remove all the social differences that feed into unequal educational opportunities, but can start to address differences in attitudes and relationships that divide the experiences of children from various backgrounds.

An important issue, raised in a review of different conceptual approaches to tackling unequal educational chances, is what level of intervention is effective (Raffo, 2007). On their own, interventions at the level of school or community risk creating a 'scattergun' approach that will not address underlying causes of the problems described above. Such solutions are often associated with a 'functionalist' approach which aims to improve social mobility within the existing system by extending opportunities to less advantaged children. An alternative and more ambitious strategy is to take a 'socially critical' approach entailing more radical change in educational relationships and democratic approaches to running classrooms and schools.

Whichever approach is taken, it is clear from this research that if students from deprived backgrounds feel powerless as learners, they will continue to have disappointing educational results. Therefore the transformation of educational relationships inside and outside the classroom will be at least as important as efficient delivery of the school curriculum in boosting the chances of children from disadvantaged families.

About this paper

This summary draws on the JRF's programme of work on education and poverty. The first eight studies in this programme, published in 2007, investigated features of the relationship between poverty and education outcomes. Over the next two years, further research and analysis will extend this research and develop ideas about policy and practice solutions that address the poverty gap in education.

References

Reports published by the JRF are available for free download: the direct web address for each report is given where available at time of printing. You can also find other reports, *Findings* summaries and information on work in progress at www.jrf.org.uk.

The paper draws on the following reports (all published by Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York).

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For more details on the content of these reports, see page 3.

Other references

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