

COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER:

A ROUTE TO REDUCING THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON
EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN SCHOOLS ACROSS WALES

Summary of Research Commissioned
by Save the Children

DAVID EGAN
MAY 2012



Save the Children
Achub y Plant

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor David Egan is an Educational Consultant and Adviser. He has been closely involved in education in Wales as a schoolteacher, academic, researcher and policymaker for many years. Currently his major portfolio of interests include acting as a Senior Consultant to the ASPIRE Programme and as Policy Adviser to the Heads of the Valleys Education Programme.

SAVE THE CHILDREN

In Wales today over 200,000 children live in poverty. Growing up in poverty has a huge impact on a child's health, education and economic future - their opportunities and life chances. To build a society of opportunity and social mobility we must fight inequality. Only by prioritising the ending of educational underachievement of children in poverty and boosting families' incomes can progress be made towards a prosperous Wales.

Save the Children is working with families, children and young people across Wales to bring about the changes needed to end child poverty.

Introduction

In Wales there is a very strong and growing association between poverty and low levels of educational achievement.

This is a major influence upon current levels of education performance in Wales.

The Welsh Government has, therefore, made reducing the 'poverty gap' one of three national priorities for schools in Wales and introduced significant grant funding to support this.

Within this context, this report considers the extent and causes of the 'poverty gap' in educational achievement in Wales and the solutions which should now be applied by schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government to address this situation.

The Problem

Poverty is a major influence on the extent to which children in Wales can achieve their potential.

The gap between the achievement of disadvantaged compared to advantaged children is present at 9 months old, is significant by the age of 3, grows in the primary years and accelerates particularly in secondary education.

By the time that students complete their 'compulsory' education at the age of fifteen the gap is at its biggest: it is two and a half times more likely that a student not living in poverty will achieve a high outcome than one living in poverty.

There is a very low chance that disadvantaged students who have not achieved to a high level at the age of 15 will go into further and higher education and achieve any further qualifications by the age of 19.

Whilst those students living and not living in poverty have improved their educational performance over time, the poverty gap has not narrowed.

Large concentrations of FSM students in a school have an adverse effect on the performance of non-FSM students: the evidence is less clear on a possible obverse effect.

Causes

Poverty and child poverty which affects one in three of all children in Wales is the major cause of low achievement in disadvantaged students.

Low educational achievement is a major cause of poverty and poverty the most important reason for low educational achievement.

Poverty is concentrated in particular areas and schools in Wales most of which faced the collapse of their local economies and sources of employment in the 1980s, but there is not a consistent correlation between high concentrations of poverty and school performance.

The reason why the low performance of FSM students accelerates in secondary schools is likely to be caused mainly by personal and social factors.

In disadvantaged communities parents, peer groups and communities generally do not have the positive influence they could on the achievement of students.

The reasons why schools are not able to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students can be identified.

Solutions

The solution to reducing the poverty gap in education in Wales must involve holistic action that includes schools, parents and the community.

Schools can have a significant effect in improving the achievement of disadvantaged students. To bring this about they need to:

- Have strong moral purpose.
- Leadership that focuses the activities of the school on this purpose.
- Place a strong focus on the wellbeing of students.
- Use data to track students and prompt early interventions.
- Provide high quality teaching.

Some schools and local authorities achieve this already, but most have limited success and there is considerable variation in performance.

Schools cannot maximize the reduction of the poverty gap unless their work is supported by strong engagement with their parents and communities.

Parental engagement can have a significant impact on reducing the poverty gap, but it is unlikely that there is sufficient high quality parental engagement in place in Wales.

Significant opportunities exist to improve the links between schools and communities in the most disadvantaged parts of Wales through closer working with *Flying Start*, *Families First*, *Communities First* and *Community Focused Schools*.

The national priority in education to reduce the poverty gap along with the extension of *Flying Start*, the introduction of *Families First* and the further development of *Communities First* provide a unique opportunity to develop a holistic approach within the Welsh Government's *Tackling Poverty Strategy* that can provide the solution that is required to significantly reduce the impact of poverty on education.

This will require partnership working at national, regional and local level.

Conclusions

Poverty has a significant impact on education and although there are instances which show this is not an inevitable outcome, in general the poverty gap in education is not being narrowed and is a major cause of low performance by the education system in Wales.

Whilst the influence of parents, peer groups, communities and schools all affect why disadvantaged students do not do well in education, the biggest impact is that of poverty itself and this is concentrated in particular communities and schools in Wales.

Solutions for reducing the poverty gap in education can be found in holistic and mutually reinforcing approaches that unite schools, parents and communities; an opportunity now exists in Wales to bring these approaches together in a national programme within the Welsh Government's *Tackling Poverty Strategy*.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government should;

- Develop within the *Tackling Poverty Strategy* a national intervention model to reduce the impact of poverty on educational achievement;
- Provide clear guidance for schools and local authorities on how best to use the funding that is being made available
- Remit Estyn and the Wales Audit Office to monitor and regularly report on the effective use of this funding.

Schools should;

- Have a strategic plan in place that shows how they will use the resources available to them to reduce the poverty gap in student achievement;
- Develop leadership structures that enable this to be achieved
- Regularly monitor, report and evaluate the impact the plan is having on student outcomes.

Local Authority Education Consortia should;

- In the support and challenge work they undertake with their schools have as one of their major priorities reducing the poverty gap in education
- Ensure that they have the leadership and staff capacity in place to achieve this.



About us

Save the Children works in more than 120 countries.

We save children's lives.

We fight for their Rights.

We help them fulfil their potential.

For more information please contact:

Ruth Mullineux, Policy Officer Save the Children

r.mullineux@savethechildren.org.uk

Sara Drysdale, Communications and Campaigns Officer Save the Children

s.drysdale@savethechildren.org.uk