

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

EO 01

Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households

Evidence from : National Union of Teachers Cymru

NUT Cymru represents primary and secondary school members and is the largest teaching union in Wales. We welcome the opportunity to contribute evidence to the Children and Young People's Committee Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households.

The effectiveness of Welsh Government policy and strategy in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes, including the 'Tackling Poverty Action Plan'; relevant education policy; and broader Welsh Government policies in this regard, for example Communities First;

The first reality to accept when examining the link between poverty and educational outcomes is to recognise the levels of poverty we have in Wales. Put quite bluntly, it is impossible to reduce the gap between poverty and attainment unless the levels of childhood poverty are tackled as a whole.

Statistics released by the Department for Work and Pensions in June 2013 showed that after housing costs 33% of children in Wales were living in poverty. This is an increase on figures for 2011/12 (31%). This is the highest level of childhood poverty in the UK outside of London. While the Welsh Government's target of eradicating child poverty by 2020 is a worthy aspiration, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is unlikely to be achieved, especially with child poverty increasing.

It should be noted that this increase in child poverty cannot be attributed to just one factor. It is natural to examine the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's policies in light of this failure to reduce poverty amongst Welsh households, but there is also the contributing factor of Westminster policies that are impacting detrimentally on the income of the Welsh household.

With regard to Welsh Government education policies, there is a concern that some are having unintended consequences, or at least will have in the long term. The introduction of school banding has created a competitive environment between schools in Wales. This has severely hampered the co-operation and sharing of best practice that is essential to pooling resources and joint programmes of work.

The long term problem with banding is that parents, using the banding scores as an indicator of quality, will vote with their feet and move their children to band 1 and 2 schools. We have already seen examples of this happening in Wales as well as examples of schools marketing themselves using banding results to attract pupils. The result of this pupil migration is that schools deemed to be poor will have fewer pupils and as a result reduced funding. It is an almost inevitable social trend that the parents who will move their children to a different school will come from more middle class and financially secure families. There is a major fear the policy could create a ghettoization of education in Wales where children who come from poor backgrounds attend increasingly poorer education facilities, thus creating a cycle of decline for both education and prosperity within Welsh communities.

One further policy that is having an impact is continually increasing class sizes in Wales. When education was devolved there was a commitment to ensure low class sizes which was matched by a

noticeable decline initially. However, in recent years there has been a steady increase in class sizes, especially amongst infant classes. These increases, with 30+ class sizes being at an all-time high since devolution (<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2013/130711-school-census-results-2013-en.pdf> page 17 onwards) mean less and less time is spent by teachers with individual children. The result of this is that educational, and social needs are often not uncovered as efficiently as they should be. It may be worth the Children's Committee considering an inquiry into class sizes and their impact, to ensure a greater level of research into this issue.

Often, where children are receiving one-to-one support, it comes from a teaching assistant given the high reliance on support staff. While it is right that the important role teaching assistants play in supporting education is recognised, it is equally important to note that they are not qualified teachers. Often the pupils coming from poorer backgrounds who are in need of the most support are either lacking in specific assistance needed due to class sizes leading to a lack of capacity, or that support is delivered by someone who is not trained to do the role.

There are some very clear initiatives that are being pursued by the Welsh Government that are helping to support closing the gap between poverty and attainment. Central to this has been the introduction of the free school breakfast scheme. This scheme has not only ensured that children coming from poorer backgrounds have access to nutritious breakfasts, with the health benefits of that, but there are also noticeable educational benefits. NUT members have reported that children who have been involved with free school breakfasts have been more focused in lessons as a result of the policy. As a result of free school breakfasts there are increased levels of concentration, participation and commitment in class. Aside from this, individuals are also learning new and improving social skills during the free school breakfast period. This translates into better communication and confidence in the classroom as well as a more relaxed atmosphere in terms of the relationship between the school and the pupil, thus making the learning environment more of a natural setting.

The pupil deprivation grant has been a welcome addition to the funding available to schools to target shortfalls in budgets, especially centred on supporting the most vulnerable school pupils. While this money is nowhere near enough to make a substantial difference it has still ensured that some holes in school budgets have been filled, as well as allowing schools to implement proactive programmes to support pupils.

The recently announced Early Years and Childcare plan put forward by the Welsh Government is a positive development. (<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/130716-building-brighter-future-en.pdf>)

It is pleasing to see the approach has accepted, and examined, the whole set of influences on a child's well-being, before they start school, during that period and at a time when they are outside the confines of an education facility. Quite clearly there is a crucial role for schools to play in this process. However, it is important to recognise, as the Early Years and Childcare plan does, that a host of influences shape the attainment of children and support for all must be forthcoming if real results are to be seen. As shown in the plan, parental involvement is critical to children's quality of education. While teachers have a critical and influential role to play in schools unless that education is supported, independently of and in partnership with schools by parents, it will not be sufficient to ensure long-term sustainable progress. This is best highlighted by the evidence presented in the plan as to the rate of return on investment and how engaging programmes targeted at parents, even before children have started school, help pupils, parents and schools reap rewards at a later date at a more effective level than later in the process.

The Early Years and Childcare plan also highlights how important the household income of a family is. This again brings us back to the need to tackle wider social and economic inequality if we are to succeed in truly bridging the gap between poverty and attainment.

What is particularly positive about the Early Years and Childcare plan is its recognition of the need for good working relationships between schools and communities as a central plank in pupil development. This has long been the view of NUT Cymru. Returning to previous comments about Welsh Government policies, frontline teachers have given consistent feedback that school banding, literacy and numeracy testing, and no doubt in time the introduction of truancy fines, have all undermined that existing relationship. There certainly appears some disconnect between the ambitions and aspirations of policy documents and the impact of individual education policies.

Much of the new Early years and Childcare plan is to be welcomed as a platform for enabling a more joined up approach to addressing the issues behind supporting children at the start of their educational journeys. It is especially positive that the plan doesn't just start with school but as early as the pre-birth stage. The Welsh Government should be congratulated on that commitment. However, as with any such document, implementation is the key. NUT Cymru support the objectives and the plan but how it is supported across Wales will define how successful it will be in reality.

The Flying Start programme is a positive approach but the ratio of Flying Start initiatives in comparison to levels of deprivation is not enough. There needs to be greater numbers of Flying Start programmes to fully deal with the high levels of poverty to be found in Wales. We would also echo the concerns raised by the Children's Commissioner that Flying Start and Families First programmes do not provide for families outside the targeted areas. While deprivation may be relatively low in an area such as Monmouthshire or Powys there are still pockets there where children live in poverty. It is important not to forget the need to cater for those families as well as concentrating resources on areas of high deprivation.

The 2009 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, 'What is needed to end child poverty in Wales?' suggests a number of commitments the Welsh Government needs to meet to tackle child poverty. One in particular stands out.

- Dramatically improve childcare provision, include before and after school care and holiday care and enhance support for carers who want to work.

There continues to be a major concern about the impact of poverty on children during the summer months. Given many children receive free school meals and attend breakfast clubs there are serious questions about the nutrition levels they get when not in school.

In addition to this there are major disadvantages faced by children from impoverished backgrounds in relation to access to learning environments. Most will not own any IT facilities or have access to broadband meaning they are in a state of digital poverty, which, with today's reliance on modern technology skills for employment, has a significant impact on creating a cycle of poverty. There is also less of a likelihood that children will have access to trips, holidays or other life experiences that help develop their personal and academic development.

The impact on household budgets is also huge if working families are unable to cope with the costs of child minding. There is a knock on effect for working families who will inevitably have to stagger their holiday from work to look after children creating very little time as a full family unit.

The respective roles of the Welsh Government, education regional consortia, local authorities, schools and governing bodies in addressing this issue and why there is variation between schools in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes;

There is a clear role for all the above bodies in tackling the attainment gap, including at a school level. The greatest concern at present is that there is currently a disconnect between each individual body and the policies as envisaged are not always implemented consistently or with the required support. It is extremely difficult to truly appreciate what, if anything, and how regional consortia are contributing to the current process. The teaching profession were promised that regional consortia would be up and running by September 2011 offering support directly to teachers and schools. We are now in the summer period of 2013 and the support that is being offered is variable at best; non-existent at worst. In some areas, North Wales for example, there is little confidence that the consortia are operational at any acceptable level. While this situation continues there is only a small chance the four consortia will have any positive effect on the ability of schools and teachers to bridge the gap between poverty and attainment. When considering this outlook the proposals put forward in the Robert Hill review for consortia taking over the role of support and improvement services should be approached with scepticism about the practicalities and realities of it in the current climate.

As with the consortia the quality of local authorities is deeply concerning. No single local authority has been found to be of a high standard by ESTYN highlighting the challenges schools face in terms of accessing quality support. In one sense the variation can be put down to the fact that poverty exists in varying degrees across Wales. Where poverty is a common factor amongst children the challenge, and meeting that challenge, is potentially more difficult as a result of the expertise and resources required to address it. Where areas have pockets of more affluent communities, targeting resources can be given a higher level of priority and tracking improvements is easier.

Equally, if there are high levels of poverty there will be expertise in implementing policies designed to tackle those problems. That same expertise may not exist amongst more affluent local authority areas.

The general perception is that Welsh Government policies in this field are well meaning, ambitious and recognise clearly the reasons why parts of Wales suffer so badly with poverty. Unfortunately, there is not so much clarity of direction on the practical steps, or uniform support, which ensures implementation and delivery, follows.

Whether Welsh Government policy sufficiently takes forward issues relating to parental engagement in respect of the educational outcomes of children from low-income households, and whether it addresses the views and experiences of children and young people from such households regarding the barriers in this regard;

As argued above, current Welsh Government education policies around school banding, truancy fines and literacy and numeracy testing, to name a few, have actively soured relationships between parents and schools. While these are not strictly focused on parents of pupils from impoverished backgrounds they can have a negative impact on them. These policies are making it increasingly difficult for schools to build trust and working relationships with parents that in turn are making it increasingly difficult to engage them in their children's education as well as being able to support problems outside the school environment.

Relevant funding issues, including the effectiveness of the pupil deprivation grant and any anticipated effects of the recently issued guidance for 2013-2015;

The pupil deprivation grant has been a very welcome addition to the budgets of schools. Since its introduction it has had a noticeable impact in terms of tackling specific issues in schools that support bridging the gap between poverty and attainment. However, realistically this is not enough.

Schools need to have confidence that in future the funding will at least remain beyond the existing agreement. The PDG should be statutory for schools rather than determined as part of each and every Welsh Government budget negotiation.

The amount allocated through the PDG, while a clear improvement from what was available prior to its introduction, is simply not enough to keep track with the spending gap between England and Wales let alone close it.

There has also been a significant bureaucratic burden placed on schools in applying for the grant. In some cases the benefit of the funding has not been worth the time impact of the application. This has been noted as part of the Robert Hill review into education and there are options in the consultation on the Future of Education Delivery that seek to reduce this. Hopefully they will lead to a much more streamlined process.

NUT Cymru has consistently highlighted the funding gap that exists between Welsh and English pupils. The funding gap, originally identified at around £300 has risen to £604 according to the last available figures from 2011. We suspect that it could now be well in excess of £700 but the comparison figures are no longer published to see the reality of the situation.

This funding gap has resulted in schools operating without the ability to ensure adequate staffing rotas, with dilapidated school buildings, outdated ITC facilities, a lack of basic resources such as pens and paper as well as a host of other concerns that add to the inability to effectively bridge the gap between poverty and attainment.

It is noted in the Children's Commissioners 'Child Poverty Strategy 2012' report that Goetre Primary School in Merthyr Tydfil has employed an Education Family Support Officer. This individual is working with families and the community to ensure that children are accessing and benefiting from education. This is an example of good practice that can and should be replicated across Wales. However, this is not the case, largely due to funding constraints. Every school would like to employ an individual in this capacity that would not only help address concerns around poverty but develop good relations between schools and communities, essential to standards in a school. Unfortunately each school has its own budgetary pressures and difficult choices have to be made. Currently few schools can realistically afford to create such a post without seeing a detrimental impact elsewhere in their structures.

The costs associated with education (trips, uniforms, sporting equipment etc) and the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach in ensuring that children from low-income households are not disadvantaged in this regard;

The cost of School trips is becoming an increasingly concerning issue for schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is becoming more common place for children from poorer backgrounds to state they are unable to afford school trips. Often the schools themselves will pick up the bill for these children. However, not only is this more of an issue in terms of the regularity in which individual pupils find themselves in these situations but also the numbers of children that do. Schools already operate within extremely challenging budgets. These will inevitably become ever decreasing in the coming months and years as expenditure on a school to school basis is cut to accommodate wider Wales and UK Government budget cuts. Looking at the long-term implications of this situation schools are either going to have to have sections of their cohorts unable to travel on school trips, becoming educationally and socially ostracised in the process, or see a rapid decline in the availability of school trips on offer. This is a highly depressing situation given that for many

students from poorer backgrounds school trips are the only realistic trips they will take. With limited opportunities to travel and learn as part of life experiences outside school hours there will be a serious disadvantage for pupils in deprived areas compared to those from more affluent homes.

Local authorities who have previously funding support for children from free school meals backgrounds for residential learning experiences are also examining the long-term feasibility of these activities in light of increasingly tight budgets.

There are inevitable costs associated with school uniforms that do impact on families that have low incomes. These however are less of a burden on parents, and less of a social stigma, than enabling children to attend school in their own clothing where brands and fashion create a clear equality divide.

Sporting equipment, and other school resources, are difficult for those individuals coming from poorer backgrounds. This is unfortunately the case for all schools as well. We are regularly hearing of schools unable to support high quality sport, and particularly cater for diversity amongst the sports they can offer, as a result of the very limited resources available. In terms of educational resources it is far from uncommon for teachers to be spending their own personal earnings on basic materials such as pens and paper. Where this drain on resources exists amongst schools it is inevitably more prominent amongst communities with high deprivation. This creates a circular trend whereby individuals attend schools with inadequate sporting, educational and ICT materials and thus their educational attainment is hampered. This leads to lesser skilled communities that struggle to access jobs and attract industry which in turn places greater burden on the school to support the system financially.

In terms of the disparity between pupils it is not unexpected that children from low-income households suffer most with regards to the stigma and inability to access trips, sports etc.

Issues relevant to free school meals within this context, such as take-up rates, the perceived stigma of claiming free school meals, the use of free school meals as a proxy indicator for child poverty and the impact of the need to revise eligibility criteria arising from the introduction of Universal Credit;

There is a stigma associated with claiming free school meals. The stigma can exist amongst pupils and can lead to social exclusion and a lack of confidence. However, it is largely more prominent amongst parents of pupils who are eligible but do not claim the benefit as they fear how it will be reflected on them as families. There exists a gap between eligibility and take up which does then place a burden on low-income families who do not take advantage of the policy.

Educationally it also has a major impact on schools given the importance of free school meals data to other performance indicators. The eligibility for free school meals is also a concern. Current eligibility for free school meals means that parents working 16 (or 24 hours for couples) per week lose their entitlement, no matter how little they earn. Given many jobs in Wales are low paying occupations, and that half of children in poverty in Wales belong to working families, it is unsurprising that many who are not receiving free school meals could still be children of poverty stricken families. This means the impact of poverty is seen even if statistically they are not registered as FSM students.

There is a major concern regarding the introduction of the universal benefit and its implications for identifying FSM entitlement. This is a matter than needs to be addressed in order to ensure that individuals who should be entitled to the benefit do not get marginalised.

Just under a third of schools in Wales do not offer a free school breakfast club. This should not be the case given the educational and wellbeing benefits that can be seen as a result of its introduction.

Views on the Welsh Government's response in taking forward the recommendations of the Children and Young People Committee of the Third Assembly in respect of the 'Child Poverty: Eradication through Education' report*.

Some aspects of the report have no doubt been implemented by the Welsh Government, and implemented to a positive effect. Others have had more variable responses. For example the Child Poverty: Eradication through Education report recommended that the Welsh Assembly Government ensure participation of front line professionals (including teaching unions) at the earliest possible stages in policy development, rather than only through formal consultation following policy development.

There has been a sense in recent years that education policy in general has been imposed on the profession rather than undergone any serious discussion prior to implementation. There is a growing feeling that consultation responses, however numerous and detailed, are given little consideration with policies largely implemented without any change from inception to delivery. As seen with the introduction, and subsequent withdrawal, of the Child Development Assessment Profiles (CDAPs) this has had negative consequences for pupils, parents, teachers and the Welsh Government.

Where collaboration has taken the profession and the Welsh Government have been able to find agreement that has ensured positive outcomes. This needs to be more of a focused approach in future.