

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

EO 15

Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households

Evidence from : The Bevan Foundation

Introduction

1. The Bevan Foundation welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's inquiry. The Bevan Foundation is an independent think-tank that helps to make Wales a fairer place through research and policy development, publications and events. It has a very modest income and resource, and is funded primarily by research commissions and membership subscriptions.
2. It has developed considerable expertise on many aspects of poverty and social exclusion in Wales. Recently its Director, Dr Victoria Winckler, has been appointed to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Task Group preparing a UK poverty plan – this project is undertaking a review of evidence of 'what works' to inform a set of proven actions due for publication in 2015/16.
3. In terms of work on education and low income, the Bevan Foundation is currently running the 'Poverty and Education Network', with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to bring together interested organisations, including schools and community organisations, to exchange experience and ideas. The network's funding is limited (less than £5,000) ends in March 2014. The Foundation also recently completed a report for the Heads of the Valleys Education Programme on adult learning in Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent, areas with a high incidence of low income.

The effectiveness of policy and strategy in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes

4. The Bevan Foundation welcomes the Welsh Government's commitment to "tackle poverty" and its action plans to do so. It has been suggested¹ that the Welsh Government is a world-leader in its commitment. The Foundation has identified a number of ways in which the "Tackling Poverty" plans could be strengthened, including:

¹ Dr Peter Kenway, speaking at the launch of *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Wales, 2013* on 19th September 2013, Urdd Centre, Cardiff

- a. Recognising the different incidence of low income amongst different groups of people, including different age groups;
 - b. Recognising the different causes of low income as they affect different age groups, such as worklessness (and in particular the relationship with disability), low income from paid work (both as a result of low wages and limited hours of work) and low state benefits, including pensions;
 - c. Taking a wider view of low income to include resources (such as savings / debt, capital assets) and costs (in particular domestic fuel and food costs);
 - d. Making breaking the link between low income and poor quality public services a high priority – this would include breaking the link between low income and low educational attainment.
5. Eradicating the link between low income and low educational attainment would, in our view, be the single most significant step towards equality, social mobility and the realisation of the potential of Wales’s children (and adults) that could be taken.
 6. In terms of delivering the Welsh Government’s priorities, it is vitally important that the action plan embraces other public bodies, schools and the third sector as well as Welsh Government - all have a vitally important role to play in reducing poverty.

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

7. The Bevan Foundation has no observations to offer on the roles of various bodies.
8. As far as variation between schools is concerned, it appears from our work with the Poverty and Education Network that schools and others are unclear about the most effective actions to take, and in this vacuum develop their own approaches. It is clear that schools also vary in the relative priority they give to reducing the impact of low income on attainment. The Network has proved a valuable forum for schools to discuss these ideas and there is considerable potential to develop it further.

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.

9. The Bevan Foundation’s work with the Poverty and Education Network has identified considerable interest amongst schools in engaging with parents. We have seen that schools are developing numerous different approaches to engaging parents, some of which are reported to be highly successful. However, most initiatives are not being formally evaluated, if at all, and it is difficult therefore to establish their effectiveness independently of other factors.
10. The research undertaken by the People and Work Unit in Glyncoch suggests that parental engagement needs to take place in the wider context of community

engagement, and should be part of a suite of actions both school and community based which 'build bridges' between the two and encourage learning and support self-esteem in all age groups.

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

11. The Bevan Foundation does not have expertise in this area and has no evidence to offer.

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

12. Work undertaken by the Bevan Foundation and Save the Children in 2008² highlighted significant concerns about the costs of state education, including compulsory costs (such as uniforms, ingredients for cookery classes, additional text books) as well as items which are voluntary but for which significant social pressure to purchase is exerted (photographs, trips, book fairs etc). We recommended that immediate action be taken to make participation in education genuinely free of charge, including adoption of a simple, low-cost uniform.

Free school meals, including 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.

13. The Bevan Foundation and Save the Children Wales's 2008 report³ recommended that action be taken to encourage take-up of free school meals particularly at secondary level, and to reduce the perceived stigma of claiming and receiving them.
14. Use of Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement as an indicator for child poverty is imperfect. As only children in families which receive out-of-work benefits are eligible, children in working families, which comprise a substantial and growing proportion of households in low income, are excluded. The recent New Policy Institute report for Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁴ suggests that in-work poverty is more prevalent in rural Wales than other areas, so use of FSM as an indicator may mean the number of children from low-income families is under-estimated here.
15. The problem is compounded by take-up rates. Evidence from England suggests that approximately 3% of all pupils are eligible but do not claim. However, low take-up is significantly more common in relatively affluent areas and in schools with low take-

² Bevan Foundation and Save the Children (2008) **Children in Severe Poverty in Wales: an agenda for action**. Available at: <http://www.bevanfoundation.org/publications/children-in-severe-poverty-in-wales-an-agenda-for-action/>

³ Op. Cit.

⁴ New Policy Institute (2013) **Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Wales, 2013**, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

up, and among families with professional occupations and higher qualifications.⁵ The use of FSM as an indicator thus magnifies the differences between schools with high and low proportions of FSM claimants.

16. The introduction of Universal Credit is an opportunity to put eligibility for FSM on a more equitable footing. Whilst the Bevan Foundation has previously expressed concerns about aspects of Universal Credit, it has the advantage of its receipt being an indicator of low income and household need that does not depend on a family's work status. We would favour receipt of Universal Credit being a simple passport to FSM entitlement. The alternative is that all school meals are free.

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.

17. The Bevan Foundation has no observations on this point.

Other points

18. In the course of our work on many different aspects of poverty, comments have often been made about the role of the curriculum, both in terms of its appropriateness for children from low income households (such as assumptions about household composition or resources in setting homework) as well as its potential to equip children with life skills to live in (and move on from) low income homes, for example cookery skills, to skills of co-operation with others, financial literacy.
19. We are not able to comment on the validity of these comments, but they suggest that the Committee may wish to include the role of the curriculum in its inquiry.

Victoria Winckler

Director, Bevan Foundation

⁵ Samaira Iniesta-Martinez & Helen Evans (20XX) *Pupils not claiming free school meals*, Department for Education. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183380/DFE-RR235.pdf