

Social class and raising achievement

In the UK, social class is widely regarded as the strongest predictor of educational achievement. The social class gap for educational achievement which exists in the UK is thought to be the one of the most significant in the developed world (Perry and Francis, 2010). This is further supported by the Department of Education (<http://www.education.gov.uk/a0076062/disadvantaged-pupils>, Accessed 30/3/13) who identify that, after prior attainment, the single most important factor in predicting a child's future is poverty. The fact that all three main political parties have identified the social class gap as a policy concern indicates the importance and the acknowledgement that a problem exists in the UK. There has been a variety of initiatives over the years to try and deal with the problem, such as 'Aim Higher', 'Excellence in the Cities' and 'Extra Mile', but as Perry and Francis (2010) point out, the gap between the educational achievement of poor children and their more affluent peers remains a complex and difficult problem to deal with.

Comment: By who?

Comment: Maybe, this signifies that they consider that there is a problem not that the problem, necessarily, exists.

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According to the DFES (2009) educational achievement is strongly influenced by parental income and material deprivation, particularly for very deprived families experiencing poverty over a long period of time. Perry and Francis (2010) support with this and add that it is also the parents' occupation and qualifications that are linked to children's educational achievement.

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Material deprivation can influence a student's educational achievement in a variety of ways. It can reduce the number of educational resources parents can provide their children and it can adversely affect the environment at home. There are indirect effects that also commonly influence children's achievement, such as: health; parents' own cognitive abilities; parental involvement in their child's education; and low aspirations. It is this factor of low aspirations in children and parents from deprived backgrounds that will be the core focus of this report.

Comment: Why have you chosen this as the core focus?

Research by The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) showed that even before children enter into school, educational deficits have emerged between children from rich and poor backgrounds. Big differences in cognitive development exist at the age of three and the gap widens by the age of five. This is supported by the BBC (2010) (cited in Perry and Francis, 2010) who found poor children by the age of three had been assessed to be one year behind richer children in terms of communication. One of the factors to explain this pre-school gap is the differences in the early childhood

Comment: If these are your words they are awkwardly worded, if not they should be indicated as a quote.

caring environment of children from poorer backgrounds. Some of the differences include: the family health and wellbeing, where poorer children are more likely to be affected by lower birth weights, which influences their cognitive development and their mothers suffering from depression, which can affect their educational development; the home learning environment, which is found to be much less advantageous, for example reading regularly to a child is very important for children's educational development, this was found to be more prevalent in those from richer backgrounds; and parental style and rules, where poor children experience less regularity in their routines, like regular bedtimes and mealtimes. Underlying these differences is the family background, with the most significant effects being: the mother's age at birth; number of siblings; and whether the father, if present, is in work (DfES, 2009 and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010).

Comment: Is it fair to call this a caring environment? It could predicate that those families with less material offer a less caring attitude?

Comment: There are lots of good points here but there is almost too much information in the paragraph – so many factors make it hard to follow any specific line of argument – and to link this to the low aspirations which you indicated (above) is at the core of this report.

Although all these factors and differences explain some of the educational deficit between the rich and poor before school, there is still a large proportion of the gap that remains to be explained (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010). This suggests that Government policies like Sure Start and Family Nurse Partnership which are targeted to improve parenting skills, home learning environments and the outcomes for pre-school children will not eliminate the cognitive skills gap between the poor and rich children. However, some of the aspects of the early childhood caring environment have a positive impact on children's educational development, so these interventions could still be very important.

As children enter compulsory schooling, educational deficits continue to widen between children from poor and more affluent families. Currently in the UK, the method for measuring deprivation amongst children in schools is based on the uptake of free school meals. The social class gap is found to widen quickly during primary school, statistics show that by the end of key stage 2, 54% of students eligible for free school meals reach the expected level in English and Maths, compared to 76% of students not eligible for free school meals (National Equality Panel, 2010). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) found that some of the key factors that appear to explain this gap are: parental aspirations for higher education; and how far parents and children believe their own actions can affect their lives. Parental aspirations towards education varied strongly, with 81% of the more affluent mothers saying they hoped their nine year old would go onto university, compared to only 37% of the poorest mothers. These negative attitudes towards education by

Comment: Under this measure

Comment: An odd comment – you do not need to have this it is not the statistics that show this but the NEP.

Comment: Why would this impact on the KS2 SATs?

Comment: I am not sure that not wanting children to go to university can be equated with a negative attitude to education there may be a number of other factors involved in the attitude to HE – for example concerns over costs, suitability of the course for their child, job opportunities for graduates ...

disadvantaged mothers is one of the most significant factors associated with low educational attainment by the end of key stage 2.

The widening of the social class gap is effected the most during early and middle childhood. The gap, by the time a student reaches secondary school is large and continues to widen throughout the teenage years, however, the widening of the gap is relatively small compared with earlier in childhood (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010). When students reach the time to take their GCSE's, the gap between the poor and rich is very large and this can be seen in the GCSE results that the children on free school meals achieve compared to students not on free schools meals. In 2008, 40% of children eligible for free school meals obtained five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C, compared with 67% of those not eligible (Sutton Trust, 2009). The figures for my placement school in 2012 were very similar, with 41% of students on free school meals achieving five or more GCSE's at A* to C, compared to 71% who were not eligible. These attainment gaps can be expressed in many different ways, for instance the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) compared the poorest fifth against the top quintile, which revealed an even larger gap, with only 21% of the poorest fifth obtaining five good GCSE's including Maths and English, compared to 75% of the top quintile. However these statistics are displayed, a large gap in educational attainment between the rich and poor exists at the end of secondary school. The Department for Education (2013) claim that data on trends over time suggest that in key stage four the deprivation attainment gap has narrowed. Looking at the figures available, suggests that not a lot has changed over the years in reducing this gap.

Comment: Is this the correct phrase?

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) state that reversing the patterns of underachievement during the teenage years becomes very hard, however, their studies found that children are more likely to do well in their GCSE's if: their parents think it is likely that their child will go onto higher education; the child believes in their own ability at school; they find school worthwhile; and they think it is likely they will apply to higher education and get accepted. Since children in poor families generally don't do well in these respects compared to their more affluent peers, this could provide some explanation to their poorer educational attainment by the end of key stage four. This could suggest that by intervening earlier in the child's schooling life and aiming policies at improving the children's and parents attitudes and aspirations

for higher education could have some beneficial effect in preventing these children from falling further behind during the secondary school years.

Expectations and aspirations for higher education are strongly associated with higher educational attainment. Sodha and Margo (2010) found 49% of families in the poorest fifth said they are likely to apply to university, compared to 77% of the richest fifth. Although some studies show parents and children from poorer backgrounds have high aspirations, the rates of participation in higher education by these children is low. The Guardian (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2010/sep/18/oxford-cambridge-university-free-meals>, Accessed 30/3/13) found that only 4% of those eligible for free school meals at 15 years old continue to study at university, compared to 33% of their peers. Even universities such as Oxford and Cambridge found that very few apply for places, even though they have schemes in place for students who are from low income backgrounds. The take up rates for these students is only 11.5% at Oxford and 12.6% at Cambridge (Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/sep/28/working-class-students-posh-universities>, Accessed 30/3/13). This evidence suggests that work is also needed to convert these expectations and aspirations for higher education into reality.

Comment: Most universities will have these schemes and also there are bursaries available for the poorest students.

All this research into the social class gap has highlighted three areas where interventions might help reduce the educational deficit between children from poor and rich backgrounds. These areas are: improving the home learning environment for deprived families; helping these parents and children from poorer families believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education; and raising the aspirations of these parents and children for advanced education from primary school onwards. As The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) point out, in recent years there has been a significant shift in Government policy away from a narrower focus on educational outcomes, however, some of these areas are better covered by these policies. For instance, there are a number of programmes with considerable emphasis on parenting and improving child behaviour in the years before compulsory schooling starts, such as Sure Start and Family Intervention Projects. There is less emphasis on these types of programmes during the primary years and even less during the secondary years, yet the evidence suggests that reaching these less affluent families while their children are still of school age could continue to be useful.

As I have discussed above, one of the key areas is to improve the home learning environment. I have seen evidence in my practice school where they are

trying to help these students from deprived backgrounds that don't have the material resources at home. The school organises regular homework sessions after school and during lunchtimes for those students unable to attend after school. The students have access to computers and the internet, which they may not get at home and they also have access to a teacher who can support them with their homework. The school feel this access to a teacher is a valuable asset for the students as research shows that there is a link between the social class gap and the cognitive ability of parents (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010).

There are other interventions that focus on the working-class children, which are aimed to increase educational engagement and attainment by developing strategies to help raise educational aspirations, such as the Extra Mile project and the Aimhigher scheme. The Extra Mile project was specifically developed to raise aspirations of students at primary and secondary school in disadvantaged communities. This involved a wide range of activities, including attempts to broaden the horizons of these pupils by offering them experiences and opportunities they would not normally get. The initial evaluation on this project by the DfE stated that the 'Extra Mile is associated with a positive impact on pupil attainment and other outcomes...' (DfE, 2010:3). The Aimhigher scheme was also aimed at raising aspirations of the working-class by encouraging them to participate in further and higher education. This included such activities as university taster days and residential summer schools. However, this programme only started in the secondary school years, while the research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) suggests that these interventions could be worthwhile from an earlier age, such as during primary school.

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A lot of these schemes or projects such as Aimhigher have lost their funding since the new coalition Government came into power. The introduction of the Pupil Premium and the National Scholarship Programme, have moved towards a whole-of-education approach, which starts much earlier and supports pupils to turn school-based achievement into success at university (The Times Higher Education, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/414416.article> Accessed 30/3/13). Pupil Premium is additional funding for schools to help them support their disadvantaged students and help close the attainment gap between them and their peers. The Government believes that this is the best way to address current underlying inequalities between children eligible for free school meals and their peers by making sure funding to tackle disadvantage reaches those who need it (DfE,

Comment: Good this early intervention is very important and intervention at secondary can be too late.

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/premium/ppfaqs/a0076064/free-school-meals-faqs>, Accessed 30/3/13).

Research shows us that there is a hidden poor, who are eligible for free school meals but for one reason or another do not take up their entitlement, according to McMahon and Marsh (1999) approximately 20% of those eligible do not register. This can amount to a substantial amount of money that both the school and the individual pupils, who don't register are missing out on to help them raise their attainment. My teaching practice school has a number of programmes that the money for Pupil Premium funds, such as: one to one tuition; immersive teaching in English and Mathematics; and music tuition to name but a few. The school understands the benefits of Pupil Premium and takes a number of steps to help encourage parents to register their child's eligibility for free school meals. They make sure that parents are aware of Pupil Premium and they understand what it means to their child and the school. They do this by sending out letters to parents and having the information on their website. They also update the parents on what the school will spend the money on each year, so they are incentivized to apply. One of the key steps the school takes is to make it clear to the parents and particularly the children that registering for free school meals is confidential and it will be kept confidential throughout their time in school. As McMahon and Marsh (1999) discovered in their research, a key fact to not registering is the stigma attached to the provision of free school meals, which can be made even more traumatic by bullying from other pupils. The plan the school has in place appears to be having some success with only 5% of pupils eligible for free school meals not taking their entitlement compared to 20% which McMahon and Marsh (1999) discovered.

Comment: Good link of theory with practice in your school.

This research I have undertaken into the social class gap will certainly impact on my future practice. It has made me aware of some of the key issues in relation to social class and educational achievement and it is clear that social class remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK. The area that has had the biggest impact on me is the participation rates of working-class children in further and higher education. The aspirations of parents and children from poorer backgrounds for further and higher education seems incredibly low and being able to make an impact in this area seems to be an important area to focus on. However, with recent changes to tuition fees for higher education, I feel this task may well have got even harder, as

students from poorer backgrounds may well be further deterred from pursuing a path into higher education in the future.

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One area I believe can have an impact on the aspirations of all children, not only the deprived children, is aspiration days. This is where schools invite former students back into school to advise and inform the current students about future educational and career opportunities they have successfully experienced themselves. Students will engage with them easier and find them more approachable role models because they are local and former students, they will also see that success is possible for people from their walk of life. This type of approach can also provide a school with opportunities to provide students with work place experiences through these former students. Work experience in my own personal experience is an important stepping stone to learning about the world of work. This is not something currently employed by my practice school, this stopped when the school moved year 9 into key stage four. I believe it can motivate students and help them see how school subjects relate to the job they are potentially interested in. The DfE (2009) found that: 75% of students after a work experience placement were clearer about what they wanted to do in their future careers; 90% agreed that they understood better why it is important to do well at school; and 89% agreed they were more prepared to work harder in lessons and course work. This suggests that work experience is valuable and can raise the aspirations of students from poorer backgrounds, however, it needs to be relevant to the student and needs to be something they are potentially interested in as a future career and/or appropriate to their particular skills and strengths.

This study has highlighted that raising aspirations of children and parents from poorer backgrounds could help raise their achievement and improve their take up rate into further and higher education. The key in my opinion is earlier interventions in their schooling life. Some of the current and previous programmes aimed at raising achievement have worked but the research does suggest that the seed needs to be planted of high aspirations early on, so implementation of certain initiatives needs to begin earlier in a student's schooling life.

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