

# Combating child poverty in Wales: are effective education strategies in place?

**Viewpoint**  
Informing debate

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Wales has a range of innovative education policies that seek to combat the effects of child poverty on educational attainment. However, more needs to be done if this relationship is to be overcome, argues David Egan. He draws on recent JRF studies on education and poverty in England and Northern Ireland that have resonance for Wales.

## Key points

- Child poverty has been significantly reduced in Wales but still affects one in four children.
- The association of child poverty with low educational achievement is well known and can be clearly demonstrated within the education system in Wales.
- A range of education policies has been introduced over the last ten years by the Welsh Assembly Government as part of its concerted attempt to reduce child poverty and to combat its effects.
- The JRF research argues that schools alone cannot overcome the links between child poverty and low education achievement and points to the need for much greater:
  - integration of discrete education policies, to maximise their impact on the effects of disadvantage;
  - emphasis on a range of out-of-school and community-based services that can support these young people.
- At the present time in Wales considerable thought and planning is being given to developing an Education Effectiveness Programme designed to improve educational performance and achieve greater equity of student outcome. This paper suggests that this should take full account of the JRF findings, particularly in relation to the need for the greater integration of policies and a more extensive range of services in our most disadvantaged areas.

## The research

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## Where are we now?

A report prepared for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in 2005 found that 27 per cent of children in Wales lived in poverty (Kenway et al., 2005). This measurement is based on households where the income is below 60 per cent of the median income for an equivalent type of household. The figure of 27 per cent represented a sharp decline in child poverty levels in Wales since 1999 when they were one of the worst in the United Kingdom (behind only London and the North East of England). By 2005, Wales had experienced the greatest fall of any nation or region, to the extent that its child poverty rate was now at the average for the UK as a whole.

This considerable achievement has been made possible by both the upturn that has taken place in the economy of Wales and the concerted strategy pursued by both the Assembly and Westminster governments to develop a range of social policies aimed at eliminating child poverty and its insidious effects.

Kenway et al. also noted that the geographical distribution of child poverty in Wales was uneven. Around one-third of children in poverty lived in the six local authority areas of the virtually post-industrial South Wales valleys. Another one-third lived in the other five local authority areas in South Wales (with a relatively large number in Cardiff) and the additional one-third in the remainder of Wales.

An update on the 2005 report was published in July (Kenway and Palmer, 2007). This noted that little additional progress had been made in reducing the child poverty figure of 27 per cent. One in four of our children in Wales (180,000 children) continue, therefore, to live in poverty and experience its deleterious impacts on their life-chances. The former Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration in the Welsh Assembly Government, Edwina Hart, has described these effects as follows:

**“It manifests itself in underachievement and social exclusion; in poor health; and in limited opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is damaging to individual children, to families, to communities and to society as a whole.”** (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a)

Over the last three years, the Assembly Government has given increased priority to its cross-cutting policies designed to tackle child poverty. These were articulated in February 2005 in the strategic document *‘A fair future for our children’: The strategy of the Welsh Assembly Government for tackling child poverty* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005). This committed the Government to halving the rate of child poverty by 2010 and completely eliminating it by 2020. The key elements of the strategy were to be:

- reducing **income poverty** through better job opportunities;
- ending **participation poverty** through greater opportunities for children from poor families to access play, sporting, leisure and cultural activities;
- reducing **service poverty** through improving access to public services for poor families;
- capturing and monitoring the extent and nature of child poverty through the use of a **wider range of measurements**.

In October 2006, the requirements of the latter led to the publication of a series of milestones and targets for income and work; education; health and housing (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a). In November 2006, there followed an Implementation Plan that included a series of general policy proposals including ‘child-poverty proofing’ of all new Assembly Government initiatives and spending commitments, ‘programme bending’ of all budgets and programmes to preferentially benefit the poorest children and their families and annual reporting of milestones and targets towards the 2020 elimination of child poverty in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006b).

The policy manifestos of the political parties for the Assembly Elections of May 2007 gave prominent attention to child poverty. The Coalition Government – eventually formed in July 2007 by the Wales Labour Party and Plaid Cymru – based its agreement on a policy programme known as ‘One Wales’. This gives continuing prominence to the eradication of child poverty, recognising that progress has been made in that direction but noting with “great concern” its persistence (Wales Labour and Plaid Cymru, 2007). It reaffirms the targets of the previous Labour Assembly Government and sets out a number of planned actions, the majority of which restate those set out above. In addition, there is a commitment to create an Expert Group to develop policy in this area and to seek legislative powers that are currently in the competence of the Westminster government.

## Effects and indicators

There can be no doubt that over the last half century considerable progress has been made in the percentage of young people who are entered for and achieve recognised educational qualifications. However, the rate of progress in Wales over the last decade presents a mixed picture:

- Attainment of pupils at the age of 5 and 11 has continuously improved. This is particularly the case at the age of 11 where, over the last six years, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected level of performance in mathematics, science and either English or Welsh has improved by up to 12 percentage points.
- Attainment at the ages of 14 and 16 has also improved over this period, but the rate of progress has slowed and sometimes stalled and is generally behind that of other countries and regions in the UK.
- Fourteen per cent of 16-year-olds fail to get five GCSEs at any level.
- Wales has a particularly high proportion of 16-year-olds failing to get any GCSEs at all.
- 17-year-olds who have neither five 'good' GCSEs nor an equivalent vocational qualification are very unlikely to have any further qualifications by the age of 24.
- The take-up of vocational qualifications in Wales between the ages of 14 and 19 is low by UK and particularly European standards.
- Ten per cent of 16- to 18-year-olds are not in education, or training, or employment.
- The proportion of 19-year-olds who have not achieved at least a Level 2 qualification is 25 per cent, a surprisingly high figure. Generally it is unlikely that these young people will reach or surpass this level of qualification in their twenties and they will, therefore, be more vulnerable to experiencing low pay and economic inactivity (Kenway and Palmer, 2007).

It is often students affected by various forms of disadvantage, particularly child poverty, who experience the lowest levels of attainment. This, of course, is not universally the case: many pupils overcome disadvantage and are capable of the highest levels of achievement. The phenomenon of schools in some of Wales' most challenging socio-economic areas bucking

trends and achieving far more for their students than might be expected has been captured in two studies commissioned by the Assembly Government (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002). Such outcomes are also noted in one of the recently commissioned research studies produced by JRF (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). The academic and professional field of school effectiveness, including awareness of how variations in outcome also take place within schools and between different LEAs, is now being strongly pursued by the Assembly Government, as will be noted further below (Egan and Marshall, 2007).

Notwithstanding these qualifications, the link between disadvantage and low educational attainment is a pernicious one that is strongly represented in Wales:

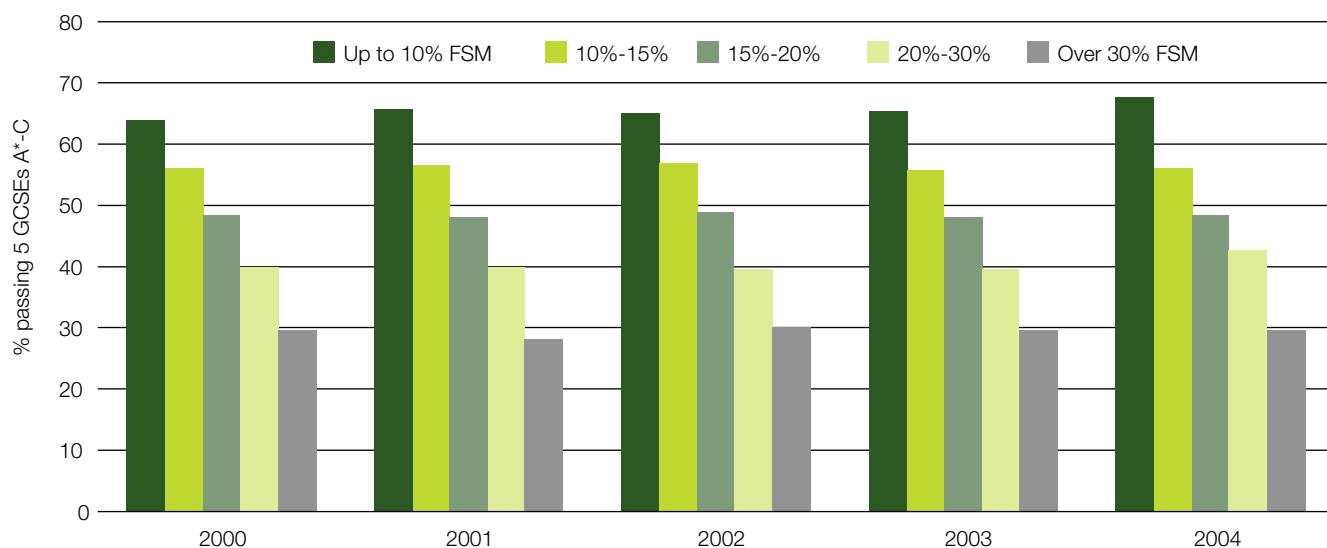
- Kenway et al. (2005) noted that among schools with the fewest pupils entitled to free school meals, just 6 per cent of 16-year-olds failed to achieve at least five GCSEs in 2004. By comparison, 27 per cent of 16-year-olds in schools with high proportions of free school meals failed to reach that level.
- The strong link between free school meals and academic achievement has been noted in successive publications from Assembly Government statisticians. Analysis of student results at ages 14 and 16 clearly show that the level of student achievement decreases as the level of free school meals entitlement increases (National Assembly for Wales, 2006 and '07).
- Figure 1 presents this relationship looking at the attainment of five 'good' GCSEs (Welsh Assembly Government 2007).
- Children from unskilled backgrounds are five times less likely to proceed to further and higher education than those from more affluent backgrounds (End Child Poverty Network and Children in Wales, 2006).

Why might it be that children experiencing child poverty do less well at school? The End Child Poverty Network Cymru and Children in Wales offer the following reasons:

- a comparative lack of access to resources, activities and opportunities outside of school enjoyed by their more fortunate peers;
- living in overcrowded and inadequate housing;
- less parental involvement in education;
- the expectations and influence of the peer group;
- the impact of stigma, bullying and not feeling respected;
- emotional and behavioural difficulties;

## As in many countries, in Wales there is a strong link between disadvantage and academic performance:

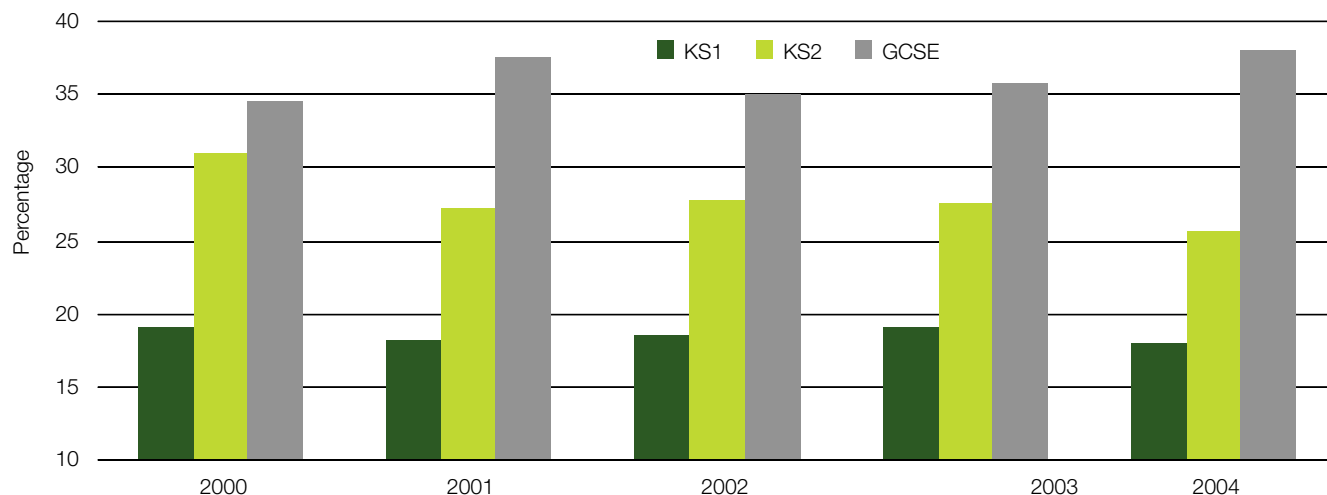
Pupils getting five or more GCSEs grades A\*- C grouped by FSM entitlement



Coverage: Wales. The percentage of children at a school who are entitled to free school meals (FSM) is a proxy for disadvantage

## The gap widens as pupils pass through the school system – again a phenomenon seen in many countries:

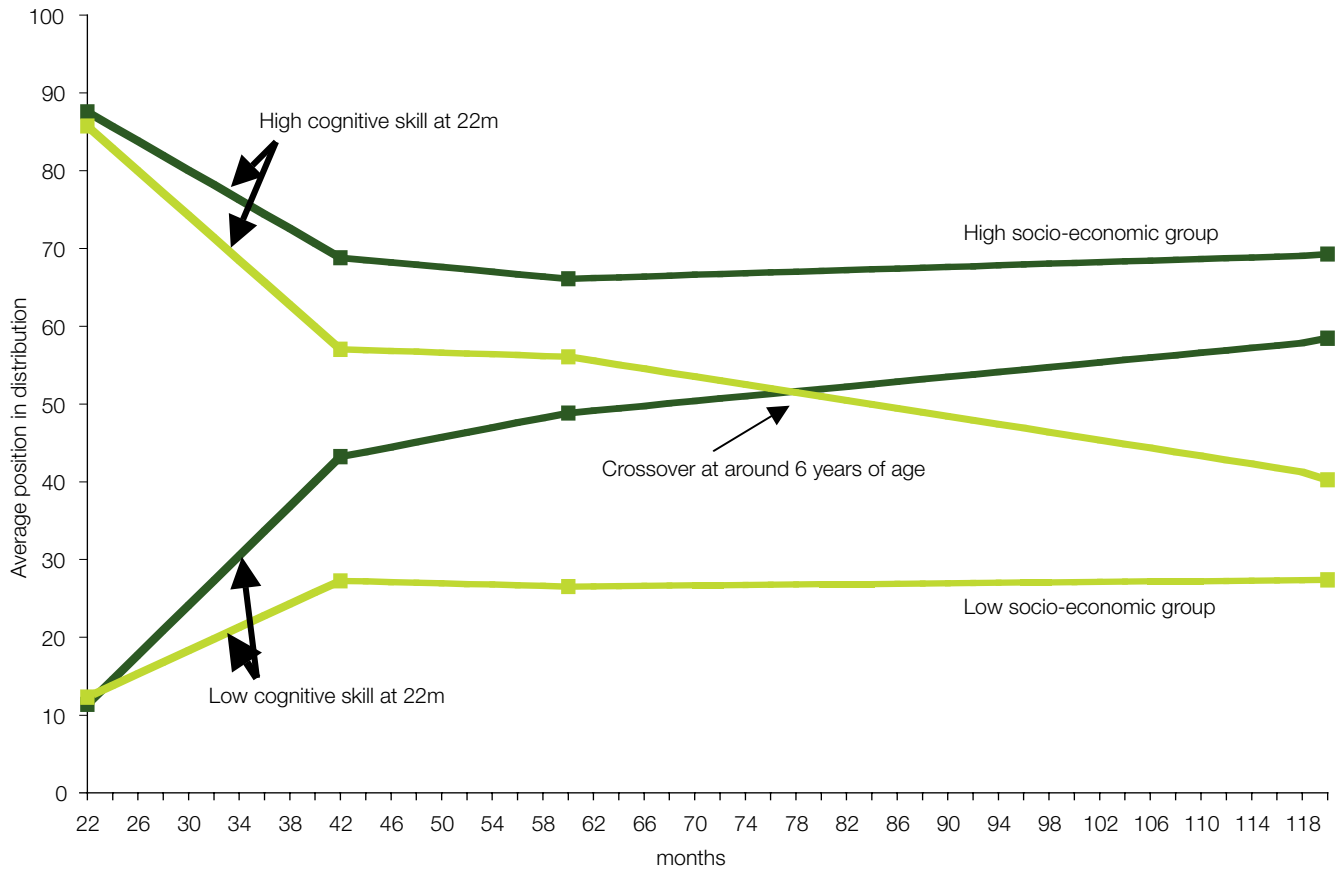
Gap in pupil performance between highest and lowest FSM schools across age groups (difference in percentages of pupils obtaining benchmark)



Coverage: Wales. KS1 benchmark is the proportion of pupils assessed as being at level 2 or above in core subjects, KS2 benchmark is proportion at level 4 or above, GCSE benchmark is proportion obtaining 5 or more grades A\*-C.

# Disadvantage in childhood compounds over time (more evidence):

Relative cognitive shifts, 22 months to 10 years



- higher levels of additional learning needs;
- disengagement from secondary schooling;
- increased likelihood of teenage pregnancy.

The Assembly Government is responding to that report by setting up a Child Well-being Monitor for Wales that will report every three years on the following areas:

It is interesting that many of these factors reflect the findings of a report produced by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) in February 2007 on child well-being in rich countries (UNICEF, 2007). This uses a much broader range of qualitative as well as quantitative indicators to judge educational outcomes in twenty-one industrialised countries including the UK. The categories it investigates are material well-being, family and peer relationships, health and safety, behaviour and risks and children's own sense of well-being. Although much of the data is England-only, the report's conclusion that the UK is at the bottom of the league table for child well-being across these countries appears indicative of the relationships between these factors, child poverty and low educational attainment.

- Early Years education and learning opportunities;
- health, freedom from abuse and victimisation;
- access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities;
- having a safe home and community that supports emotional well-being;
- freedom from child poverty.

## Current and emerging solutions

Since 1999, the Assembly Government has introduced a wide range of educational policies many of which have been at least partially motivated by the cause of social justice – the need to tackle educational disadvantage in general and child poverty in particular. In the most recent strategic statement of education policy in Wales, *The learning country: Vision into action* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006c; September), Jane Davidson, then Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, notes that the policies set out there are intrinsic to the Child Poverty Implementation Plan. It is also apparent in the *One Wales* agreement that education continues to be seen as having a leading role in tackling the outcomes of child poverty.

These policy areas include:

- *Flying Start*. A major spending programme that offers intensive and targeted support for the most disadvantaged 0- to 3-year-olds in Wales and their families. They are given an entitlement to increased access to free childcare facilities, health visitors, parenting programmes (as part of the Parenting Action Plan) and other services.
- *Primary Free Breakfasts*. Following a pilot programme in disadvantaged communities, all primary pupils in Wales are now entitled to a free nutritious breakfast at the start of the school day. This is now being taken up by over 50 per cent of primary schools in Wales, many of which are reporting improved concentration, attitudes and behaviour from children.
- *The Foundation Phase*. A new curriculum for 3- to 7-year-olds based around play and creativity. It reflects evidence from around the world on how best to provide an early years education that will enable all young people to achieve their potential. The longitudinal evidence suggests that such approaches have the ability to improve life-chances in a variety of ways that overcome disadvantage and the risk of personal failure. The plan is that, as it is introduced as a national programme from September 2008, the Foundation Phase will have staff/pupil ratios of one to eight for the youngest children and one to fifteen for 5- to 7-year-olds (Siraj-Blatchford, I. et al., 2006).
- *Children's Services integration*. Each local authority in Wales is required to nominate a Children's Services Director, to produce a single plan for children's services and to create a partnership of all interested organisations. In many areas there

are now Integrated Children's Centres that provide locations for such joined-up service delivery.

- *The RAISE Programme*. This initiative (Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education in Wales) is the largest programme targeted at improving the levels of attainment of disadvantaged pupils ever undertaken in Wales. Using additional funding from the 2006 budget, it provides £32 million over the two years up to 2008 for schools in Wales where the free school meal uptake is 20 per cent or higher, to develop customised strategies such as literacy support, out-of-hours activities and extended curriculum opportunities. This initiative was developed as a specific response to the growing awareness that the links between disadvantage and low attainment were particularly strong in Wales (Davidson, 2006).
- *Student funding*. Fortnightly Education Maintenance Allowances to encourage young people from lower income homes to remain in learning after 16 and annual Assembly Learning Grants to assist young people from low-income households into further and higher education have also been introduced.
- *Community Focused Schools*. Recognising that the facilities provided in secondary schools are a community resource that should be available outside of the school day and that some of the schools in Wales achieving outcomes above expectation are community-orientated institutions, the Assembly Government has introduced a Community Focused School programme. This programme has used funding of £6.8 million from 2005 to 2007 to introduce a range of school-based provision, some of which is provided in the most disadvantaged communities of Wales. The future funding of the programme is uncertain (Contin You, 2006).
- *Specific child poverty targets*. The strategic plans to tackle child poverty introduced by the previous Assembly Government, as set out above, include a number of specific targets for education in relation to, for example, raising student performance at ages 11, 14 and 16; reducing the proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds who are not in employment, education or training (the 'NEET' group) and improving the achievement of looked-after children. The *One Wales* agreement promises increased attention to childcare, reducing class sizes for 3- to 7-year-olds, more community schools and the integration of existing child poverty initiatives using the Wales Spatial Plan (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006b).

These policies should be seen within a wider policy agenda, much of which has been driven by a commitment to greater social justice. This includes policies that have eschewed the use of school league tables, seen a move away from national testing of pupils at ages 5, 11 and 14, a strong commitment to reform of 14-19 education and training and a greater voice for young people through statutory Schools Councils and other measures.

Nevertheless, in the heady and prolific policy atmosphere that has followed the devolution of power to Wales, policy integration and synergy have not always been strong features. It is likely that Ministers and Assembly Government officials would be the first to recognise this weakness in the policy agenda. The introduction of RAISE could be seen as a case in point. Prior to the budget 'windfall' of April 2006 there was already a growing awareness of stubborn difficulties surrounding the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and low attainment and a policy intention to do something to address this. The political imperative to target the additional funding available at this area and to produce rapid policy outcomes inevitably meant that policy integration was not fully undertaken.

It can also be suggested that whilst much has clearly been done in the field of education to introduce policies designed to counteract the effects of disadvantage, little is known in precise terms about the actual impact these policies, individually or collectively, have had. Whilst the Assembly Government is committed to evidence-based policy and evaluation, crosscutting research and evaluation of this type has not been undertaken.

More recently the Assembly Government Education Department, as part of a commitment to carry out extensive systemic reform of the education system in Wales at each level (state, local authority and school) and in line with the strategy set out in *The learning country: Vision into action*, has been developing a National Education Effectiveness Programme. One of the key drivers of that programme is the ambition to raise student performance including overcoming the links between disadvantage and low achievement. In so doing it is recognised that much closer integration of existing policies and programmes will be required under the umbrella of the overall Effectiveness Programme. Whilst the programme looks mainly to the effect that schools and local education authorities have in achieving effective educational outcomes and outputs, it also recognises that there is a wider child well-being agenda that should be addressed (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007).

## Messages from the JRF Education and Poverty Programme

In September 2007, the JRF published a series of research-based studies on education and poverty undertaken by academic specialists in the field. Whilst many of these studies have taken account of the Welsh context none have dealt specifically with Wales or with discrete developments in the country. They nevertheless are likely to have strong resonance for education and child poverty in Wales. What then appear to be the key messages that they contain in relation to the education policies being pursued in Wales?

The key background study highlights the fact that schools do make a difference to educational achievement (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). Allowing for all other measurable factors, the authors calculate that high quality secondary schools can add up to 14 per cent value in terms of outcomes compared with those of poor quality. This finding is in line with other studies on the impact of school effectiveness strategies, some of which have suggested that at GCSE, for example, an effective school can add up to two additional GCSEs at Grade C to a student's performance (Gray and Wilcox, 1998).

What this also indicates, of course, is that schools are not the only determinant, or necessarily the major influence, on student attainment. The remainder of the JRF studies strongly support such an interpretation, placing as they do significant emphasis on out-of-school influences and solutions.

### Community schooling

A number of the studies suggest that extended schooling and out-of-hours activities are particularly important to disadvantaged pupils: they do not enjoy the range and richness of out-of-school learning available to their more advantaged peers (Wikely et al., 2007; Frankham et al., 2007).

These studies also suggest that the *quality* of the experiences that the disadvantaged young people are offered is every bit as important as the range of opportunities available. In particular, these young people lack access to organised activities. Affordable clubs and subsidised transport are important facilitators of such high quality experiences.

The role of adults in supporting these activities and interacting with young people in a way that is very different from the relationships that exist with teachers in schools is also seen to be critical. These adults are best seen as friends who, like the young people, are voluntarily engaged in the activities and are also participating in learning.

Most important of all is the fact that the young people choose to be involved in these activities and this has a clear influence on successful outcomes. All of this suggests that high quality community schooling targeted specifically at disadvantaged young people can have a major impact on their attitude to education and achievement.

There appear to be a number of implications here for current policies in Wales. These include:

- Is the current Community Focused Schools programme sufficiently large to achieve the kind of impact suggested by the JRF studies and which appear to be in place in the Extended Schools Programme in England (Cummings, et al., 2005)? Given that the current budget for the programme is comparatively small (about £3 million a year), that it is not explicitly targeted at our most disadvantaged communities/young people and its future is uncertain, the answer would appear to be in the negative.
- What evidence do we have on the impact of the Community Focused Schools programme and the role of schools within the Flying Start and RAISE programmes? Whilst it is true to say that these programmes are in their infancy and the results of commissioned evaluations are not yet available, the answer would again appear to be not much. In order to understand the impact which community schooling may be able to exert on child poverty and disadvantage and, in the light of the JRF evidence, what more could be done, this type of integrated policy impact assessment seems to be urgently required.
- Given the debate over the need for extensive rationalisation of school places in Wales as a result of a significant decline in pupil numbers, leading to the possibility of a major programme of school closures over the next decade, is the 'community school' issue being sufficiently factored into considerations (Welsh Local Government Association, 2007)? Again it would seem that this is not the case.

## Learner voice

The views of disadvantaged young people themselves are exploited powerfully in a number of the JRF studies, particularly in the work on links between poverty and literacy (Kellett and Dar, 2007) and the study on primary education in Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2007). They suggest that it is only through listening closely to young people that we can begin to fully understand issues associated with poverty, disadvantage and educational achievement.

The Horgan study is particularly revealing in its demonstration that children experiencing poverty from a very young age show a clear awareness of the difficulties that they face in and out of school and how this will affect the outcomes of their schooling. Boys seem to have a particularly strong understanding of how poverty impacts upon them and their education. Powerful instances of the worry that these young people feel are the costs of school uniform and of school trips.

The Kellett and Dar study on literacy demonstrates that children from more advantaged backgrounds enjoy considerable out of school support in overcoming their problems that their disadvantaged peers do not receive. The latter are almost totally dependent on out-of-school homework clubs if they are to access such support. It is clear that it is only through building confidence that disadvantaged students experiencing literacy difficulties can learn to overcome their problems. This requires dedicated and non-threatening time being provided for them and also with their parents in developing family learning. This type of support cannot be provided within the school day or by schools alone.

What implications and questions seem to arise for Wales from this?

- Wales has a strong record in relation to recognising the rights of children and young people, including support for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the introduction of statutory Schools Councils and a number of policy areas where young people's participation is enshrined. It would be difficult, however, to point to specific policy areas where the kind of research-based evidence collected from poor and disadvantaged young people themselves, of the type used in the JRF studies, has impacted upon policy thinking. Where is the high quality research in Wales that presents the views of disengaged, hard-to-reach, low achieving young people in general and those who are excluded and in the NEET group in particular?



- Evidence drawn from work with schools in Wales as part of the development of the Education Effectiveness Programme and from an ongoing international study of effective schools suggests that one of the defining characteristics of such institutions is the high currency they give to the views of young people, their parents and the wider community (Unpublished research). This validates the JRF evidence and suggests that strengthening the role and influence of the learner voice should be taken forward more strongly in Wales.

## The role of adults

Virtually all the JRF studies point to the importance of a range of appropriate adults, including – but certainly not only – teachers, working with disadvantaged and excluded young people in order to build their confidence and get them more strongly engaged in education and training.

This includes other types of professional as part of the wider children's services agenda, as Horgan (2007) argues in suggesting that care and welfare staff should be located within schools. Outside of the current professions, however, there is the need for new types of professionals to emerge in the form of mentors, coaches, those giving literacy support and youth workers. This has clear implications for the training and conditions of service of these staff and for the whole workforce development agenda.

There are many implications for policy developments in Wales in this area. The need to develop new types of education professionals is already a major issue within the Flying Start, Foundation Phase and 14-19 reform programmes. In the latter case Learning Coaches are being trained to work with young people in much the way that is being suggested as good practice by the JRF studies.

- Should this model be refined and extended more broadly across the education system as a way of providing additional support to our most disadvantaged young people in order to support them, in and out of school, ending their exclusion, building their confidence and improving their outcomes?

## Governors and governing bodies

The study on the role of school governors and governing bodies in disadvantaged areas (Dean et al., 2007) supports other contemporary research that governors can have an important role to play in school effectiveness. This appears to be particularly true in disadvantaged areas although the challenges faced by governing bodies in these situations are considerable. They face problems in recruiting suitable members in order to have the capacity to perform their role, including that of offering challenge as well as support to headteachers. The JRF study suggests that new models of school governance may, therefore, be required to overcome these obstacles and to allow governing bodies to fulfil their potential.

There again appears to be resonance here for Wales.

- What is known of the role of governing bodies in our most disadvantaged areas and also in relation to those schools that are performing above expectation?
- Do/should governing bodies have a distinct role in attempting to overcome the effects of child poverty and disadvantage and what implications might this have for school governance?
- What evidence might be emerging from the RAISE programme in this area that could be usefully incorporated into the emerging Education Effectiveness Programme?

## Excluded young people

One of the JRF studies raises particular issues about excluded and hard-to-reach young people (Thompson and Russell, 2007). They point to the importance of consulting with these young people and their parents in relation to the most appropriate provision that can be made in order to re-engage them in education. They also suggest that more rigorous data collection is needed, identifying why these young people have become excluded and hard-to-reach. Improved quality assurance of the programmes they are offered and longer term planning of the strategies in place to support them are also essential ingredients making for success. Those in the NEET group appear to require strategies and support tailored to their particular needs. In general, far greater investment is needed in these young people if they are to be rescued from exclusion. This includes having the right kind of trained and appropriately rewarded professionals in place.

- There appear to be clear implications here for the work currently being undertaken by the National Behaviour and Attendance Review in Wales. Many of these findings resonate with its Interim Report and could usefully be considered in its future deliberations (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007).

## Other issues

A number of other specific issues and questions arise in the JRF studies that may have resonance in Wales. These include:

- whether issues regarding child poverty and disadvantage should become part of the Personal and Social Education curriculum;
- the case for bending policy on play to take account of the difficulties faced in disadvantaged areas in providing appropriate open spaces for play;
- introducing high quality parenting and family learning programmes for the parents of children experiencing child poverty, including excluded young people;
- introducing guidance on homework policies that take account of the difficult situation faced by children experiencing poverty and the support that can be made available to them;
- the introduction of a literacy strategy specifically targeted at disadvantaged young people;
- making Youth Opportunity Cards available to disadvantaged young people to enable them to get free access to community facilities and programmes;
- introducing strategies for tackling the particular difficulties faced by boys who experience child poverty.

All of the above seem to merit serious consideration but there is also a very clear message from the study carried out by Raffo et al. (2007) on existing education policies that attempt to address poverty. They argue strongly that it can through the joining up of those policies can real success in overcoming the association between poverty and low educational attainment be achieved and sustained. Policy in this area they maintain “needs to have an overarching vision of how various interventions fit together and for what purposes”.

This message is echoed in the Cassen and Kingdon study (2007) on low educational achievement. Their conclusion is that there is “no single magic bullet” that can be used to overcome the link between child poverty

and low attainment and that what is needed is to refine and fully implement policies already in place for schools. They point, in particular, to the need for an improved literacy strategy in primary schools, to higher quality provision for pupils with additional learning needs, the introduction of an attractive vocational curriculum, a broader capture of student achievement than the narrow five A-Cs at GCSE and enhanced funding of disadvantaged schools.

What is also very apparent in the JRF studies is that whilst schools have a major part to play in confronting and attempting to overcome the relationship between child poverty and low educational attainment, it is by no means the case that they can do this alone or that necessarily they have the major role to play. The synthesis of the JRF studies prepared by Donald Hirsch makes this point forcibly in saying that “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” (Hirsch, 2007). For him, therefore, “the transformation of educational relationships inside and outside the classroom will be at least as important as the efficient delivery of the school curriculum in boosting the chances of children from disadvantaged families”.

## Moving policy forward

The analysis offered above suggests that in developing policies to address and combat the effects of child poverty within the education system in Wales the current Assembly Government should consider:

- Much greater integration of current education policies that impact upon the effects of child poverty. This should be based upon research and evaluation of the discrete effect they may be having individually and collectively. The role of the learner voice should have greater significance within this.
- The tool for integrating these policies in future should be the emerging Education Effectiveness Programme, which should include policy levers enabling its implementation and impact to be bent towards disadvantaged students and schools.
- Overt recognition that schools alone are unable to tackle and overcome the effects of child poverty on education.
- Closer integration of the wider children’s service agenda in the Education Effectiveness programme through the development within it of a Child Well-Being Strategy.

- Action in the major areas identified by the JRF studies, particularly the development of the Community School programme within disadvantaged areas, as a way of offering a greater range of education opportunities and support to young people experiencing poverty.

These recommendations have, of course, significant funding implications particularly at a time when it is anticipated that forthcoming public spending rounds will be extremely tight. The commitment to reducing child poverty, however, is a major plank of the Assembly Coalition Government programme. The potential availability from 2008/09 of the funding currently expended on the RAISE initiative would be useful but hardly sufficient. The possibility of bending school funding more strongly towards deprivation and need is already on the policy agenda and the commitment of the One Wales agreement to review school funding would enable this to be considered. Together these suggest a financial way forward.

Whilst successive Welsh Assembly Governments have developed education policies designed to benefit all young people in Wales but with due regard for the needs of the most under-privileged in our society, the time now seems opportune to accentuate the emphasis on greater equity of outcomes if current levels of educational attainment in Wales are to be moved significantly forward.

The JRF research suggests that if all of the one quarter of our young people who currently experience the effects of poverty are to fulfil their potential then a range of integrated policy initiatives need to be in place with particular salience for them. They would not be the only beneficiaries. For if all children experiencing poverty can succeed, they will be empowered in moving their own families out of poverty, breaking the inter-generational factors that are so intractable at present. Thereby education can play its major part in enabling Wales to be a place by 2020 where poverty no longer blights our nation and impedes educational progress.

## About this paper

This paper was written by Professor David Egan of the Wales Institute for Applied Education Research, Cardiff School of Education, University of Wales Institute Cardiff.

It draws on the JRF's programme of work on education and poverty. The first nine studies in this programme, published in 2007, have investigated features of the relationship between poverty and education outcomes. The individual reports are listed in the references below (see Cassen; Dean; Frankham; Horgan; Kellett;

Raffo; Sutton; Thomson; Wikelely). These reports (and summary *Findings*) are available for download from [www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop](http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop). A broader summary document (Hirsch, 2007) is also available, pulling together the conclusions of these studies. Over the next two years, further JRF research and analysis will develop ideas about policy and practice solutions that address the poverty gap in education.

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