

Appendix 2

What impact does socio-economic circumstances have on educational attainment at key stage 4 (14-16)?

***A briefing report for Durham
County Council Scrutiny
Committee***



Centre for Public Policy

Introduction

This briefing paper explores both the positive and negative impacts of socio-economic factors on the level of pupil educational attainment levels at Key Stage 4 (KS4). The paper reviews both the academic and policy literature and from this it seeks to identify areas of good practice.

The first section of the paper seeks to ascertain how and the extent to which the socio-economic backgrounds of children can affect their educational attainment.

The second section examines what can be done by public authorities to address problems of lower educational attainment among disadvantaged pupils. This section also identifies policy initiatives which have had some success in improving educational attainment levels. In addition it explores the role local authorities can play in this policy area.

The briefing paper concludes by highlighting some the key issues to emerge from this research.

What is the impact of socio-economic circumstances on attainment?

Much of the literature on this subject is concerned with analysing and finding answers to the 'educational attainment gap' between disadvantaged and better off pupils. However Meek (2006)¹ cautions that this debate is not just about addressing the needs of "low-attaining deprived pupils" but also those "deprived pupils at risk of **slower progress** at all levels of attainment".

The educational attainment gap among school pupils is driven by "deep social factors" more than by the structure of the education system (Meek 2006). The available empirical evidence, of which there are copious amounts, shows that socio-economic circumstances particularly those related to the personal and family background of individual pupils, can have significant impacts on educational attainment. The 2005 Education White Paper (2005), *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, noted that "...a child's educational achievements are still too strongly linked to their parents' social and economic background - a key barrier to social mobility". Babb (2005)² supports this contention arguing that:

¹ See Stephen Meek, Director of Strategy at DfES, powerpoint presentation at: http://www.ippr.org.uk/uploadedFiles/events/Stephen%20Meek_s%20Presentation.ppt.

² Babb, P. (2005) *A Summary of Focus on Social Inequalities*. London: National Statistics. Accessed at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/FOSI_summary_article.pdf.

Participation in higher education and attainment at GCSE level are strongly influenced by people's social and economic background. Nearly **nine out of ten** 16 year olds from higher professional occupational backgrounds were in full-time education in 2002 compared with around **six out of ten** of those with parents in routine or lower supervisory occupations.

In fact the gap in GCSE attainment levels based on parental socio-economic status widened during the 1990s.³ In 1992, the attainment gap was **44%**, with just **16%** of pupils from an unskilled manual background achieved good GCSE results⁴ compared with **60%** of pupils from a professional background (Babb, 2005). By 1998, this had become a **49%** gap as a result of the smaller improvement in attainment by pupils from an unskilled manual background (Babb, 2005). However, by 2002 this educational attainment gap **returned to its 1992 level** following greater improvement in results for pupils from unskilled manual or routine backgrounds (For details of the 2002 statistics see appendix 1). Part of this gap in attainment is explained by **highly educated parents** (i.e. with a degree level qualification) being more involved in learning activities with their child in comparison to parents with lower or no qualifications. Statistical evidence shows that "parents with no qualifications are three times less likely to have done any learning activities over the previous year with their child than parents with a degree" (Babb, 2005).

A detailed study by Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004)⁵ on intergenerational transmission of educational success also notes that:

The most important socio-demographic, family-level, *distal* influences on children's attainments are **parental education** and **income**. Occupational status is also important ... Family size is another important factor.

However as well as parental influence there are other factors that can influence children's educational attainment levels. Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004) research also identified other factors that can, depending on context and circumstance, either "offset or exacerbate" in a "substantial way" family / parental level factors, including:

- pre-school, neighbourhoods and schools;
- parental beliefs, values, aspirations and attitudes;
- parental skills in terms of warmth, discipline and education behaviours.

³ McNally and Blanden point out there is a shortage of quality data in this area. See: McNally, S. and Blanden, J. (2006) *Mind the gap: child poverty and educational attainment*. Poverty 123. Accessed at: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/info/Povertyarticles/Poverty123/Poverty123-Child-poverty-and-educational-attainment.pdf>.

⁴ In other words five or more GCSEs A*C grades.

⁵ Feinstein, L. Duckworth, K. and Sabates, R. (2004) *A model of the inter-generational transmission of educational success*. London: The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning Institute of Education. Accessed at: <http://www.learningbenefits.net/Publications/ResReps/ResRep10.pdf>.

These are identified as key factors in the “formation of school success”. More significantly Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004) argued that “these behaviours can be **adopted by parents** no matter what their background”, which is an important point to note for policy makers.

However as Meek (2006) highlights, to date there is only limited evidence on the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at improving parenting skills. In addition policy interventions of this type tend to have an impact only if they are highly targeted, specialised and costly programmes. Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004) research concludes by stating that policy interventions need to go beyond schools and the education sector specifically and encompass the multi-dimensional factors that impact on educational attainment, which can only be achieved by “integration of cross-departmental activities to enhance the effectiveness of educational support”.

The profile of children most likely to be low educational achievers in England is (Babb 2005):

- Male;
- from a low socio-economic background;
- with parents who have low or no qualifications;
- living in a single-parent household;
- having many siblings;
- attending a state school rather than an independent school;
- attending a school with a high rate of free-school meal eligibility;
- workless households;
- certain ethnic groups (e.g. black males, travellers and children whose first language is not English).

In addition, it is not surprising to find that **truancy** also has a significant impact on educational attainment. Research by Bramley and Karley (2004)⁶ found that **housing tenure** can be an impediment to educational attainment. This research found that home-ownership does have “an additional, independent and positive impact on school attainment”, the effect of which “is stronger in the primary school sector”.

Interestingly, research by Raffe et al (2006)⁷ into inequality in levels of participation and attainment of young people from different social classes found that:

⁶ Bramley, G. and Karley, N.K. (2004) *Impediments to educational attainment and the role of housing tenure*. ENHR 2004 Conference in Cambridge. Accessed at: <http://www.crsis.hw.ac.uk/IMPEDIMENTS%20TO%20EDUCATIONAL%20ATTAINMENT%20AND%20THE%20ROLE%20OF%20HOUSING%20TENURE.pdf>.

⁷ Raffe, D., Croxford, L., Iannelli, C., Shapira, M. and Howieson, C. (2006) *Social-Class Inequalities in Education in England and Scotland*. Special CES Briefing No. 40. Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh. Accessed at: <http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/Brief040.pdf>.

[Research that shows] inequalities based on social class have diminished contrasts with the finding of economists that inequalities based on parental income have widened. It is possible that the main basis of inequality has shifted from social and cultural to economic factors, perhaps reflecting the increasing costs (including opportunity costs) of maintaining a given level of relative attainment in an expanding education system.

A study into inequality and attainment among the four 'home nations' of the UK by Croxford (2000) found that social class had more impact on attainment levels in England than in Scotland.⁸

These studies on class and inequalities highlight the level of complexity around interpreting the factors that impact on educational attainment.

A number of key facts are evident regarding the educational attainment gap. First, it is clear that disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances have an **immediate impact** pupils' educational attainment as soon as they begin formal education. In addition the education gap **continues** and **worsens** as pupils move through the Key Stages. As McNally and Blanden (2006) point out:

Combining the initial gap in early cognitive ability with the apparent growth in the attainment gap through the educational system leads to **substantial differences in final attainment levels** between children from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

This highlights the importance of 'early-years intervention' to address pupil underperformance. For instance Babb (2005) found there was only "a **smaller difference in educational attainment** between the social groups among young people who succeed in their early years".

This evidence highlights the fact that the attainment gap between disadvantaged and better off pupil continues to be an intractable education policy problem which so far seems resistant to significant improvement. McNally and Blanden (2006) argue that there is little evidence to show that the education attainment gap at all Key Stages is in decline, despite considerable efforts made by the Labour government to address this problem.

What can be done to improve attainment?

Successful policy initiatives

That is not to say certain policy actions have not proved to be effect. First and foremost McNally and Blanden (2006) found that when schools with a high

⁸ In addition the study found that the comprehensive system of schooling in Scotland and Wales had no impact on attainment and there was a better social mix in schools in these two nations. See: Croxford, L. (2000) *Inequality in Attainment at Age 16: A 'Home International' Comparison*. CES Briefing. University of Edinburgh. Accessed at: <http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/Brief019.pdf>.

number of disadvantaged pupils receive extra funding this can make a positive difference to pupil performance. Policy programmes such as Excellence in Cities (EiC) utilised a number of techniques to support disadvantaged pupils which were found to be beneficial:

- the provision of learning mentors to help students overcome educational or behavioural problems;
- learning support units to provide short-term teaching and support programmes for difficult students;
- and a programme to provide extra support for 5-10 per cent of pupils in each school who were considered gifted or talented.

It was found that:

...for a 4.4 per cent increase in expenditure per pupil it [EiC] has delivered a **2.9 - 4.8 per cent increase** in the number of pupils achieving the government target or better in maths at key stage 3 for the most able pupils in schools with the highest rate of deprivation. This policy is an example of a successful attempt to raise standards in deprived areas and shows that **resources, when properly directed**, are a good use of public money. (McNally and Blanden, 2006).

It is important to note that not all successful policy programmes require extra resources. Evaluation of the literacy hour introduced by the Government in the late-1990s showed that:

...this policy was important in raising educational standards at key stage 2 at a very low cost (mainly involving a few days of teacher training). Hence, education policy can also improve standards by facilitating the adoption of high quality teaching practices (McNally and Blanden, 2006).

Meek (2006) points out the “use of personalised interventions such as catch-up literacy and small group tuition” can be useful methods for assisting disadvantaged children. In addition it is clear that the extended schools programme does have potential to assist children who have lower levels of education attainment.

The role of local authorities

Local authorities can at best have only a marginal impact on educational attainment levels or some aspects of pupil performance. According to Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002)⁹ good local authorities have a:

...beneficial effect on some aspects of performance of pupils and schools, but the effect is **not great**. There is no proven relationship between the quality of an LEA and overall standards of attainment. Other factors, such as the effect of **disadvantage**, are stronger. The expectation that LEAs should have a major effect on pupils' standards appears unrealistic.

⁹ Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002) *Local education authorities and school improvement 1996–2001*. Accessed at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/assets/2844.pdf>.

Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002) go on to state that:

At the highest levels of generality, it appears that there is no **direct** relationship between the quality of an LEA and the **standards reached by its pupils in core subjects at KS2**, nor in their rate of improvement ... Standards are closely related to levels of socioeconomic advantage in each authority, and good LEAs working in disadvantaged circumstances have not yet overcome the effects on pupils of that disadvantage. Standards are higher in the advantaged authorities, even where an LEA gives poor support to its schools”.

This picture is, in broad terms, replicated in the evidence of **GCSE results [KS4]**. Although there is more inconsistency than at KS2 between LEAs in similar socio-economic contexts, it is still clear that pupils’ results are related to **the LEA’s level of disadvantage** rather than to that LEA’s quality.

While there has been continuous improvement annually in GCSE results in England across all socio-economic bands, this has been due to **other factors** rather than LEAs. Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002) note that the “...expertise of LEAs’ school improvement services and the quality of their management and deployment have not yet led to discernible effects on schools’ GCSE results”.

Nevertheless LEAs can have some positive, if extremely limited, impacts on pupil performance and attainment. Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002) found evidence of positive effects from **social inclusion strategies**. For example it was found that “in the most disadvantaged LEAs, standards are slightly higher among authorities giving **better support for access**”. LEAs have also generally been effective in delivering many of the government’s school improvement initiatives in particular the literacy and numeracy strategies. In addition high performing LEAs’ can have positive effects on the **quality of school management and efficiency**. Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002) found that “more primary and secondary schools have been judged to have very good management and efficiency in those LEAs that give good support to school managers than in the LEAs that are weakest in that respect”.

Ofsted/Audit Commission (2002) conclude by saying that positive effects on pupil attainment:

...is so far apparent only where LEA support is directly linked to a **particular aspect** of a school, such as literacy support or attendance support ... as yet, no clear evidence that the accumulation of the LEA’s influences has been so significant as to bring about a general effect on pupils’ overall standards.

Concluding remarks

At a general level it is clear that a multitude of complex and inter-related socio-economic factors contribute significantly to educational attainment outcomes at all Key Stages, indeed more so than factors such as the type of school or educational system / structure generally. However it is important to note that the Government’s policy agenda (and indeed that of preceding Governments)

focuses mainly on structures, systems and institutions, this despite a commitment made by Ministers in the 1990s to concentrate policy efforts on 'standards not structures'.

More specifically it is parental background, education and income that are probably the most important combination of factors influencing educational attainment. This suggests greater attention needs to be given to this aspect of policy by public agencies. For instance measures to support parents and carers in the home, improving parenting skills, providing childcare provision so parents can access to employment¹⁰ and attempting to change parental values, attitudes, aspirations and behaviours can all contribute to improving a child's educational attainment.

It is important to note that interventions at an early stage in a child's life and educational career are more likely to have long-term positive impacts. The watch word is earlier the better. For example pre-school attendance has a positive effect on attainment in primary school, although interestingly this is not a model used in some other European countries where children start school later than is the case in England.

It is also clear that programmes which provide extra funding and resources can drive higher attainment, especially if these are carefully targeted and linked to particular teaching and learning strategies. In fact cost is not the only issue, as low or virtually zero cost initiatives based on high quality teaching practices can also have positive impacts on attainment levels.

Finally from a local authority perspective it is evident that councils have only a marginal influence on educational attainment. However that is not to say councils do not have a role to play. There is some evidence of local authority good practice in this area. For example local authority support that is directly linked to a particular school based initiative or an 'issue in need of improvement' (e.g. literacy support or attendance support) can be effective. Councils can also look to make a positive contribution to educational outcomes by tackling the wider 'social context' in their areas that affects children such as measures and strategies to alleviate child poverty and social exclusion. Perhaps most significantly, councils can make the biggest impact in those areas of education and child welfare policy and service delivery which are still their responsibility such as Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision, Looked After Children and monitoring school standards and admissions policies. Ensuring that these services and responsibilities are provided to the highest of standards possible is probably the best way for local authorities to contribute to improving educational attainment of disadvantaged and poor performing children in their areas.

¹⁰ However encouraging or even 'incentivising' parents to go to work could also be a negative factor if parents cannot provide the necessary time, care and attention to their children because of work commitments.

Appendix 1

% GCSE attainment¹: by parents' socio-economic classification², 2002					
England & Wales					
	5 or more GCSE Grades	1-4 GCSE Grades	5 or more GCSE Grades	1-4 GCSE Grades	
	<i>A*-C</i>	<i>A*-C³</i>	<i>D-G</i>	<i>D-G</i>	<i>reported</i>
Higher professional	77	13	6	..	3
Lower professional	64	21	11	2	2
Intermediate	52	25	17	2	4
Lower supervisory	35	30	27	4	4
Routine	32	32	25	5	6
Other	32	29	26	4	9
<i>1 For pupils in year 11. Includes equivalent GNVQ qualifications achieved in year 11.</i>					
<i>2 See Appendix, Part 3: National Statistics Socio-economic Classification.</i>					
<i>3 Consists of those with 1-4 GCSE grades A*-C and any number of other grades.</i>					
<i>Source: Youth Cohort Study, Department for Education and Skills</i>					