

## Tackling social and educational inequality – Cambridge Primary Review Trust

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### Summary

The Cambridge Primary Review Trust has published a review of UK and international evidence - [Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality](#) - to establish whether unequal educational outcomes are related to social inequality. The review was done by two epidemiologists, Kate Pickett and Laura Vanderbloemen, and funded by the international education company, Pearson.

The study found that the most important influence on educational attainment is family background including parental incomes, educational background, and homes which provide an environment for study. The review finds that educational attainment is better in more equal societies and that unequal educational outcomes are more profound in unequal countries not just for poorer children but across the social spectrum.

However, spending on education, including more targeted spending like the pupil premium, can make a difference, but is most likely to do so in already successful schools.

The evidence from Sweden is that free schools and parental choice may lead to deteriorating educational achievement while the authors claim that the Government's assertion that Academies improve attainment among disadvantaged pupils has been challenged on evidential grounds. Yet, certain schools-based interventions have been showed to help.

The authors conclude that reducing educational inequality will ultimately depend on reducing socio-economic inequality rather than educationally focused policies and interventions.

This briefing will be of particular interest to elected members and senior officers with responsibilities for early years, primary and secondary education.

### Briefing in full

The Cambridge Primary Review Trust has published a review of evidence - [Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality](#) - to establish whether unequal educational outcomes are related to social inequality. The report reviews evidence on the impact of inequality on childhood, parenting, relationships and family life. It then assesses a number of current policies and initiatives intended to narrow or close the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.

## Inequality and educational outcomes

The authors see that there is “clear and long-standing evidence linking poverty and deprivation to educational outcomes”; with broad agreement that:

- Income, benefits, social class, parental education, or occupation/employment are important predictors of lower levels of educational attainment;
- That low socio-economic status predicts a “wide array of health, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes in children”; and,
- A child is already behind in terms of school readiness and cognitive development when they start school, and then unfavourable educational outcomes are much more likely, in spite of good schooling.

Family background is seen as key to educational success over time, for example, the performance of children with low cognitive abilities but from families with a high economic status, increases steadily over time; in contrast with those from children with similar abilities but who come from families with low economic status.

The authors stress that this is not a fixed phenomenon of nature versus nurture that cannot be changed as in some countries up to 70% of poor children are educationally resilient, i.e. students perform well regardless of their own socioeconomic background. Whereas in the UK less than a quarter of poor children manage to exceed expectations based on family background. Indeed the UK performs worst than the average across OECD countries, in contrast to countries like Canada, Finland, Japan and Korea.

While contrary to commonly held beliefs, inequalities in cognitive development and intelligence are not a cause of social and economic inequality, but in large part a consequence.

In “The Spirit Level”, Kate Pickett (one of the authors of this review) and Richard Wilkinson found that the average performance of countries on the OECD PISA tests of maths and reading literacy was significantly related to income inequality among rich nations, and the same in relation to educational attainment of eighth graders. While other international evidence concludes that as well as having more numerate adult populations, the more equal of the OECD countries also have a narrower distribution of numeracy skills among adults. But while the country you live in makes a marked difference to educational outcomes even the children of well-educated and affluent parents perform better in more equal societies.

## Inequality and childhood

Evidence suggests that social and economic inequality affects the quality of family life and relationships, thus hampering the capacity of parents and care givers to provide an optimal environment for child development and wellbeing.

Much is now known about the importance of the early years for later development with learning beginning at birth and the first few years of life are a critical period for brain development. This early learning can be enhanced or inhibited by the environment in which a child grows up. Essential for early learning is a stimulating social environment.

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However, the authors refute any associations between income inequality and compromised outcomes explained by family breakdown. For while the lack of family life and the stress of debt is significant, difficulties in family relationships and parenting are not confined to the poor. Nonetheless children are aware of the status differences within their own society and are affected by the psychosocial context in which they are growing up. The age at which this occurs may vary, but they are fully conscious of differences before they leave primary school.

Poor children gain no advantage in wellbeing from living in affluent neighbourhoods; for instance, poor boys living in well off neighbourhoods are the most likely, and poor boys in poor areas the least likely, to have behavioural problems; whereas rich children living in poor neighbourhoods are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour.

Children living in affluent neighbourhoods exhibit greater school readiness and higher attainment than their counterparts living in neighbourhoods with people of lower socio economic status. This may be because such neighbourhoods have better resources, or because relationships between people are better in affluent neighbourhoods, or because social norms and expectations are different.

Researchers at the University of Bristol found that black children are systematically marked down by teachers. In contrast, Indian and Chinese students tended to be marked upwards. White British children from poor neighbourhoods were also marked down, compared to children from more affluent neighbourhoods; with discriminatory marking is found to be most pronounced in areas with fewer black or poor children. These findings are interpreted as reflecting unconscious stereotyping.

There is consensus that social mobility is not increasing and that in comparison to other rich, developed countries, social mobility in the UK is low. Efforts to widen participation in higher education have benefited middle class more than poorer children with affluent families providing a 'glass floor' for their children, protecting them from downward social mobility. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission describes this as the 'hoarding' of educational and employment opportunities by the wealthy and privileged.

## Closing the gap: what works?

The authors state that increased spending on education, including teachers' pay, is not the answer to poor educational outcomes. However targeted spending such as the Pupil Premium can make a difference though it is most likely to do so in schools which are already successful (where there is strong leadership, good governance and robust tracking systems). The extra resources are not enough to overcome the problems of weaker schools.

The authors point to the experience of Finland, as the best performing country in Europe, which they see as exemplifying how a whole system change can transform education for all through:

- a wholly comprehensive, non-selective school system (from early years to age 16);
- improving teacher quality and raising the status of the teacher profession (all teachers have a Master's degree); and,
- giving teachers a high degree of autonomy in what they teach within a national curriculum framework.

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Children in Finland also start school at a later age than in many other countries, they are subject to less testing, and have more break time during the school day.

In contrast, according to authors, the Swedish experience suggests that free schools and parental choice has led to deteriorating educational achievement. While the Department for Education's claim that academy schools improve attainment among disadvantaged pupils has been challenged on evidential grounds. (See Comment section, below).

The experiment in Brighton and Hove to use random allocation of children to secondary schools as a tie breaker (rather than the distance-to-school test) for over-subscribed schools, did not give poor children a greater chance of getting a place at a higher quality school. Where there were improvements, this was achieved through changes in catchment areas.

Evidence published by the Local Schools Network highlights that comprehensive schooling narrows educational inequality, and shows that grammar schools do not increase social mobility, and that state schools in the UK outperform private schools (once the socioeconomic background of pupils has been accounted for).

School-based interventions can help to close the attainment gaps between disadvantaged children and their peers with the authors pointing to the work of the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF), which promotes and evaluates practical strategies for narrowing the attainment gap. Research which the authors highlight includes the conclusion "that reducing class sizes is generally ineffective, setting by ability has negative effects and teaching assistants have little impact on children's achievement. In contrast, introducing social and emotional learning modules, talk-rich teaching, peer tutoring, and meta-cognition ('learning to learn') and self-regulation approaches all improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils." (Arguably, the review provides for a selective interpretation of the EEF evidence, for instance EEF said on classroom assistants that their effectiveness depends on how they are deployed, and not that classroom assistants are ineffective).

The authors see "there is strong prima facie evidence" that inclusive well-structured and cognitively challenging classroom talk improves learning processes and outcomes. Here the talk of the teacher is as important as that of the pupil because it is the teacher's talk that prompts, mediates what pupils say and hence the thinking and learning that might result.

## Comment

The key conclusion from this report is that educationally focused policies and interventions cannot overcome the structural issues of poverty and inequality which are the root causes of educationally inequality. These strategies characterised by early interventions such as Sure Start and the Pupil Premium will, the authors say "*be needed ad infinitum unless the root causes of educational inequality are addressed, and they will always be expensive and never be more than partially effective.*" Rather they advocate policies such as more progressive taxation, reductions in VAT and regulations to curb financial speculation and tax avoidance. Together with a higher minimum wage, sufficient social security for families, more secure employment, and the availability of high quality childcare and other help for parents who want to go back to work.

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While the findings have gained a measure of public support, arguably this review appears to have selected evidence to support a pre-prepared narrative, rather than going where the evidence takes it, whatever the conclusions that it might lead to. That suspicion is fuelled by using evidence from sources known to support the findings, is dated (up to twenty years old for some), and from international contexts outside Europe which appear to have little relevance to the UK. The authors have given little consideration to contrary views.

There is also some selective reporting of the source material. So for instance in the case of the Education Select Committee's 2015 report on academies the authors of this paper cite this report as supporting their claim that academies do not improve the attainment among disadvantaged pupils. In fact, the Select Committee said that "it is too early to know how much the academies programme has helped to raise standards, both overall and for disadvantaged children." At the same time there are strange omissions from the paper on for example: the impact of educational interventions such as changes to the curriculum, the balance between academic and vocational study, and recent moves to increase the age of participation to 18.

## External Links

["Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality"](#) - The Cambridge Primary Review Trust report

## Other related CSN/LGIU briefings

[Funding for disadvantaged pupils – PAC report](#) (October 2015)

[The Pupil Premium, Next Steps – Sutton Trust and Education Endowment Foundation](#) (September 2015)

[Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the 'glass floor' – SMPC report](#) (August 2015)

[Funding for disadvantaged pupils: NAO Report](#) (July 2015)

[Hunger and food poverty: all-party parliamentary group inquiry](#) (January 2015)

[Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility – SMPC report](#) (November 2014)

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