

The impact of poverty on young children's experience of school

Findings
Informing change

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The UK Government is trying to break the link between child poverty and educational disadvantage. This study examines the extent to which poverty impacts on younger children's experience of school and looks at life in primary schools in Northern Ireland from a child-centred perspective.

Key points

- How most children experience school is determined by the level of disadvantage they face. Poorer children in the study accepted that they were not going to get the same quality of schooling, or the same outcomes, as better-off children.
- Children and parents identified the main costs of school as uniform (including shoes), lunches and school trips. Children in disadvantaged schools were very aware of all the costs and of the difficulties parents faced in finding as little as 50 pence or a pound for school events.
- The experiences of school for children from poorer families were narrower and less rich. For example, children in disadvantaged schools had limited access to music, art and out-of-school activities that children in advantaged schools generally took for granted.
- All of the children agreed that education was important, but for different reasons. In advantaged schools, children saw education as a way of ensuring a good life as an adult. Children in disadvantaged schools were more likely to view education as a way of avoiding problems in the future.
- All children worried a lot about testing but those in the advantaged schools felt under parental pressure to do well and worried most.
- Boys as young as nine in disadvantaged schools were disenchanted with school and starting to disengage. They are being particularly failed by the education system due to the interaction of:
 - educational disadvantage faced by children growing up in poverty;
 - the difficulties faced by teachers in disadvantaged schools; and
 - differences in the ways that boys and girls are socialised.

The research

By Goretti Horgan at the University of Ulster.

Background

The role of education in providing a route out of poverty is at the centre of many policies to end child poverty. Improving educational attainment is important for the individual child, but it is also vital if the goal of eradicating child poverty in a generation is to be met. The Government has also committed itself to involving children and young people in decision-making, particularly in relation to education.

The cost of school

Despite government policy aimed at keeping the cost of primary school uniforms as low as possible, all the parents interviewed reported spending about £50 on each child's uniform, not including the cost of shoes. Some of the older children were keenly aware of the cost to their parents of school uniforms. Some schools, even in highly disadvantaged areas, displayed an inflexible attitude to uniforms.

School trips also proved expensive and few parents realised that schools are not allowed to charge for trips during school hours. Most saw the 'donation' that was asked for as a fixed charge. Residential trips, particularly those outside the region, were seen as too expensive by all the parents interviewed, even those who were relatively well-off.

Children and parents generally welcomed healthy eating policies in schools but felt that school dinners had not gone far enough towards providing tasty healthy options. The poor quality of meals in some school canteens meant that children who might rely on their school dinner as the main meal of the day refused to eat what was on offer. For families who were not entitled to free school meals but had several children at school, the cost of school dinners made them prohibitive.

Reasons for going to school

Younger children (four- to six-year-olds) all saw school as a place to learn for learning's sake, or as many of them put it "to get smarter". They said that making friends, meeting friends, playing and "having fun" were the best things about school.

Older children's understanding of why they went to school had developed. So seven- to nine-year-olds

still saw school as about learning and having fun, but started to say they went to school to learn so they could get a job when they were older. For ten- and eleven-year-olds, school was all about getting a good education in order to get a good job.

While all agreed that school was important for their future, the older children in the more advantaged schools tended to say they enjoy attending school. They had positive reasons for saying that school was important, to ensure a good life as an adult. Children in the disadvantaged schools, however, were less likely to say they enjoyed school and more likely to cite negative reasons for why school was important, such as to avoid problems in their adult lives.

These comments illustrate the difference:

"School is important. On a scale of one to ten, school is about eight and a half ... It's important because we have to get a good education and if you want to go to university you have to get good GCSE and good A-level marks."
(Ten-year-old girl, advantaged school)

"Well, if you didn't go to school you wouldn't be able to learn. You wouldn't be able to know anything when you grow up. Every time you go to speak to somebody, you'd be, like, d'oh!"
(Eleven-year-old girl, disadvantaged school)

Different experiences of school

Older children in disadvantaged schools complained about being shouted at by teachers. While both boys and girls complained about being shouted at, the boys were more likely to say that it was "unfair". The girls tended to make excuses for the teachers and blame themselves to some degree for being shouted at. Children in more advantaged schools did not complain about teachers shouting at them.

As well as the attitudes of teachers, children in the disadvantaged schools complained about a range of issues:

- the compulsory nature of school;
- the length of the school day;
- the quality of the food; and
- rubbish in the playground.

Boys across the range of schools, but particularly those in the disadvantaged schools, complained about the length of the school day and about how brief they found break times. Girls complained about not having enough time to eat lunch and play but not about the length of the school day generally.

Tests were the single most cited reason for worrying about school. All the children worried about tests, but children in the advantaged schools were far more worried and under greater pressure to do well in all their tests. The children who planned to do the Eleven Plus (which remains in place in Northern Ireland until November 2008) said they found it “stressful”, that they worried about their parents’ expectations and feared they would “let them down” by not doing well enough.

All the children, whether or not they were doing the Eleven Plus, were aware of the distorting effect of the test on teaching in the year before it. In particular, those preparing for the test complained their curriculum had narrowed considerably and they were no longer included in some school trips and missed out on music, art and PE lessons. Those who were not doing the test complained that they were often set work to do by themselves while the teacher concentrated on those taking it.

“I think they just need to pay attention to everyone ... because when we’re doing the tests, other people are doing easier stuff and we’re working hard but they aren’t working as hard as we are. I mean they should still be learning, they’re just doing stuff that they’ve already done and it’s not as if they’re learning any more.”
(Ten-year-old girl, socially mixed school)

Activities outside school

Children in the more disadvantaged schools were considerably less likely to participate in after-school activities. Some disadvantaged schools did offer some free after-school activities, but children were unable to take up these activities if they did not live within walking distance of the school. By contrast, in the better-off schools, parents, relatives or other carers picked the children up in cars from after-school activities. In the more advantaged schools, some children were able to recite a list of out-of-school activities for each day of the school week.

“I go to netball on Monday, and dance class on Tuesday, piano on Wednesday and then on Thursday go to choir.”
(Nine-year-old girl)

Several ten- and eleven-year-old children in the more advantaged schools, in response to being asked about out-of-school activities, said that they “couldn’t be bothered”. These children, most though not all of whom were entitled to free school meals, were also among those who said that they “couldn’t be bothered” to go on school trips. These children seemed to be experiencing what Tess Ridge terms “exclusion from within” (Ridge, 2002).

Headteachers in the more disadvantaged schools, including the rural ones, were concerned to ensure that activities that could enrich a child’s life, such as art,

Table 1: Boys already disengaging from school

<i>Advantaged Schools</i>	<i>Disadvantaged schools</i>
“I don’t think there is very many bad things about school.” (Ten-year-old boy)	“I don’t like school, ‘cos you have to work. I think it’s too long.” (Ten-year-old boy)
“I think you need to go to school and I really like school but I think we need more sports.” (Ten-year-old boy)	“No one likes it in our class, none of the boys like it, don’t they not?” (Ten-year-old boy)
“See if you want to have a good job, you have to have a degree in Maths and English and science and everything.” (Ten-year-old boy)	“All the boys in our school, all the boys in the school don’t like school. I wish school wasn’t invented!” (Ten-year-old boy)
“You get a good education and all so you can get a good job when you’re older.” (Nine-year-old boy)	“I hate school, doing work and teachers shouting at me.” (Ten-year-old boy)
“It can be good to learn if they make things fun to learn.” (Ten-year-old boy)	“If you don’t go to school, your Dad will go to jail.” (Eleven-year-old boy)

Source: *The impact of poverty on young children’s experience of school* (Horgan 2007).

sports and music, were available to all. Schools went to great lengths to make sure that children who had some musical ability would get music lessons without having to pay for them. By contrast, headteachers in more advantaged schools expressed concern that so much that used to be free was now subject to a charge. Some were fatalistic about the effect of these charges.

“The music tuition that we have ... [is] not really accessible, practically not accessible, to children from lower income backgrounds.”
(Headteacher, advantaged school)

Early disengagement from school

A significant number of boys in the most disadvantaged schools were already starting to disengage from school at the age of nine or ten. Some of the differences in how boys from different backgrounds experienced school can be seen in Table 1. Older boys in the disadvantaged schools were the only children who talked in a positive manner about truanting. Older girls in disadvantaged schools spoke disapprovingly of boys who “tell their Mummies they’re going to school but they don’t really, they just stay off”. There was no discussion of truanting in the advantaged schools.

Boys in the advantaged schools complained more than girls about the amount of work, particularly homework, they had to do. In all schools, boys seemed more concerned than girls about being able to get outside to play, both during and after school hours. Girls in the disadvantaged schools were as likely as boys to complain about being shouted at, but only boys concluded that this led them to hate school. And it was only in the disadvantaged schools that the length of the

school day, the amount of work and teachers shouting at them led to boys saying they hated or really did not like school.

About the project

Two hundred and twenty children aged four to eleven took part in group interviews, in both disadvantaged and advantaged primary schools across Northern Ireland. Parents and teachers were also interviewed. Focusing on disadvantaged schools rather than pupils avoided stigmatising children living in poverty. The schools in the most disadvantaged areas had between 50 and 75 per cent of their pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), while schools in the most advantaged areas had between three and 14 per cent of their pupils eligible for FSM.

The children talked about:

- what they thought of school and its costs;
- how important education was to them;
- how they thought schools worked; and
- how they experienced school.

Afterwards, what the children said was analysed to see what it showed about the impact of poverty on their school lives, as well as about the different experiences of those living in poorer and better-off circumstances.

References

Ridge, T. (2002) *Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: the child's perspective*, Policy Press: Bristol.

For further information

For more details, contact Goretta Horgan, School of Policy Studies, University of Ulster. Email: g.horgan@ulster.ac.uk or telephone: 02871 375203.

The full report, **The impact of poverty on young children's experience of school** by Goretta Horgan, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

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