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## **Closing poverty-related attainment gaps in Scotland's schools: what works?**



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**Making a difference to policy outcomes locally, nationally and globally**

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**POLICY BRIEF**

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# Closing poverty-related attainment gaps in Scotland's schools: what works?

Professor Sue Ellis and Dr Edward Sosu, University of Strathclyde

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**Poverty-related attainment gaps are an issue for every school and every local authority in Scotland. There are many different ways to tackle this issue, from greater parental involvement to linking schools and authority-wide measures. However, to be successful, they all need to be underpinned by the evidence of 'what works'. This IPPI Policy Brief distills the evidence to provide an "at a glance" guide to what works to reduce poverty-related attainment gaps. Its aim is to inform teaching professionals, school and education leaders, policy makers, politicians, parents and citizens more widely.**

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Schools, teachers and education and local authority policy makers can help address the poverty-related attainment gap but they need to better understand the geography and profile of poverty in Scotland. The reality is that:

- **Most Scottish pupils in poverty do not live in 'poor' areas.** Directing all resources at schools with 'poor' catchment areas will only impact on 41% of children in Scotland (unlike in the US and England where schooling is more 'zoned' by income). In Scotland, poverty is an issue that EVERY school and EVERY local authority needs to address.
- **Addressing attainment in the early years is necessary but not sufficient.** A good early years' education does not inoculate children against low attainment in their post-nursery stages. We need interventions to poverty-proof schooling against low attainment at every age and stage – nursery, primary, secondary and college/university.
- **In Scotland today most children in poverty have a parent in work.** However, the work is low paid and often part-time and / or intermittent.
- **Poor families do NOT lack high aspirations for their children.** What they lack is the practical know-how and networks to help them navigate and overcome barriers as and when they arise.
- **Families in poverty give their children just as much homework help as middle-class families,** but their help is less well-informed because the parents may not have sufficient knowledge themselves, and may not have social networks with such knowledge.
- **Political and professional leadership is vital.** Professionals need reliable data on pupil attainment and they need it in a form that allows them to track the progress of low-income pupils to ensure the system is serving these pupils well. Professional conversations prompted by the data need to be informed by advice about the interventions that are most likely to work at pre-school, early years, primary, secondary and college / university levels. The intervention 'mix' needs to fit the context, be applied persistently and consistently, and its impact tracked and adapted as necessary. Professionals should adopt proven and / or promising interventions before they adopt new or unproven interventions.

## An 'at a glance' summary of the key features of proven and promising interventions

| <b>1. Funding (not especially linked to attainment, but .....)</b>  |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>The best outcomes occur when there is / are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A clear focus on outcomes, not activities</li> <li>• A clear focus on improving attainment</li> <li>• Data is used to monitor impact of interventions</li> <li>• Collaboration between schools (if it is well selected, data-informed &amp; planned)</li> <li>• Parental involvement</li> <li>• Intervention(s) guided by robust research</li> </ul>  | <p><b>The worst outcomes occur when there is / are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced budgets / support in other areas</li> <li>• Separate provision that stigmatises groups</li> <li>• Broad goals set with no specific guidance on what to do</li> <li>• Short-term, external support for tuition or 'hit and run' interventions or developments</li> <li>• Interventions that rely on anecdotal evidence</li> <li>• No consistent monitoring of engagement or impact on attainment</li> </ul> |
| <b>2. Parental Involvement</b>  |   |
| <p><b>The best outcomes occur from interventions around:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving parents the skills they need to help their children learn (e.g. 'Pause, Prompt, Praise' in reading)</li> <li>• Making space for homework at home</li> <li>• Enjoyable books and conversations</li> <li>• Sustained, group-based, <i>persistent</i> home-school relationships</li> <li>• Incorporating other risk areas such as behaviour, positive parenting support (with professionals)</li> </ul>   | <p><b>The worst outcomes occur when they only focus on:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectation and parenting styles</li> <li>• Homework tasks</li> <li>• Sending letters</li> <li>• Parental volunteering in class</li> <li>• School meetings</li> </ul>  |
| <b>3. School System Initiatives</b>   |   |
| <p><b>After-schools / outside-school activities</b> for children in poverty must develop their confidence, widen knowledge and experiences and increase their motivation and engagement in schooling, but to deliver <i>equity in attainment</i>, they must also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus directly on how the provision will specifically raise attainment in the target group, not on a general provision of activities or programmes</li> <li>• Incorporate academically-focused knowledge and skills into activities, for example, literacy, numeracy and study skills</li> <li>• Have a clear focus on engaging children in poverty</li> <li>• Be sustained</li> </ul> <p><b>Mentoring</b> works when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentors are well trained and the mentoring project tightly targeted</li> <li>• Mentors and pupils are carefully matched</li> <li>• Mentors and pupils build quality relationships</li> <li>• Mentors and pupils set themselves targets and times to meet</li> <li>• There is a clear strategy that covers the lifespan of the mentoring arrangement</li> </ul> |   |

#### 4. Early Years

##### Works when:

- Extended Early Years provision *is of a high quality*
- It is available to children from low income households at an earlier age
- It provides positive learning experiences; has clear learning objectives; an explicit focus on language, early-reading & number concepts, and focus on non-verbal reasoning
- Staff are well-qualified
- Pre-schools have children from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds

#### 5. Literacy Instruction

##### Works when it promotes:

- Decoding using a range of cues
- Comprehension – of key text messages and their implications; links with personal experiences and knowledge of wider world
- Engagement that promotes networks of readers, access to resources and time to read to develop: (i) identity as a reader (ii) value of reading
- Diagnostic, timely intervention for those who struggle
- High teacher aspirations and calm, analytic use of attainment data
- Intellectually interesting and socially meaningful tasks
- Well planned but responsive teaching, where pupils work at a level of ‘easy difficulty’ and teachers are able to ‘seize the teachable moment’
- For older pupils, literacy instruction is linked to the requirements of subject disciplines

#### 6. Curriculum Pedagogy Initiatives

##### **Peer and one-to-one tutoring outside lesson times** works when there is:

- Training for tutors / volunteers
- Active teacher involvement in organising groups and tutoring activities
- Regular monitoring
- Support for tutors
- Effective structuring of activities
- It complements, but does not replace, teacher support

##### **Metacognitive and self-regulation strategies** work when:

- Children are taught to understand and improve their own learning through an explicit focus on how to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning
- Teaching strategy is well structured and focuses on raising attainment
- Teachers receive intensive professional development and support on strategies that work, how to teach them and how to support their use
- Teaching provides explicit opportunities for learners to try strategies out

##### **Assessment and Feedback** works when it:

- Offers specific, accurate and clear guidance to learners on how to improve their work and directs attention to those issues that will give them the biggest payoff
- Signals to the learner the difference between successful and unsuccessful work
- Requires the learner and teacher to co-produce clear and challenging targets based on previous work/ attainment
- Provides guidance at different points (before, during, after) and an overall mix that promotes independence
- Emphasises effort and persistence

## 6. Curriculum Pedagogy Initiatives (*continued*)

**Structured group work / co-operative learning** works when it:

- Is taught and facilitated by teachers
- Provides children with specific support to help them understand how to work successfully in groups
- Encourages lower achieving students to articulate their thinking
- Adopts mixed-ability rather than ability grouping
- Involves on-going professional development for teachers

## 7. Whole School Reform Approaches

**Work when they:**

- Incorporate elements of effective pedagogy guided by strong evidence
- Focus on closing the attainment gap
- Use data to monitor impact on attainment of learners
- Provide quality professional development - tailored to specific curricular areas, class contexts, pupils and groups

## 8. School to School Networking

**Works when there is:**

- Clear focus on attainment (with data to monitor improvement)
- Clear identification of where success and expertise lies
- A range of activities – visits, data analysis, tutorials, demonstrations, discussion
- Information flows in *both* directions

*NB: The 'London Challenge' made an impact on attainment and narrowed the gap. It was a data-driven, nuanced, networking approach that benefited from external advisory groups and earlier literacy initiatives in the primary sector.*

## 9. Community Links

**Work best when schools focus on:**

- Identifying community capacities - local residents (their skills, talents, interests, stories), local organisations, universities and college expertise, public / private employers and not-for-profit organisations and charities
- Forging relationships that drive connections and mobilisation for projects and pupil groups
- Impact by developing engagement, confidence and specific skills required for school and for employment, training or further / higher education
- Creating practical applications of knowledge and skills, promoting engagement, networks and independence
- Identifying specific outcomes for target groups and focus on attaining these

## 10. Wider Management Issues

### Work best where Councils have:

- Clear priorities and actions relating to the poverty attainment gap, with short, medium and long-term goals for all staff and sectors
- Strategic planning systems in place that focus everyone on attainment and on the poverty gap
- Sleek, easy-to-use systems that promote devolved data for tracking, analysis and intervention
- Systems for ensuring teacher quality:
  - Recruitment systems that focus on core knowledge and proven competency
  - Support-and-challenge systems (for individual teachers and for schools) that are impact-focused and address poverty-linked attainment gaps
  - Staff development, monitoring and performance management that is pro-active, high-quality, outcome-focused, strategic, contextualised and tailored (where necessary) to individual teachers, managers or schools
  - Retention of good staff through ethos, commitment and support for career development
  - Leadership development in place at every level

## 11. What will help? – Smarter Data

### Works best when data systems focus on:

- Capturing learners' experiences - using focus group or other methods to select pupils rather than self-selected Pupil Councils
- Developing a culture and ethos of understanding and interrogating data and of using it to inform everyday work
- Organising attainment data to allow teachers and school managers to analyse it and use it to directly prompt professional conversations that feed teaching / management decisions
- Promote professional judgement and research-informed knowledge in analysing data patterns and in the choice / design / monitoring of interventions

***'High-stakes' testing is NOT helpful but tracking, monitoring and targets on a range of measures does help. The interpretation of test data is all!***

**'Education systems' are also important in closing the poverty-linked attainment gap.**

***(See overleaf ....)***

**‘Education systems’ are also important in closing the poverty-linked attainment gap.**

#### **What helps? – Powerful Knowledge Mobilisation**

Educators need reliable knowledge if they are not to waste their own and their pupils’ effort, time and hope on interventions that are unlikely to be successful in the proposed context.

This requires:

- Bespoke knowledge of what works, for whom, in which contexts, why, how much it costs and specific knowledge and ***expertise on how to make it effective***.
- Educators to focus on those interventions most likely to give the biggest payoff, not those that sound most exciting or personally appealing
- A focus on the quality of implementation and impact on the target group, not on mere provision

#### **What helps? – Well-planned Evaluation**

**Models of good evaluation at school, local authority and national level should:**

- Be underpinned by a theory of change describing how a project will gain traction with the target group and achieve a specific impact
- Build evaluation into the project at the start and provide feedback during the project to inform its implementation
- Provide an explicit focus on attainment and on children in poverty
- Produce detailed ‘implementation knowledge’ as the project develops
- Collect systematic data on learner impact and experience – before, during, final, and post-implementation (to assess longer-term maintenance of gains)
- Be informed by knowledge of what is pertinent, and by past research to ensure they measure outputs that are directly important (*Count beans but make sure they are the right beans!*)

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## The International Public Policy Institute

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