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POLICY BRIEFING
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Poverty and children's access to services and social participation

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This briefing paper summarises evidence in the research and policy literature on inequalities surrounding access to services and social participation for children and young people living in poverty in Scotland. The related policy and practice implications for services' access and societal participation are also outlined. In the poverty and inequalities context, a mix of policy interventions aimed at rebalancing power at all levels are more likely to be effective to changing the status quo. Rather than searching for a single 'silver bullet', policy should target the multiple dimensions of poverty and inequality and their intersections as experienced by young people.

Key points

- Currently, 1 in 5 children, or over 220,000 children, grow up in poverty in Scotland.
- In Scotland, as in many other countries globally, children's unequal access to opportunities remains a chronic and cumulative impediment to their education, health and civic participation.
- There are substantial differences in types of services that children can access depending on the area they live in and their parents' ability to pay for high quality provision.
- Children from deprived areas are less able to access leisure opportunities because of the additional associated costs, even if activities are 'free' at point of use, and they are also more likely to feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods.
- Young people in disadvantaged areas often report limited opportunities for community involvement and volunteering.
- Public services must aim to mitigate the effects of child poverty and social disadvantage and make social participation more equal for all.
- There remains a need for further substantial research, policy development and practice interventions on access to services and social participation for children and families living in poverty.

Key recommendations

- Policy makers and professionals in all children's arenas must promote the young people's active participation to develop, implement and continuously evaluate policies, practices and programmes aimed to address poverty.

- Schools and local authorities should ensure that children in deprived areas benefit from available out-of-school learning opportunities, by making provision affordable, flexible and safe to access.

- Practitioners must fully understand how to detect children at risk of disadvantage, to ensure support is available at the earliest opportunity. In identifying support needed, they should make use of *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) policy *National Practice Model*, *Resilience Matrix*.

- There is a need for continued education and learning for all practitioners working in children's services on shared knowledge and understanding of key policy discourses, in relation to severe conditions of child **poverty**; **wellbeing** indicators; **resilience and equalities**.

1. Introduction

In Scotland, as in many societies in other countries globally, unequal access to opportunities remains a chronic and cumulative impediment to children and young people's education, health and civic participation. Over 220,000 children in Scotland currently still live in poverty and it is estimated that by 2020 this number will increase by a further 100,000 (McKendrick *et al*. 2014).

Social class at birth is an indicator of the education and related access to services and educational and social participation opportunities children will have throughout their childhood (Bradshaw & Martin 2008). The educational 'achievement gap' has been a longstanding policy concern and remains a major factor that perpetuates social divisions (Sosu & Ellis 2014). The UK Government Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission calls for renewed 'focus on the impact that poverty has on children's lives', to break the link between being born poor and a lifetime of poverty (SMCPC 2015).

Tackling children's experiences of inequalities in education, health rights and social participation and ensuring equal opportunities for all later on in life remain key governance and policy challenges in Scotland. In a recent address, the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Angela Constance MSP, emphasised government targets on equity and excellence for Scotland's poorest children (SG 2015a).

2. Poverty and other key terms

The research of Peter Townsend, the eminent sociologist and co-founder of the Child Poverty Action Group, provides us with key insights on poverty and in particular on understanding poverty-society relations. Townsend provides the following definition of poverty:

> *Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong.* (1979: 31)

Poverty therefore is not limited to inadequate income and material deprivation, although poverty includes both of these. Low income and lack of money has effects for individuals' participation and for their levels of confidence and skills to actively choose to participate in society. Lack of financial resources affects the material resources that people can secure with certainty: food, clothing, fuel, housing. It also limits or may deny individuals' access to services; arts, sports, cultural and leisure activities; and impede active citizenship and political participation. What constitutes 'being in poverty' is qualitatively different, depending on people's degree of divergence from the living conditions that are considered normal in a particular community and society.

Tackling poverty and its wider societal effects are issues of equality of opportunity and social justice. The United Kingdom (UK) has one of the highest associations between social class, educational performance, and life opportunities amongst member countries of the OECD countries (OECD 2010). Denial of access, participation and opportunity to the poor also makes the country's services, institutions and society less representative, less publically credible and less democratic.

Research has shown that the extent of social problems and issues such as teenage pregnancy rates, mental illness, obesity, imprisonment rates, and life expectancy depend on how un/equal a society is rather than its level of wealth (Wilkinson and Pikett 2010). Tackling social inequality and disadvantage is therefore a matter of addressing the share of resources in society and the distribution of wealth to reduce the gap between rich and poor, thereby increasing access to services and opportunities and the likelihood of civic participation and representation for those currently dispossessed due to lack of money.

This briefing uses several key terms and ideas relevant to issues of access to services and institutions and to participation in education, services, community and society:

Rights – Fundamental, is the right of each individual to the equal respect and concern of those who govern them (UNUDHR 1948).

Access and social participation – A number of models of youth citizens' participation have been developed (see e.g. de Backer & Jans 2002). In Scotland, citing the right of the child to be heard, a report of the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People gives operational definitions of participation and rights provided by children (OSCCYP 2013). Seven themes which children highlighted are identified and exemplified:

- *Understanding of rights;*
- *Honesty and respect;*
- *Being valued and listened to;*
- *Being supported;*
- *Children and adults working together;*
- *Not making assumptions;*
- *Feedback and communication.*

Wellbeing – 'The state of being happy, healthy, and contented'. Some critics have questioned if the concept is used with sufficient regard to social, cultural, or ethnic diversity (Pirrie & Hockings 2012: 32) and gender.

Resilience – 'The ability to recover readily from, or adjust easily to, adversity, misfortune, or setbacks of any kind; buoyancy; seen as a key factor in success in education. The importance given to it has been criticised, however, on the grounds that 'it seems to place the onus on the individual to adapt or cope [and not] the underlying disadvantage' (Pirrie & Hockings 2012).

3. Policy and governance context

The Child Poverty Act 2010 (UK Parliament 2010) requires the UK Government to monitor targets towards the eradication of child poverty and imposes the duty on the UK countries' devolved governments to develop polity specific strategies. The Scottish Government *Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland* (SG 2011, 2014) specifies three key principles in the Scottish approach:

- *early intervention and prevention,* targeting early effective interventions to prevent families experiencing poverty;
- *an assets based approach,* prioritising individuals' knowledge, skills and views in any support processes and arrangements;
- *a child-centred approach,* emphasising children's right to be involved and their views made central in all decisions affecting them and their lives.

The principles of a child-centred and multi-agency approach to tackle disadvantage align with the principles that underpin the *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) policy agenda (SG 2012). GIRFEC promotes effective planning and coherent service delivery across children's agencies where several agencies are collaboratively supporting the needs of a young person. It aims to ensure that the needs of each child are made central in multi-professional and agency co-practice. The GIRFEC approach makes it the responsibility of all practitioners to ensure that children are: Safe; Healthy; Achieving; Nurtured; Active; Respected and Responsible; and Included. This set of indicators is now commonly referred to as *the SHANARRI indicators*.

Three other policies underpin the Scottish Government joined up approach with Scotland's Local Authorities, NHS, third sector and community planning partners:

- *Achieving our Potential: A Framework to Tackle Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland* (2008a) – a 'concordat' giving local authorities responsibility for locally targeted anti-poverty strategies. Actions are specified on finding work, making work pay, tackling health inequalities and discrimination, ensuring better homes, and improving children's life chances.
- *The Early Years Framework* (2008b) – published in the context of the 'concordat', it aims for 'transformational change' in the delivery of early years provision and support for families with young children. A ten year plan, it enjoins a coherent approach to service delivery, improved collaboration between agencies, and empowerment of children and families.
- *Equally Well: Report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Health Inequalities* (2008c)– this is the first national commitment to tackle social inequalities on health. It promotes a range of approaches deemed effective, such as universal services and early and targeted interventions.

Together, these three frameworks seek to tackle inequality and social disadvantage in a challenging financial climate and when a number of relevant matters and powers remain reserved to the UK Government and Parliament in Westminster.

In 2014, the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014* (SP 2014) gave recognition in Scots Law to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC 1989). In consequence, from 2015, the relevant Scottish Government Ministers and public bodies will report publically on how they have taken account of the UNCRC. The Act also requires local authorities and health boards in Scotland to develop joint children's services plans with other children's services providers, to implement a 'named person' for every child approach and to establish a statutory definition of 'wellbeing'.

4. Access to services and social participation

Research shows that growing up in poverty has devastating effects for children's health, education and long-term opportunities. Such damaging effects are documented in a number of studies in Scotland and other places (Bromley & Cunningham-Burley 2010). Young people born with the most social, economic and cultural resources go on to have a disproportionately large amount of resources invested in their education. They learn a variety of 'soft practices' related to social interactions and are at the centre of their own learning and relationships, notably practices of 'assured optimism', which support successful lives and careers beyond the school gates (Forbes & Lingard 2015).

Children in poverty – children's views of health inequalities

Deprivation affects children's health throughout the life span, and children living in poverty have overall higher engagement with health services (Bramley & Watkins 2008). They are more likely to have been born prematurely and/or have low birth-weight, and to be born to teenage mothers and mothers who smoke during pregnancy, both risk factors contributing to child mortality (RCPCH 2014). Throughout childhood, they live with more chronic health conditions, disabilities and general poor health compared with other children, particularly mental health problems (Spencer 2008). They are also at increased risk of accidental injury at home (PHE 2014a) or in road traffic accidents (PHE 2014b). For families, the costs of caring for sick children means further financial burdens.

Children interviewed about relationships between poverty and health difficulties show clear understandings of linking mechanisms. Children from socially deprived areas in Wales (Crowley & Vulliamy 2007) talked about their families' inability to afford 'healthy' food and cooking facilities, and other basic items they went without, including products for keeping clean, medicines, and public transport to health service premises. Children said that being poor was stressful for adults too, and identified the link to potential drug abuse, crime and depression, and even suicide later on in life. Teenagers in Northern Ireland showed similar understandings of the links between poverty and poor health, including mental health:

> *It can be kinda depressing, you know, knowing that they [parents] are depressed about bills and things* (Horgan 2009: 8)

Children in poverty – language behaviours and engagement with language and communication services

Language and communication services include educational (nursery, school, psychology) and health (speech and language therapy, health visiting) staff. There is a strong relationship between social deprivation and language skills. In Scotland, most concerns identified by the universal 26-30 months screening were in the domain of speech, language and communication (SLC) difficulties. Previously unidentified SLC concerns were found in 10% of children and an additional 3% had known concerns before screening (SISD 2014a). Children in the most deprived quintile were equitably screened, but a higher proportion had concerns raised about SLC development when compared to all Scottish children (SISD 2014b: 18). Further research into appropriate action for children newly-identified with SLC delays and the effectiveness of early SLC interventions, is required.

Studies using standardised measures in Scottish schools in areas of high social deprivation have found high levels of language difficulty (McCartney *et al.* 2015). The *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy 2014: Listening and Talking* (SG 2015b) found that: 'In all stages for listening and talking, a higher proportion of pupils from least deprived areas performed well, very well or beyond the level compared to pupils from the most deprived areas'. This suggests further attention to Curriculum for Excellence (LTS 2005) *Listening* and *Talking* strands is required for children in deprivation.

Children in poverty in Scotland may be further disadvantaged by language prejudice. There are no valid linguistic or communication problems inherent in any dialect, but if schools favour more formal and 'standard' forms of English, pupils' linguistic, cultural and emotional capital is reduced, adversely affecting how their 'voice' is heard (Snell 2013). Pupils interviewed in the north of England (Spencer *et al.* 2011) and in Ireland (MacRuaric, 2011) suggested that while 'school' language styles would not be appropriate for social interactions with peers, family and community, and were therefore of limited

use, further understanding of the formats expected in school and work would be helpful. Curriculum for Excellence (LTS 2005) *Listening and Talking* strands provide opportunities to do this, and to decrease prejudice through informed linguistic and social understandings.

Finally, high numbers of young people with language and communication difficulties are identified in young offenders' institutions throughout the UK (Clark *et al.* 2012), although these difficulties often remain unidentified. Scotland has pioneered Speech and Language Therapists' intervention in young offenders' institutions, but further information is needed on helpful and socially just practices.

Children in poverty – arts, culture, sports and leisure access and participation

Evidence suggests that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are reliant on education and the school curriculum to provide a way into the arts and cultural learning and leisure services (Bamford 2006). The Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) (LTS 2005) makes central the education of the whole child and skills for life and work are encouraged, for example, in Expressive Arts partnerships and collaborations with organisations beyond education. CfE endeavours to give every child the opportunity to develop holistically as successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

An arts-rich curriculum has been used effectively with children in social deprivation in a variety of countries. Initiatives in Argentina show the arts being used for social transformation to combat the effects of the polarised distribution of wealth (Olaechea & Engeli 2008). In the USA, the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education used popular arts culture to engender student interest in learning towards successful school graduation. Participant students were subsequently more likely to vote, hold down a job and to stay out of prison (Bamford 2006). Similar outcomes on arts and achievement for risk youth are found in studies in the USA and UK (Catterall, Dumais & Hampden-Thompson 2012). In Scotland, the Sistema 'Big Noise' project uses music as a medium to drive social change for disadvantages children (Harkins 2014).

Children in poverty – gender participation, rights and equalities

There are particular issues of social justice and inequalities surrounding gender inequality and girls' education, which require resourcing interventions that shift institutional discourses and practice norms. The key findings of the recent DFID review on girls' education and gender equality point to the need for a mix of combined interventions, which could change institutions and societies (Unterhalter *et al.* 2014). The DFID review suggests the following number of combined interventions:

- **resource interventions**
- **infra-structural** interventions;
- **institutional change**; and
- interventions to **shift gender norms (**ibid.: 1).

The link between education and poverty is conventionally understood in two main ways: the value of investment in education as a poverty reduction strategy, which enhances skills and productivity in poor households; and poverty as a constraint to educational achievement both at macro-levels (poor countries have lower levels of educational enrolment) and at micro-levels (children in poor households have less education) (Oxaal 1997). Suggested strategies to tackle issues of gender and poverty include: reducing opportunity costs to female education through childcare provision or informal educational

provision; scholarships to encourage girls' enrolment by reducing educational costs; and educational initiatives outside the formal school system, e.g. adult education, literacy courses, access courses.

However, contemporary markets shaped by globalisation and communication technologies have created new forms of employment and new relationships between gender and poverty which weaken substantially the human capital model as above. Working patterns have become more varied and precarious in the context of market deregulation and public sector privatisation. As employment opportunities have expanded, disparities in employment and income have widened, with career structures and collective bargaining substantially destabilized (Dunford & Perrins 2014). However, the gender pay gap has narrowed for all but two countries in the OECD – though still remains on average 16 percent in 2010 (OECD 2012). It is argued that this narrowing of the pay gap is the result of women's increased qualifications, engagement in the labour market and feminist campaigns for greater equality via European Union legislation and US equalities and affirmative action legislation (Dunford & Perrins 2014).

Policymakers and practitioners must be committed to listening to the views of *all* children and young people living in poverty, on issues of lack of access to services and their lived realities concerning the causes of constraints, inhibitors and barriers to their fuller participation in education and in their local communities. Policy arenas must promote the active participation of children and young people living in poverty 'in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes to eradicate it' (EA-PN 2015).

Children in poverty – participation types and levels and children's voice

The participation of children and young people in educational and societal processes relevant to them and their lives is foregrounded in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (HMSO 1995) embedded UNCRC into Scottish legislation and recommended that young people in Scotland are centrally and fully consulted on all matters that impact their lives; and that their views and aspirations must be made central in all decision making and planning processes concerning them in schools and children's services (SE 2001). Recent advocates for children's rights recommend consulting young people on their particular experiences of poverty (SYP 2015) and bringing education further into the debate on poverty (JRF 2015), to improve service practices in response.

Understanding the aspirations and needs of young Scots in and through participation and consultation processes is not straightforward. Criticism of 'student voice' centres on: power relations (Fielding 2006), the type of knowledge generated (Fielding 2007), the purposes to which such knowledge is utilised (Whitty & Wisby 2007), and the tendency to privilege more articulate and confident young people (Flutter 2007). Arnot & Reay (2007: 318), for example, distinguish the categories of 'dominant voices', 'sub-voices' and the 'yet to be voiced'. In response to policy recommendations (SE 2001), further research is required to reach and make central the voices of *all* young people; on the effects in practice of a focus on voice and participation; on power relations in pupils' participation in partnerships and collaboration in schools and communities; and how higher levels of student proactive participation impact on local and national equity agendas.

A multi-level approach to the complex nexus of issues surrounding access to services and educational and social participation is adopted here to tackle the multiple intersecting dimensions of child poverty. Accordingly, a multi-level framework of analysis and recommendations is now outlined.

5. Improving children and young people's access and participation – Governance and policy issues

The ideas embedded in policy, schools and children's services practices and outcomes, and everyday socio-cultural practices should represent and encourage 'productive' principles and practices compatible with the ideas of justice: cultural knowledges, inclusivity, community and identity, active citizenship, and connectedness to the wider social world and to each other (Lingard *et al.* 2003).

- The relationship between education, social change and empowerment; the role of institutional contexts and power for all young people; the local and national climate of support for equality in leadership positions, inclusive dialogue and policy making – need to be understood.

- Children's sector policy needs to focus on the issue of normalizing ideas of social justice, equity and well being in discourses, in the practices of schooling and other services, and everyday practices. Discourses and arguments and the practices and norms they institute should be equality based and human rights informed.

- Policy study is called for to examine and measure the effectiveness in practice in schools and children's services of policies and legislation on: health, education, rights, and social access and participation aimed at tackling socio-economic inequalities – and related policy trajectories that impact on the lives and life chances of children and young people in severe poverty (SG 2015d).

- Equality and human rights arguments must be carefully linked to the specific social conditions in which individuals live their lives; and children's rights to a standard of living that ensures their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development.

- Policy and governance needs to examine carefully and address the 'spatio-temporalities' (locations over time) in which young people live and develop aspirations and feelings about themselves, their circumstances and futures.

- Account must be taken of the amount and intensity of children's broader cultural, social and educational experiences and learning and the places in which these occur and how extended intensive learning experiences and activities act to help children in poverty to acquire resilience to 'beat the odds' against their social participation (Bartley 2006).

6. Implications for practice and pedagogical change

Practitioners need to develop further specific knowledge and skills to help tackle the inequalities that young people experience. This could include training on:

- How best to listen to children's voices and views and to use children's representations and insights to the benefit of children.
- How to detect children at risk to their learning, well-being and resilience due to persistent poverty, by using the *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) policy *National Practice Model*, *Resilience Matrix* (SG 2015c).
- Shared knowledge and understanding of key policy discourses on: severe conditions of child poverty; wellbeing indicators; resilience; and equalities.
- How to buffer the effects of poverty on children, including the avoidance of potentially stigmatizing and/or marginalizing practices in schools and children's services, such as those related to the cost of the school day (CPAG 2014).
- How to build social connections and 'assured optimism' for children as 'protagonist-agents' at the centre of their own learning and participation (Forbes & Lingard 2015).
- How to adopt 'Productive Pedagogies' approaches underpinned by principles and practices of social justice and inclusion, active citizenship, and connectedness (see above) (Lingard *et al.* 2003).
- How to ensure access to services and educational and social participation for children in severe poverty.
- How to work with other agencies to coordinate an effective 'joined-up' multi-agency approach to poverty and associated learning and life issues and needs.

7. Conclusion

The findings and recommendations in this policy brief have broader implications for the kinds of education and further training that practitioners need to collaboratively include and make central the aspirations of children and young people affected by poverty. The above steps will equip practitioners with the necessary knowledge bases and skills to change infrastructural and institutional discourses and practices, ensuring better access to services for children and better opportunities for social participation.

Acting together with children, families and communities to change current norms and the status quo on child poverty and social disadvantage and having well resourced and equipped practitioners can give 'every child a strong start in life' (SG 2007). Such practices will change for the better the lives of children living with intersecting socio-economic risk factors, such as family un/employment, disability, single parenthood; gender; ethnicity; urban/rural location, that may produce severe poverty and inequality.

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