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## Poverty and Education<sup>[1]</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the author discusses the multiple ways in which the enduring, and increasing, problems associated with child poverty blight young people's educational opportunities in the school system. Current policies, supported by a sympathetic media, blame individuals for their poverty, and blame teachers when they fail to 'close the gap'. The article concludes that these problems can only be addressed by increasing resources devoted to tackling poverty, and developing a more supportive and sophisticated approach to those schools facing the biggest challenges.

There are now 3.5 million children in the United Kingdom living in poverty. These children are concentrated in particular areas, particularly in inner-city housing estates and rural areas where there is not enough work to go around. Their schools face particular challenges every day.

Schools face the direct effects of child poverty when:

- children are hungry and rely on the school to provide them with breakfast and lunch;
- children are unable to participate in school activities because they do not have the money for sports, excursions or extra-curricular activities such as music;
- children are unable to do their homework because there is no place they can use for study, they have no computer and no access to the Internet or to reference books.

Teachers in schools serving high-poverty communities know that many of the children they work with have no bedroom of their own, do not have a safe place to play outside and live in housing which is damp and unheated. Some children have to care for parents who are ill. Such life circumstances prevent children from achieving as much as they might. Despite the best efforts of their schools, many children living in poverty can be stigmatised by peers, some unthinking adults, and educational policies which assume that all children have

equal access to libraries, health and welfare services, transport and everyday activities such as holidays and trips to the theatre or gallery.

It is often said that because many people who are poor did not do well at school themselves, they are not supportive of their own children's education. This is not true. The vast majority of parents are very keen for their children to do well and understand very well the relationship between qualifications and life chances.

The media are always ready, it seems, to make programmes that portray these children and their families as lazy and feckless, as shamelessly dependent on benefits. But the majority of people living below the official poverty line are working, sometimes stitching together several part-time, insecure and poorly paid jobs. It is estimated that one in five workers is now paid less than they need to maintain a basic but socially acceptable standard of living. The Living Wage Commission says that

Britain's economy is showing sustained signs of recovery after the worst recession since World War II, yet more and more workers are falling into low pay. The juxtaposition between increases in economic output and the worsening problem of low pay is an important one, because it means that economic growth alone will not necessarily solve Britain's low pay crisis. (Living Wage Commission, 2014, p. 7)

Some schools are part of the low-wage problem too; they employ people on part-time contracts which only cover term-time.

The vast majority of schools and teachers are committed to breaking the ongoing nexus between poverty and educational success. Schools with a high proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals know that they are much more likely to be below floor targets than other schools. But changing the statistics is not a simple matter. It is well known and understood in schools with high child poverty that many children are more likely to begin school without the advantages enjoyed by their peers in better-off families – their parents cannot afford full-time pre-school and the kinds of books and experiences that are congruent with the current school curriculum. The advantages experienced by some children continue all the way through school, right up to the final years of high school, where many parents who can afford to do so employ personal tutors to ensure exam success.

The schools serving the poorest children in the country have to do more with less. They must spend more of their budgets on: health and welfare support; subsidising equipment, materials and excursions; breakfast and homework clubs; and enrichment activities that less cash-strapped families would provide for themselves. Schools in high-poverty neighbourhoods have to provide more support for English language learning for new settlers in the country, more remedial support for children whose learning has been interrupted or delayed, and more specialised intervention for children with diagnosed learning difficulties. Teachers in these schools must also work with

children whose families are under intense financial pressure and where everyday life is often highly stressed, and cuts to local health and welfare services have meant that schools serving the poorest communities have had to pick up even more responsibilities.

While additional funds such as the pupil premium are crucially important, they are insufficient to cater for all of the things that need to be done. Schools serving poor neighbourhoods need to be able to focus on their educational work – making progress against the educational odds facing their pupils. Their job would be much easier if there were a coordinated public policy agenda on the question of child poverty – an agenda which covered issues such as the level of wages paid to parents and the provision of regular and accessible public transport, affordable housing and good public community health provision. Parents should be assisted to return to education themselves to gain qualifications that would help them in the labour market.

A government which understood the everyday challenges facing schools serving the most vulnerable children would not punish them when they find it difficult to make a difference. Expertise and support would be provided together with the financial support needed to tackle the serious issues they face. Punitive regimes do nothing to tackle the real issues, and they do much to damage the morale and capacities of schools and teachers working with families and communities which are making the best of a very bad financial lot.

### Note

[1] This article first appeared on the website [www.reclaimingschools.org](http://www.reclaimingschools.org)

### Reference

Living Wage Commission (2014) *Working for Poverty. The Scale of the Problem of Low Pay and Working Poverty in the UK*. <http://livingwagecommission.org.uk>

### Further Reading

*Education and Social Mobility*. [www.esrc.ac.uk/\\_images/education-vital-social-mobility\\_tcm8-20069.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/education-vital-social-mobility_tcm8-20069.pdf)

Nelson, J., Martin, K. & Featherstone, G. (2013) *What Works in Supporting Children and Young People to Overcome Persistent Poverty? A Review of UK and International Literature*. Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

Save the Children (2014) *A Fair Start for Every Child. Why We Must Act Now to Tackle Child Poverty in the UK*. [www.savethechildren.org](http://www.savethechildren.org)

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