

Education, Children and Young People Committee

5th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday 9 February 2022

Scottish Attainment Challenge

Introduction

The Committee is undertaking an inquiry to scrutinise the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The Committee launched a [call for views](#) which closed on 8 February.

At this meeting, the Committee will begin to take oral evidence.

Committee meeting

The Committee will take evidence from—

- Professor Chris Chapman, Chair in Educational Policy and Practice, University of Glasgow;
- Professor Mel Ainscow, Professor in Education, University of Glasgow;
- Dr Laura Robertson, Senior Research Officer, The Poverty Alliance;
- Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation; and
- Emma Congreve, Knowledge Exchange Fellow, Fraser of Allander Institute.

Supporting Information

The Committee has received written submissions from Professor Chris Chapman and Professor Mel Ainscow, the Poverty Alliance, and the Fraser of Allander Institute. These are provided at **Annexe A** to this paper. A SPICe briefing on the issues being considered at this evidence session, is provided at **Annexe B**.

Education, Children and Young People Committee Clerking Team
4 February 2022

Annexe A

University of Glasgow – Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

‘Unlocking the Potential’

A manifesto for educational reform in Scotland prepared by researchers at the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at the University of Glasgow

March 2021

Over the last eight years or so a team of researchers from the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change have worked alongside a range of partners across the Scottish education system to explore how greater equity can be achieved in schools. This has revealed how, despite the serious national commitment to enhancing excellence and equity and a huge range of well-intentioned initiatives, the most vulnerable children and young people still lose out, and that the established links between education and disadvantage have yet to be broken.

A change in government provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on what can be learned from this ongoing development and research process. With this in mind, this document takes the form of a ‘manifesto’ for the equitable reform of the Scottish education system. In it, we address the following questions:

- What else can be done to promote equity within the Scottish education system?
- What are the barriers to progress and how might they be overcome?

To be clear, our purpose is to set out the foundations for what we see as a major new policy effort within Scottish education. In other words, we are not presenting short-term, quick-fix solutions to ingrained problems – ‘Friday morning policies’ to be implemented straight after an election. Rather, we are concerned with what might be achieved in the course of a five to ten-year period, which, while it may be a long time in politics, is still only a short time in the context of whole-system reform. We believe that anyone who is serious about creating a more equitable education system must commit, alongside us, to this long-term view of transformation, and to fostering the political consensus needed to see it through.

The challenge of equity

The Robert Owen Centre programme of work has involved a series of collaborative action research initiatives carried out with practitioners and policy-makers across

Scotland¹. Its focus has been on finding more effective ways of improving outcomes for all children and young people, particularly those from economically poorer backgrounds. This has involved work with networks of schools and their communities, as well as with local authority colleagues. These developments have focused on making better use of human resources *within-schools*, *between-schools* and *beyond-schools*.

Building on the much-quoted adage, *‘the best way to understand an organisation is by trying to change it’*, our analysis of these experiences leads us to believe that there is massive untapped potential within Scottish schools and their communities that can be mobilised to address the challenge of equity. With this in mind, we propose five interconnected actions that need to be taken in order to make the Scottish education system more equitable:

Action 1: Improvement strategies must relate to the challenges and resources within particular contexts

As far as educational change is concerned, *context matters*. This means that, in determining improvement pathways, evidence is needed about the way that local education systems work. In this way, it is possible to identify barriers that limit the progress of some learners and resources – particularly human resources - that can be mobilised to address these difficulties.

The insider knowledge of key players at different levels of an education system is an essential means of carrying out such a contextual analysis. In particular, the views of colleagues from other schools, plus those of local authority staff, can provide a different set of perspectives. The involvement of children and young people, and the wider community, is also important, as we have seen through the work of our Children’s Neighbourhoods Scotland initiative.

All of this requires schools to have greater flexibility to determine how resources are used to address local circumstances. It also builds on international research which suggests that when teachers are involved in decision-making this is likely to promote a stronger culture for learning within schools.

Action 2: Collaborative action research should be used to stimulate collective action

We have documented how forms of collaborative action research have the potential to draw people together in relation to challenges facing schools, as well as generating evidence that can stimulate innovations aimed at improving thinking, policy and practice. In particular, we have shown how *the use of evidence* collected by practitioners to study teaching within their school can foster the development of practices that are more effective in reaching out to all learners.

¹ See: Chapman, C. & Ainscow, M. (Eds.) (2021) *Educational Equity: Pathways to Success*. Routledge (in press)

The evidence needed to create this stimulation can take many forms and involves the use of a variety of techniques. What is common among them, however, is the way they create ‘interruptions’ that make the familiar unfamiliar. During the busy school day, this can lead to the sharing of ideas and practices, as well as encouraging collective problem-solving.

In terms of evidence, the obvious starting point is usually with statistical information regarding student attendance, behaviour and progress. In recent years the extent and sophistication of such data have improved, so much so that the progress of groups and individuals can now be tracked in considerable detail, giving a much greater sense of the value that a school is adding to its students. However, statistical information alone tells us very little. What brings such data to life is when ‘insiders’ scrutinise and ask questions together as to their significance, bringing detailed experiences and local knowledge to bear on the process of interpretation.

Action 3: School partnerships that encourage mutual support and challenge must be encouraged

Our experiences have demonstrated that *school-to-school collaboration* can strengthen the capacity of practitioners to respond to learner diversity. Specifically, collaboration between schools can help to reduce inequalities of provision, to the particular benefit of those students who are marginalised at the edges of a local education system.

In particular, there is evidence that when schools develop more collaborative ways of working, this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Specifically, comparisons of practices in different schools can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light, in ways that encourages a move away from deficit thinking. In other words, those learners who cannot easily be educated within a school’s established routines are seen less as ‘having problems’ but as challenging teachers to re-examine their practices in order to make them more responsive to learner diversity.

There are important implications here for national accountability systems. In particular, our research on the benefits of school-to-school cooperation suggests that it is time for school evaluation to be carried out mainly *by schools for schools* in ways that can act as a stimulus for improvement. However, this has to be challenging and credible. In other words, it must not involve forms of collusion within which partner schools endorse one another in an acceptance of mediocrity.

This requires a move away from a heavy reliance on top-down accountability, towards an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders. A reformed national system of inspections would be the means of ensuring this does not happen. This requires *an inspection service that is recognised as being independent*.

Action 4: External support has to be coordinated at a local level

In order to foster equitable education, policy-makers have to mobilise human and financial resources, some of which may not be under their direct control. This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children.

In this respect, we have seen many encouraging examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players within a particular district – employers, community groups, universities and public services. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply *partnerships beyond the school*, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts, leading to collective impact.

All of this has implications for the various key stakeholders within the education system. In particular, teachers, especially those in senior positions, have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organisation that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate, not least representatives of the social care and health services. And, of course, it is here that local authority representatives can have key roles as facilitators of such cooperative ways of working.

Action 5: The support of key players at the local and national levels must be provided

Within our projects, progress was more evident where those leading improvement efforts had the backing of key players. In particular, there is a need to identify and engage the support of those who can make things happen, as well as those who might block things from happening.

In the Scottish system, where local authority officials have considerable influence, their support is particularly crucial. One of the distinctive features is that, although the system is relatively centralised, it allows local authorities a fair degree of flexibility to implement policies in partnership with others in ways that suit local contexts. However, the introduction of the approaches we propose will necessitate *changed roles for local authority staff*. Put simply, they have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools or, in some contexts, by other community organisations.

In taking on new roles, local authority staff can position themselves as *the conscience of the system*: guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families, and champions of a more collegiate approach. Put simply, the job of schools is to improve themselves and the role of the local authority is to make sure that this happens by coordinating the development of a networked learning system.

Addressing barriers to progress

Evidence from our programme of development and research has thrown light on barriers that are likely to limit progress in implementing our recommendations. It also suggests ways in which they can be addressed. Underpinning these barriers is an over emphasis on centralised decision making, such that limited space is available for senior staff in schools to work with their colleagues to develop improvement strategies that fit their own contexts.

In summary, barriers are created by:

- **National policies that encourage schools to narrow the educational diet.** This involves a focus of attention on ways of improving a narrowly conceived range of outcomes, as signalled by the continual emphasis placed by Scottish Government on 'raising attainment'. This has led to a tendency to narrow the curriculum and allocate teaching time on those areas of learning that are seen as being most important. Our argument is that educational equity assumes that all learners have a right to a broad range of learning experiences that will enrich their lives and improve their life chances, as defined by Curriculum for Excellence.
- **Local administrative structures that limit the freedom of practitioners to experiment.** Where there is a tradition of rigid local authority 'line management', this constrains decision-making amongst school leaders, particularly those who feel under pressure to adhere to local policy. This means that, in some instances, 'guidance' is interpreted by practitioners as 'prescription'. Our experience leads us to favour the idea of subsidiarity. Put simply, that which individuals can accomplish by their own initiative and efforts should not be taken from them by a higher authority.
- **Fragmentation within education systems that limit opportunities for sharing expertise.** Too often, practitioners continue to work in isolation from one another. Meanwhile, middle managers may see themselves as mainly having a maintenance function, as opposed to being change agents. On the other hand, the best examples in our studies were characterised by a consensus amongst adults within a school around values of respect for differences and a commitment to work together in order to offer all students access to rich learning opportunities. The implication is that senior staff have to create a climate within which this takes place.
- **Changes in senior leadership that make sustained activity more difficult.** For a variety of reasons, the temporary absence of senior staff can create particular challenge in respect to development activities. This makes sustainable change more difficult. We have found that collective responsibility in schools and within local networks is a means of mitigating the effects of this.
- **Factors beyond the school gate:** These include geographical isolation, economic pressures and community attitudes. Our work has highlighted the benefit of providing opportunities to minimise isolation through the creation of forums for tackling wider contextual issues, such as local unemployment, poverty and wellbeing. Furthermore, we have seen how schools can make important contributions to making this happen.

In addressing these factors, there is a need for innovative thinking regarding the barriers experienced by some children and young people that lead them to become marginalised. These can include: inappropriate curricula and forms of assessment; inadequate teacher preparation and support; and forms of teaching that do not take account of learner diversity.

Given the concern with the principle of equity, there also has to be focus on the thinking that is *behind* actions and the impacts of such thinking on practices. In particular, there needs to be a concern with the attitudes and assumptions that influence what teachers do, some of which may be unconscious, and how these can be modified through dialogues with others, especially with learners themselves. All of which points to the importance of forms of leadership that encourages colleagues to challenge one another's assumptions about particular groups of students.

It is worth adding, that it is barriers such as those listed here that have contributed to the difficulties involved in implementing Curriculum for Excellence. In this respect, it is worth recalling the work of the influential educationalist Lawrence Stenhouse, who argued that *curriculum development must rest on teacher development*.

New challenges

At the time when this manifesto for reform was being prepared, further significant barriers exist within education systems across the world as a result of the *impact of the coronavirus pandemic*. These new challenges point to the need for an even greater emphasis on the sorts of approaches we have presented.

Support for this is presented in a recent UNESCO report², which states:

The educational response to the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the capacity of educators to draw on their professional knowledge and collaboratively mobilize with a resourcefulness and creativity that could not have been achieved by a public authority simply issuing top down orders. In fact, over the last several months, the education sector which is often unfairly critiqued for its conservatism has shown itself to be among the most robust and adaptable of all social institutions. This is an important lesson from this crisis and one which should lead us to grant teachers greater autonomy and freedom.

The report concludes:

Teachers need to be more recognized and more highly valued; they are essential participants in defining the futures of education.

It is therefore the time for the whole Scottish community to get together with teachers in ensuring high quality educational opportunities for all of our children and young people. We also believe that universities have important contributions to make, particularly if they work in partnerships with one another. With this in mind, members of our team are currently working with colleagues in various parts of the country to take this thinking forward.

It is important to emphasise, however, that the sorts of approaches presented in this document cannot of themselves overcome the impact of the massive community

² https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/education_in_a_post-covid_world-nine_ideas_for_public_action.pdf

inequalities that exist in Scotland, as in most other developed countries. What they do offer, however, is a way of working that has the potential to make significant differences to the life chances of children and young people from low income families, whilst, at the same time, contributing to improvements in the overall performance of the education system.

Final thoughts

Recent debates in Scotland have made reference to there being a risk-averse culture across the national education system that discourages innovation. We believe that the findings of the Robert Owen Centre's programme provide the basis of an agenda for reform in Scotland that addresses this concern. In particular, they show how local pathways to success can be determined that fit the challenges that exist within specific contexts. They also point to the importance of giving practitioners much more opportunities to lead this process. Put simply, it is time to give teaching back to teachers.

There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of local authority staff. They have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, local authorities can, as we have argued, position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families - protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities.

If this thinking is to be implemented, there are significant implications for national policies. Put simply, there is a need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners and other stakeholders have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these should be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

The following members of staff at the Robert Owen Centre have contributed ideas to this document: Mel Ainscow, Irene Bell, Victoria Bianchi, Claire Bynner, Christopher Chapman, Graham Donaldson, Alison Drever, Stuart Hall, Kevin Lowden, Jennifer McLean, Joanne Neary and Sarah Ward.

The Poverty Alliance

Written Submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee: Scottish Attainment Challenge

Dr Laura Robertson, Senior Research Officer, The Poverty Alliance

About us

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, with almost 400 members from across civil society, and including people with direct experience of poverty. Our vision is of a sustainable Scotland free of poverty, with dignity and social and economic justice for all. To help contribute to achieving that vision we seek to work with individuals, organisations and communities to affect change in the distribution of power and resources.

1. The poverty-attainment gap: the context

The attainment gap in Scotland starts in the early years and widens as children and young people move through the education system. From the early years, the attainment gap is stark: in 2019/20, there was a 13.9 percentage point gap in records of development concerns for infants aged 27-30 months between the least and most deprived areas in Scotland. Upon leaving school, just over two in five living in the most deprived areas achieve one or more Highers (43.5%) compared to almost four in five young people living in the least deprived areas (79.3%) (2018/19). Young people living in the most deprived areas in Scotland are also four times more likely to be excluded from school and have lower attendance levels.³ Several of the National Improvement Framework measures have not been published since Covid. However, 2020/21 data on primary school achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels shows that gaps in numeracy and literacy between primary pupils living in the most and least deprived areas has widened since 2018/19 and is now wider than at any point since 2016/17.

There are specific groups of children and young people who are most affected by the attainment gap. Care experienced learners, children with additional support needs and Gypsy/Travellers are particularly marginalised groups. White boys living in the most deprived areas in Scotland also achieve lower levels of education attainment in

³ <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/socioeconomic-inequalities-in-school-attendance-in-scotland-resea>
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/pages/8/>

comparison to their peers.⁴ Rural poverty is also a significant issue affecting educational outcomes in Scotland, with the centralisation of services in rural areas - allied with limited and high-cost transport options - creating specific barriers to young people accessing training, education and employment.

2. Covid-19 impacts on the attainment gap

Even before the pandemic, over one million people in Scotland – including one in four children – were living in poverty. Covid-19 has, however, exacerbated levels of poverty in Scotland, resulting in precarious household circumstances for low-income families including not being able to afford regular, basic needs such as food and clothing.⁵ Covid has presented significant digital exclusion barriers for low-income families, and has negatively impacted on children and young people's mental health.⁶ As well as the closure of schools impacting on children and young people's attainment, the removal of many different forms of 'out of school' provision was felt acutely by priority family groups, particularly lone parent families.⁷ Community support from local third sector organisations has been particularly important in supporting low-income families during Covid.⁸

3. Scottish Attainment Challenge

What has worked well in addressing attainment to date?

Evaluations of the Scottish Attainment Fund have highlighted positive examples of effective practice. The most recent year five (2019/20) evaluation highlights positive perceptions of improvements in closing the poverty-related attainment gap amongst teachers and headteachers, particularly linked to perceived change in culture/ethos. Many schools in Scotland have embedded nurturing approaches, focused on wellbeing and relationships. Research on nurture groups has demonstrated positive impacts on social, emotional and behavioural outcomes for children.⁹ However, the impact on attainment needs robust evaluation. Pupil Equity Funding has been experienced positively by schools: most Headteachers (89%) report that the PEF has provided additional resource needed to address the poverty-related attainment gap and that the PEF supports provision that is responsive to local context and needs.¹⁰

⁴ <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Poverty-related-Attainment-Gap-A-Review-of-the-Evidence-11Feb2021.pdf>

⁵ https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TPA_GHS_Project_Research_Report_FINAL_proof_02-1.pdf

⁶ <https://www.cso.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/COVIDI2016-1.pdf>

⁷ <https://researchonline.gcu.ac.uk/en/publications/family-experiences-of-navigating-out-of-school-provision-in-inver>

⁸ https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/GHS_Weathering_the_Storm_Summary_Report.pdf

⁹ <https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2009.00445.x>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/attainment-scotland-fund-evaluation-headteacher-survey-2020-report/documents/>

What could improve?

- **Robust evidence at national level on effective interventions:** Whilst evidence-based interventions are developed by local authorities using available evidence from organisations such as the Education Endowment Fund, qualitative research with stakeholders involved in planning and delivering interventions identified the need to have robust evidence at national level to support the selection of interventions.¹¹
- **Reducing child poverty and policies to address the impact of poverty on participation in education:** Income inadequacy is a key and defining barrier that impacts on children and young people being able to fully participate in education. To address the root causes of the attainment gap, the Scottish Government must continue its commitment to end child poverty in the new Child Poverty Delivery Plan. As set out by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, no single policy on its own can eradicate child poverty but more action is needed to bolster incomes through the Scottish Child Payment and ensure that families get information about all the benefits they are entitled to in school and health settings.¹²

Initiatives seeking to reduce the attainment gap should put reducing financial barriers at the centre. Aside from the Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of the School Day Programme, there is a limited evidence base around models of practices that address poverty in school settings.
- **Improve evidence base on health and wellbeing interventions:** NHS Health Scotland were asked to identify and review international health and wellbeing interventions in school settings that contribute to reducing inequalities to develop evidence-based programmes within the Equity Framework. This review highlighted the lack of conclusive evidence on health and wellbeing interventions that have the potential to impact on inequalities in educational outcomes in the UK.¹³
- **Improve access to additional educational instruction outside of school:** There is a strong evidence base on the effectiveness of additional educational instruction outside of school (tutoring, after school clubs, extra lessons). However, there are a lack of programmes that provide these interventions at school-level in Scotland.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/31284/2/00532726.pdf>

¹² https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Advice-on-the-SGs-Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-2022-26_EXEC-SUMMARY_Jan2022.pdf

¹³ <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1694/reducing-the-attainment-gap-the-role-of-health-and-wellbeing-interventions-in-schools.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Poverty-Alliance-Mentoring-and-Tutoring-ReviewFINALv2.pdf>

Consistent, longer-term funding for third sector organisations: third sector organisations provide critical support to children and young people in partnership with schools across local authorities in Scotland. However, short-term funding and reporting requirements severely challenge the delivery of relationship-based support for children and young people.¹⁵

¹⁵ [Bernardos Report.pdf \(scottishinsight.ac.uk\)](https://scottishinsight.ac.uk/bernardos-report/)

Fraser of Allander Institute

Submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee ahead of evidence session 9

February 2022

The Fraser of Allander Institute is an independent research institute based within the University of Strathclyde. We carry out research to inform the big challenges facing our economy and society in Scotland. We are not politically aligned and we do not campaign on any issues. Public statements and comments made on behalf of the Institute, including this submission, are based on suitably robust evidence and analysis.

Over the last year, the Institute has been involved in a collaborative project looking at data and analysis that could help local areas better understand the linkages between poverty and attainment. This project has been funded via the Data for Children Collaborative with UNICEF and worked with eight local authorities from across the Northern Alliance Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC). Within this submission, I will summarise some of the main findings from this work.

Impact pathways

Based on a review of the recent literature and a series of workshops with education practitioners from across the Northern Alliance RIC, we identified four key pathways to attainment on which to base our analysis on:

1. Attendance at school

There are a number of factors linked, directly or indirectly to poverty and deprivation, such as poor health, lack of back-up transport if school buses are missed or difficult work schedules meaning parents aren't in the home to get children ready in time for school.

2. Ability to learn at school

Factors such as hunger or lack of sleep could be linked to poverty or deprivation, and reduce the capacity of the child to learn. The quality of the learning environment may also affect pupils – for example the extent to which they feel secure and are not subject to shame or stigma.

3. Ability to learn at home

Poor quality housing, poor accessibility to broadband connections, stress and overcrowding are all examples of how poverty and attainment could limit the quality of homework and revision. These issues are likely to have had an even greater impact during the period of the first lockdown in 2020 when schools were shut.

4. Involvement in enriching extra-curricular activities

Evidence shows that enriching extracurricular activities such as afterschool clubs, sports and hobbies are beneficial to attainment, yet children from lower income families attend such activities much less regularly than their better-off peers.

One area we were particularly interested in looking at is the extent to which living in a rural area affects the relationship between poverty and attainment. These are detailed in [Table 1](#).

Subsequently, we started to scope data and evidence that could be used to explore the extent or relationship between poverty and deprivation and these pathways. Over 30 datasets were identified, some of them at a spatial level (for example, DWP Children in Low Income Households data at intermediate zone level) and some that could be analysed at household level (for example take-up of Scottish Child Payment or overcrowding).

In general, the education practitioners that we spoke to had found shortcomings with the data they currently had available to them relating to poverty and deprivation. SIMD was felt not to work well in rural areas. Due to both the large geographical areas that SIMD relates to in rural areas and the relevance of the information captured within the measure. Free School Meals data was limited in that it only refers to those who chose to register (which may not be all who need it) and the roll-out of universal provision means it was not an indicator which could be used across all age cohorts.

However, there may still be merit in including this data, and some initial analysis using Free School Meals data did find a difference in educational attainment for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and some evidence that students from low socio-economic backgrounds that attend rural schools have experienced poorer educational mobility than their urban counterparts.

The next stage of this work is to analyse a broader range of data, as identified in the scoping study, to test whether they can predict differences in attainment. One use of this may be that if some data is shown to have a significant impact on attainment then this will provide evidence to allow schools to identify and focus resources on that issue. For example, if we find that attendance at after school activities is a strong predictor of differences in attainment in rural areas, schools may be able to focus resources on providing transport for children outwith normal school bus times.

We hope to be able to move forward with this next stage of work, funding dependent, within the next 18 months.

Table 1

| Table 1 – Rural specific issues that can affect attainment | |
|---|--|
| Cost of living | |
| Higher cost of food | Nutritional needs are not met, and this affects learning |
| Higher cost of fuel | Limits private transport |
| | Ability to heat home constrained |
| Lack of homes to rent | The higher cost of housing constrains spending |
| | May have to live in a sub-optimal location |
| Digital Infrastructure | Less reliable broadband |
| Distance to school/work/services | Long commute to and from school |
| | Long commute for parents constraining their time at home before and after school |
| | Issues with having to board on the mainland |
| | Longer distances and poorer public transport impact on access to services |
| Living in sparsely populated areas | Feelings of isolation and constraints on social life lead to lower wellbeing (children and parents) |
| Seasonality of work | Fluctuating income and times of the year when parents will be at work for long hours |
| Small schools | Multiple year groups in one class and difficulties in pitching lessons at the right level for all* |
| Stigma | Small, often relatively homogenous, communities mean any difference is more likely to stand out |
| | People may be less likely to take support offered, for example, Free School Meals, because issues will become known to the broader community |

*It was noted that composite classes are not only a rural phenomenon, and even in single year classes, teachers will need to adapt to a range of ability

Annexe B

The logo for SPICe (The Information Centre) is a purple rounded rectangle. The text 'SPICe' is in white, with 'SPIC' in a larger font and 'e' in a smaller font. To the right of 'SPICe', the text 'The Information Centre' is in white, and 'An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh' is in a smaller white font below it.

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Education, Children and Young People Committee

9 February 2022

Poverty-related attainment gap

Introduction

The Committee has agreed to undertake an inquiry into the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the Scottish Government's policy commitment to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Through the inquiry, the Committee has set out to explore—

- What has worked well?
- What could improve?
- How is the impact of funding measured?
- What has been the impact of the pandemic on attainment and achievement in schools?

Closing the attainment gap is central part of the Scottish Government's school policy. The annexe to this paper sets out a short explanation of the Government's approach.

At this meeting, the Committee will take evidence from a range of academics and experts. To support this session, this paper is formulated by exploring two broad areas: the overall Scottish Government policy and policy approach; and the wider understanding of the relationship between deprivation and attainment and the role of schools in supporting equity.

Scottish Government policy: Closing the attainment gap

The [2016-17 Programme for Government](#) set out the Government's ambitions last session to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It said—

“It is the defining mission of this Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap. We intend to make significant progress within the lifetime of this Parliament and substantially eliminate the gap over the course of the next decade. That is a yardstick by which the people of Scotland can measure our success.” (p5)

To this end, the Scottish Government established a number of policies. Under the banner of the Attainment Scotland Fund were:

- From 2015-16 Challenge Authorities and Challenge Schools – selected on the basis of the proportion of children living in SIMD20 areas (the fifth most deprived areas based on SIMD methodology);
- From 2017 -18, Pupil Equity Funding, based on the proportion of children eligible for free school meals;
- From 2018-19 the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, aimed at improving outcomes for care experienced young people up to the age of 26;
- A range of national programmes which include support for staffing supply and capacity, professional learning and school leadership, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, and some third sector organisations.

As well as the targeted programmes or funding streams, closing the attainment gap is an overall aim of the education system. As such, the universal school education offer is intended to support the goal. In addition, one of the aims of the expansion of funded ELC to 1,140 hours is to improve children’s outcomes and help close the poverty-related attainment gap.

The [National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#) (NIF) sets out the vision for Scottish Education—

- **Excellence through raising attainment and improving outcomes:** ensuring that every child and young person achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to shape their future as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors;
- **Achieving equity:** ensuring every child and young person has the same opportunity to succeed, no matter their background or shared protected characteristics, with a particular focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap.

The NIF sets out 11 measures to measure the attainment gap. These are:

- 27-30 month review (children showing no concerns across all domains)
- Two Health and Wellbeing measures: Children total difficulties score at ages 4-12 and at ages 13 & 15
- Four measures of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools

- Three school-leaver measures, having at least one qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 on leaving school
- 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment.

A number of data collections have been interrupted by the pandemic. Changes to SQA qualifications also makes national level comparisons over time difficult. The Scottish Government's [Implementation Framework](#) for taking forward recommendations in the OECD report includes a commitment to consult "on changes to the NIF measures [which] will begin in January 2022 and conclude in September 2022."

The NIF identifies six 'drivers for improvement' which are intended to provide a focus and structure to develop practice and gather evidence of improvement. These drivers are:

- School and ELC leadership
- Teacher and practitioner professionalism
- Parent/carer involvement and engagement
- Curriculum and assessment
- School and ELC improvement
- Performance information

The intention is that local authority improvement plans should reflect the national improvement plan.

Attainment Scotland Fund

As noted above, the ASF includes a number of strands. How those strands are targeted also differs, with the Challenge Authorities and Schools Programme being targeted on the basis of community-level measures of deprivation and the larger PEF based on eligibility for FSM.

The allocations for the current year of the ASF are:

| Scottish Attainment Challenge 2021 to 2022 | Allocations for 21/22 |
|---|------------------------------|
| Challenge Authorities | £43m |
| Schools Programme | £7m |
| PEF | £147m |
| Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund | £11.6m |
| National programmes | £6.6m |
| Total | £215.2m |

The interventions are intended to make progress particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy and wellbeing.

There is a difference in how the challenge authority and schools' programmes, and PEF are allocated. The challenge authority and schools programme are grants made by the Scottish Government for specific projects in response to proposals. PEF, on the other hand, is allocated to schools and it is for the schools to determine how the additional monies should be spent, albeit with certain conditions attached (e.g. must be aimed at closing the attainment gap). The Scottish Government announced in November 2021 that from the next financial year, challenging funding "will be distributed equitably between 32 local authorities based on Children in Low Income Families data for the 2019/20 financial year".

Head teachers may wish to work together with their peers and the school community to determine how to spend PEF monies. The PEF operating guidance lists a number of resources that head teachers may wish to use to determine what interventions may reduce the attainment gap in their schools. These include the [Scottish Attainment Challenge - Self-evaluation resource](#), [An Intervention for Equity framework](#), and the [Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\) Toolkit](#). The third sector can often deliver these interventions.

The Scottish Government also [positions its work on reducing the poverty related attainment gap as part of the work to recover from the pandemic](#).

Evaluations

The Scottish Government has commissioned evaluations of the Attainment Scotland Fund. [The fourth was published in March 2021](#). This set out the long-term outcomes it measured progress against. These are—

- Embedded and sustained practices related to addressing the impact of the poverty-related attainment gap.
- All children and young people are achieving the expected or excellent educational outcomes, regardless of their background.
- An education system which is aspirational, inclusive in practice and approaches for all including teachers, parents and carers, children and young people.
- Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.

The evaluation highlighted a mixed picture in terms of the quantitative data. It says—

“For the majority of measures, attainment of those from the most deprived areas has increased, although in some cases not at the same rate as those in least deprived areas.”

The evaluation also reported that the majority of head teachers observed an improvement in closing the attainment gap. The evaluation also found evidence of continuing culture change in terms of greater collaboration, understanding the barriers faced by pupils and families affected by poverty, and embedding approaches to equity in practice.

The evaluation also noted the complexity of this area and that “it remains difficult to assess the reasons behind any observed improvement in attainment or closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and whether these changes have occurred as a direct result of the fund.”

At the same time as the fourth annual progress report, the Scottish Government published [Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021](#) looking at progress across the last Parliament. Unsurprisingly, similar themes were explored as the fourth annual evaluation. It said—

“Over the 5-year time period a number of key elements have been put in place that provide strong foundations for on-going progress. Important strengths of the Scottish approach include: a systemic change in terms of culture, ethos and leadership; a strengthened awareness of the barriers facing children and young people adversely affected by socio-economic disadvantage; the significant role of local authorities in driving forward a strategic vision for equity at local level.” (p6)

Audit Scotland published its report [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#) in March 2021. The Audit Scotland report stated—

“The poverty-related attainment gap remains wide and inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19. Progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the Scottish Government’s aims. Improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country. The government and councils recognise that addressing inequalities must be at the heart of the response to Covid-19, longer-term recovery and improving education.”

It also stated—

“Given the level of resource that has been targeted through the ASF and the slow rate of improvement in attainment, if the ASF continues in some form beyond the current funding period the Scottish Government needs to be clearer about the anticipated pace of change, identify and measure against appropriate milestones, and consider the lessons about what works in determining how funding is directed.”

Collaboration and Empowerment

The approaches and aims of the SAC reflect wider approaches in Scottish education policy of empowerment and collaboration.

Supporting collaboration at various levels is encouraged. Individual teachers and leaders ought to work collaboratively and, for example, this is reflected in the GTCS’ standards for registration. In addition, Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs)

were established across Scotland in 2018. RICs are not intended to be formal parts of the education system, rather they are forums where local authorities come together along with Education Scotland to improve education in their region. The aim of RICs is to facilitate existing and new ways for local authorities to collaborate.

The Scottish Government [published a Review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives in December 2021](#). This found that there is evidence of RICs having an impact on:

- developing the skills of school staff and delivery of lessons
- skills and consistency around assessment and moderation
- leadership and improvement planning skills
- building a collaborative culture between local authorities
- new online and blended learning opportunities for pupils.

Supporting empowerment is another key aspect to the Scottish Government's approach to developing school education policy in recent years, and indeed is central to Curriculum for Excellence. The [2021 OECD review of CfE](#) commented on this and said—

“The Scottish Empowerment Agenda, aligned to support the teaching profession's role in CfE, had clear effects on school leadership empowerment. The OECD team noted several elements of this empowerment through its interviews, including headteachers' leadership practices in schools' curriculum design and implementation processes, and how they felt they were able to interpret and prioritise policies that cater best to the needs of their staff and students.”

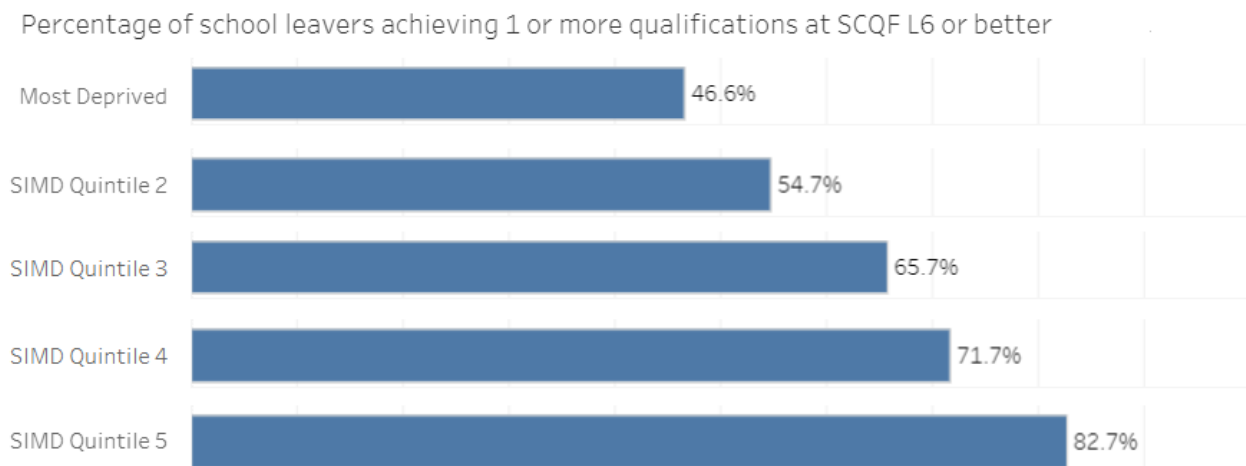
However, the OECD reported that there was less progress in supporting empowerment for individual teachers. (p79)

The response to the OECD review is also expected to make structural changes to national education agencies; it is not yet clear what these will look like or to what extent this will impact on regional or local structures.

Deprivation and school achievement

The focus of the Scottish Government is on closing the gap in attainment between children from the most deprived areas and the children in the least deprived areas, attending publicly funded schools.

It is important to note however, that the relationship between household income and outcomes in schools continues up the SES scale. For example, one measure the Scottish Government currently uses to measure progress in Scottish Education is the percentage of school leavers with at least one qualification at Level 6 – that is equivalent (both in level and size) to a Higher. The table below shows the outcomes after the 2020 diet with those percentages for each of the SIMD quintiles.



The link and mechanism between family income and attainment at school has long been a topic of study and some academic debate. For example, a confounding factor is the educational achievement of parents. A [2010 paper published by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation](#) explored some of the ways that affluence and disadvantage influence children’s educational attainment based on longitudinal studies. It found “some potentially important influences”—

- Early years: the richness of the early home learning environment.
- Primary school: maternal aspirations for higher education, how far parents and children believe their own actions can affect their lives, and children’s behavioural problems.
- Secondary school: teenagers’ and parents’ expectations for higher education, access to material resources, and engagement in anti-social behaviour.
- Across childhood: parents’ own cognitive abilities.

A [2014 paper, also published by the JRF](#) looked specifically at what “teachers, schools, local and national government and other education providers can do to close the education attainment gap associated with poverty in Scotland.” It made recommendations including improving the quality of data available and prioritising the understanding of the impacts of poverty on education and what can be done to mitigate these.

Some researchers argue that while schools can improve how they support pupils from deprived backgrounds, the potential impact is limited. For example, a 2014 paper published by the British Educational Research Association, [Social inequality: can schools narrow the gap?](#)¹⁶ stated—

“The impacts of schooling are most likely to be in the form of modest improvements for disadvantaged children, rather than fundamental transformations of their lives. Even so, there is reason to be optimistic about what schools can achieve: the positive impacts they can make are still worth

¹⁶ The authors of this paper included Professor Chapman and Professor Ainscow.

having. Further, perhaps we can learn from successful interventions about how schools might make greater impacts in future.”

The Fraser of Allander Institute’s submission noted that it has recently begun working with the Northern Alliance RIC; it has a particular focus on rural deprivation. Its work is “looking at data and analysis that could help local areas better understand the linkages between poverty and attainment”. The project is in early stages, but the work has identified four “key pathways to attainment”. These are—

- Attendance at school
- Ability to learn at school
- Ability to learn at home
- Involvement in enriching extra-curricular activities

Professor Chapman and Professor Ainscow edited a book, [Educational Equity, Pathways to Success](#), which reflected on the experience of researchers from the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change in supporting the promotion of equity in schools. They have provided members with the ROC’s manifesto for educational reform in Scotland, published last year. This manifesto reflects the conclusions of the book and is included in members papers.

A key theme of Professor Chapman and Professor Ainscow’s book is that in supporting an education system, there needs to be buy-in and active participation in improvement from across the system. It also highlighted that schools themselves are only part of an ‘ecology’ of factors that influence learning. It described three areas where issues of equity may arise:

- Within schools – teaching and learning in schools themselves;
- Between schools – how the characteristics of the local school system influences differing opportunities in different schools; and
- Beyond schools – the wider cultural, policy, economic, community and family contexts.

A paper published by the Fraser of Allander Institute in June 2020 looked at issues around poverty and the poverty related attainment gap. The paper entitled, [The Economics of Parenting: Children and Inequality in a Time of Shutdown](#) highlighted the importance of family and their neighbourhoods in supporting skills development; it said “evidence suggests that growing up in lower income households and neighbourhoods can be detrimental to development of socio-emotional skills”. The paper summarised with five “key points”:

“One, it is important for policy to consider the multiplicity of skills that develop in childhood. Two, action is needed sooner rather than later to reduce skill gaps, as skills are most sensitive while young. Three, because of dynamic complementarity, there needs to be follow-up to earlier investments with later investments. More simply, successful efforts to boost skills must scaffold.

Four, no single program will likely alleviate disadvantage. Profiles of policies that aim to balance multiple channels will be required. And, five, patience is required, as the process of skill development is long and the full impact of these type interventions may not accumulate for a generation.”

School-level interventions

One of the key conclusions of the Scottish Government’s [progress report 2016 to 2021](#) was that there had been a progress in developing a culture and leadership, focusing on equity in schools. This included—

“A greater awareness and understanding of the barriers facing children and young people adversely affected by socioeconomic disadvantage has emerged. This has led to a wide range of approaches and interventions being implemented to meet the needs of children and young people.” (p76)

CPAG’s Cost of the school day project has worked in a number of local authorities and identified areas where barriers to participation could be reduced. These barriers can be money spent on uniforms, trips, school lunches, gym kits, pencils and pens, and dress down days. The project was conducted in Glasgow and reported in 2015. Since then CPAG has worked in a number of local authorities and others have had similar initiatives, such as the City of Edinburgh Council’s 1 in 5 project.

Outwith the Scottish Attainment Challenge, Scottish Government policy has sought to reduce upfront costs of attending schools. For example, by increasing the minimum uniform grant, or working with [COSLA to remove music tuition and ‘core curriculum’ fees](#).

The progress report identified a number of ways in which there have been improvements in ways of working to deliver equity. These are:

- Enhanced learning and teaching and using data for improvement
- Focus on health and wellbeing
- Collaborative working
- Working with families and communities

The [EEF’s Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) provides accessible summaries of a range of interventions in schools. It provides a scale of costs and efficacy and notes the strength of evidence supporting these evaluations. The EEF stresses teachers and school leaders should use professional judgement to apply the evidence identified in the toolkit.

Education Scotland’s [National Improvement Hub](#) is another resource intended to support practitioners to improve their practice and increase the quality of learners’ experiences and outcomes.

The Scottish Government’s [progress report 2016 to 2021](#) stated--

“Schools select interventions based on a wide range of information, such as local authority support, [attainment adviser] advice and guidance,

consideration of data, research on interventions, and input from staff, parents and pupils.

“Local authorities have indicated evidence of a shifting focus and streamlining of approaches towards those approaches where there was evidence of effectiveness and impact.”

It also said, “investment in high quality professional learning and development opportunities has resulted in higher quality learning, teaching and assessment focusing on achieving equity.”

Collaboration is a key part of the practice highlighted by The Robert Owen Centre in [Educational Equity, Pathways to Success](#). Professor Ainscow argued that this includes the ‘problematization of established practice’; ie the recognition that something one is doing can be improved. Professor Ainscow also highlights the concept of Communities of Practice – practitioners can prefer the language, knowledge and approaches of their own professions. Using this concept, the implication is that teachers will more likely take on board advice from fellow teachers, and furthermore relationships between teachers and professionals/practitioners from other fields, such as educational researchers or CLD may take time to bed-in. These processes are exemplified by other researchers writing in the book. More broadly, the ROC’s manifesto stated—

“[Our findings] show how local pathways to success can be determined that fit the challenges that exist within specific contexts. They also point to the importance of giving practitioners much more opportunities to lead this process.”

The Scottish Government’s [progress report 2016 to 2021](#) suggested that the SAC is playing a role in empowering schools and local authorities make their own choices in how to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It said—

“One of the key features of the SAC is the flexibility and opportunity it offers to schools and local authorities to select, develop and create interventions that best work for children and young people in the local context. As a result, the SAC has seen a huge number of different interventions and approaches develop in different settings. The autonomy and flexibility provided by PEF has enabled schools to tailor approaches to their specific needs.” (p79)

The ROC’s manifesto suggested that the roles of local authorities would shift to a less operational role. It said—

“There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of local authority staff. They have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, local authorities can, as we have argued, position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families -

protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities.”

Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research

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