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Closing the attainment gap in Scottish schools

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Closing the attainment gap in Scottish schools: Three challenges in an unequal society

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Abstract

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has recently said, 'Improving school attainment is arguably the single most important objective in this programme for Government (Parliamentary address, 1 September 2015). Scotland's levels of academic attainment have become an increasing focus for debate amid continuing concerns that children living in the most deprived areas in Scotland are '6 to 13 months behind their peers in problem-solving at age 5; 11 to 18 months behind their peers in expressive vocabulary at age 5; and around two years of schooling behind their peers at age 15' (Scottish Government, 2014a: 5). The link between educational disadvantage and low levels of attainment is well documented in many countries, but particularly troubling in the UK, where overall levels of inequality are greater than in many other OECD countries, including Sweden. This paper draws on recent research in three fields of interest, namely student participation, home-school relationships and relationships within school, to explore the challenges for education in improving overall attainment. It considers how these fields of interest connect with each other and with issues of inequality and, finally, argues that they each has the potential to offer a new set of 'guidewires' for tackling this challenge.

Keywords

Introduction

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has recently said, 'Improving school attainment is arguably the single most important objective in this programme for Government' (Parliamentary address, 1 September 2015). Scotland's levels of academic attainment have become an increasing focus for debate amid continuing concerns that children living in the most deprived areas in Scotland are '6 to 13 months behind their peers in problem-solving at age 5; 11 to 18 months behind their peers in expressive vocabulary at age 5; and around two years of schooling behind their peers at age 15' (Scottish Government, 2014a: 5). The link between educational disadvantage and low levels of attainment is well documented in many countries, but particularly troubling in the UK, where despite national academic attainment levels above OECD averages, there are declining levels of relative and absolute achievement (OECD, 2015: 82).

In a period of austerity and uncertainty, the need to focus on links between educational disadvantage and attainment have particular importance, given that high attainment is a key determinant of future life chances, because the gap is harder to address the later it is tackled and because of the impact this has on individuals, communities and society. This paper draws on recent research in three fields of interest; (i) parental involvement and engagement; (ii) student participation; and (iii) behaviour and relationships within school, to explore the challenges for Scottish education in closing the gap in attainment. It considers how these challenges connect with each other and with issues of inequality and argues that reconsideration of this research may improve the chance of tackling this gap in attainment in Scotland but also elsewhere.

The policy context

The present nationalist-led Government in Scotland has an explicit commitment to raising attainment in education. It has supported this commitment through a range of approaches, initiatives and strategies, such as a focus on tackling poverty through collaboration in early years education (Scottish Government, 2013), the recent introduction of the *Read, Write, Count* programme for children in the first three years of primary school, an emphasis within the curriculum on the links between attainment and health and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2007) and the restructuring of teacher education following the Donaldson Review (Donaldson, 2011). It has been increasingly concerned to consider attainment and poverty together. Through an initiative entitled, 'Raising Attainment for All' (Scottish Government, 2014a), it now has a national network of attainment advisors to help schools tackle what it describes as 'the Attainment Challenge'.

More recently, there has been the introduction of a 'National Improvement Framework' (Scottish Government, 2016), which seeks improvements in attainment overall whilst also closing the gap. One of the key components of this Framework and perhaps its most contentious, is a plan to develop a new national standardised assessment for children and young people; testing them on literacy and numeracy at three separate points in primary school and one point in secondary school, with the results incorporated into broader teacher assessments of progress to be published nationally and by school and by local authority.

These policy efforts are supported by the Government's drive to improve the evidence base and use of data in support of tackling poverty and improving life chances overall. The best known of these is perhaps the largescale longitudinal survey, 'Growing up in Scotland' which started in 2005 and collates data from birth for five thousand children. The Government also supports the use of

evidence and data specific to education through participation in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment; though it has withdrawn from TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). At national level it conducts an annual survey of literacy and numeracy and a three yearly survey of behaviour and relationships in school. It also publishes annual statistical bulletins collating data on a range of key indicators including teacher numbers, school leaver attainment levels and destinations, levels of special or additional support need, disciplinary exclusion and school attendance. At school level, it has recently taken forward the development of a set of software and data tools accessible within the secondary school sector ('INSIGHT'), through which schools and teachers can link performance in examinations and destinations post-school to socio-economic factors and information on a range of local measures,

http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/curriculum/seniorphasebenchmarking. However, individual level pupil data, which allow progress of individual learners to be tracked over time, are not available in Scotland, although they are in England.

Further evidence of Government commitment to addressing inequality is to be found in the appointment in June 2015 of Naomi Eistenstadt of Oxford University as Scotland's first Independent Poverty Advisor, and in respect of educational inequality more specifically, the appointment of Prof Chris Chapman of Glasgow University's Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change in October 2015, as advisor to Scottish Government on the Attainment Challenge. The Attainment Challenge seeks to replicate the successes of the widely heralded 'London Challenge' which used student level data and a development plan based on cross-school collaboration, enhanced teacher professional development and support and changes to school governance and accountability, underpinned by significant

financial investment, to achieve improvement in the attainment of poorer students (Baars et al., 2014).

The policy context in Scotland, then, seems to be one in which there is strong recognition of the need to improve outcomes for those most disadvantaged. Scotland has long identified itself as a country with its own distinct set of values and traditions in which social justice, fairness and equality feature strongly, and where there is an expectation that education should be shaped by these principles and values. Despite this, the most recent PISA report revealed that the attainment gap persists, and that this gap is large compared with some other countries (OECD, 2013).

The challenge of closing the gap in attainment

The challenges facing schools are many. In this paper, I focus on the challenge of closing the gap in attainment and on three key fields of interest, namely, student participation; home-school relationships; and behaviour and relationships within school. Each of these bodies of research offers a distinctive and, arguably, under-utilised point of entry to the debate about closing the gap in attainment. I will examine them in turn but first set out the challenge they aim to tackle and the nature of the 'gap'. According to a recent OECD report (2015),

> Scotland is similar to OECD averages or compares favourably on a range of social indicators. Housing is less crowded than across the OECD area as a whole; it is a relatively safe country; it is somewhat above the average for Internet broadband access; voting levels stand very near to the OECD average (not counting the 2014 referendum which galvanised such high interest levels); the Scottish population is relatively well educated.

Despite this, more than one in five children (210,000) children in Scotland live in poverty[1]. A recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies has predicted that this will rise by 100,00 to over one in four children by 2020 (Bellfield et al., 2015), with this same report reminding us that two thirds of children living in poverty are in a family where at least one adult is working. In the broader context, Scotland is a deeply unequal society, in which the wealthiest 10% of households own 900 times the wealth of the least wealthy 10% (ONS, 2011). In terms of the impact on educational attainment, there is strong evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland surveys referred to earlier, that children living in the most deprived areas in Scotland are '6 to 13 months behind their peers in problem-solving at age 5; 11 to 18 months behind their peers in expressive vocabulary at age 5; and around two years of schooling behind their peers at age 15' (Scottish Government, 2014a: 5). By the time that children leave primary school (usually around age 11), those in receipt of free school meals (the criteria for free school meals are the same across the UK; it is often used a proxy indicator of disadvantage) are estimated to be significantly behind their more affluent peers (Spencer, 2015). The challenges are great and it is clear that education alone cannot ameliorate the impact of poverty. Nonetheless, it also evident that schools have a pivotal role to play.

It is therefore important to seek some illumination of the term itself 'closing the gap'. Both Ball in the UK (Ball, 2013) and Ladson-Billings in the USA (2006), have challenged use of the term and helpfully problematized the narrowness of its focus.

Scottish Government defines this gap in terms of 'reducing the link between deprivation and poor educational attainment in Scotland' in its National Performance Framework strategy (Scottish

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[1] The EU, UK and Scottish Government definition is used here: a child is defined as living in poverty if they live a household with less than 60% of the median household income. This definition is currently under review by the UK Government.

Government, 2016). However, defining the link more precisely is hindered by the lack of robust comparative data. This lack is a significant problem to research on educational inequalities, including any definition of the attainment gap; and of how schools might define notions such as 'progress' for individuals and groups. Evidence from international studies, from the Growing Up in Scotland survey and from the large body of literature on education and inequality in the UK give sufficient grounds for concern overall, but at national level, the evidence base is uneven, an issue also noted clearly by OECD in its recent report, 'Improving Schools in Scotland' (2015). There is, for example, currently no reliable assessment of Scotland's most recent curriculum policy development, Curriculum for Excellence, and its aim of providing what it calls a 'broad general education'. Its emphasis on teacher professionalism, increasing choice, diversity and innovation at local level and a move away from national testing have made it difficult for schools to provide evidence to stakeholders, including parents, on the progress of children in the system. While the Government's commitment to introduce standardised assessment may address this in part, the lack of robust comparative data and theoretical support for this direction of travel are now a significant issue (Ball 2013).

Murphy (2014) brings a clarity to this question when he argues that there is no 'gap' as such but a direct relationship at every level of society between socio-economic status (as defined by SIMD[2]) and examination attainment. The consequent 'gap', for example, between the 5th and 1st deciles matters much less than that between the ninth and fifth deciles because most of those in the ninth deciles are poor, whereas very few of those in the first to fifth deciles are poor. He defines the

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[2] SIMD = Scottish Indicator of Multiple Deprivation. The SIMD identifies small area concentrations of multiple deprivation across all of Scotland in a consistent way. It allows effective targeting of policies and funding where the aim is to wholly or partly tackle or take account of area concentrations of multiple deprivation. The SIMD ranks small areas (called datazones) from most deprived (ranked 1) to least deprived (ranked 6505).

challenge not in terms of 'closing the gap' but 'raising the bar', ensuring that every young person, particularly those from the least advantaged backgrounds, reaches a minimum educational and income threshold, beyond which they can participate with full agency in adult society. This assessment offers a timely and helpful route through and beyond the rhetoric about 'the gap' and one worth utilising more widely.

However, there is an added dilemma for Scottish education here. It has long supported universalist approaches; the idea of all children attending their local catchment school, the principle of co-education and the comprehensive ideal. Efforts to raise attainment are often promoted, therefore, through universal rather than targeted approaches and many of the policy initiatives referred to above aim to support schools in general. While it is always necessary to avoid the stigmatisation which can arise from targeted intervention, there is growing recognition that publicly provided education, when poorly resourced, may perversely benefit affluent families more than poorer ones, and especially so in a climate of financial constraint on education and schools. Spencer's report for the Child Poverty Action Group, 'The Cost of the School Day' has recently revealed in stark detail the many small burdens for children living in poverty, emphasising the ways in which these affect the child before, during and after school; from 'getting dressed for school', 'learning at school', friendships at school', school trips', 'eating at school', 'school clubs', 'home learning', as well as coping with attitudes towards poverty itself (Spencer, 2015).

I am in complete support of public schooling but it is interesting to note the many indications of the ways in which more affluent parents purchase advantage, especially in a time of financial constraint in public schools. This 'purchasing power' can be seen in, for example, provision of access to high quality, leading edge digital technology, the employment of private tutors to give additional

support in preparation for the national exams which give access to higher education, purchase of expensive school trips which bring a range of tangible and intangible benefits, or by ensuring participation in after-school and extra-curricular activities which can enhance confidence and skills, but which may require expensive equipment or time not always available to children living in poor families. Reeves and Howard (2013) writing in the US context, refer to this power of affluent parents as the 'glass floor', while in the UK, McKnight (2015) has gone on to examine in depth the evidence for inter-generational 'opportunity hoarding', finding that affluent parents are more likely to be protected from downward mobility even when their cognitive skills would have predicted such downward movement. I would argue that the ability and willingness of middle class parents to pay for this educational safety net suggests that they often want to keep this level of advantage, despite a national avowal of commitment to social justice and equality.

It is worth considering then, whether universal provision, where it falls below an acceptable level, and in a climate of austerity, may constrain resources so significantly as to reduce the number of avenues through which to challenge inequality and raise attainment.

If improvements in schools result from the initiatives and approaches currently being promoted by Scottish Government, it is likely that student performance will increase for those already doing well, as well as (perhaps) for those who have been least well served by their schools in the past. This concern is raised by OECD (2015), and also in the authoritative retrospective analysis of Scottish education reforms of the first half of the twentieth century undertaken by Paterson and colleagues (2011). A recent individual submission (Scott, 2015) to the OECD's call for evidence on Curriculum for Excellence suggests a worrying downturn in attainment amongst lower attainers. It is likely then in

the current context of strong pressures to reduce public spending, the 'gap' then will not reduce and may indeed widen.

Finding new guidewires to close the gap?

When education policy nationally and internationally often seems concerned with improving international standing and with greater competitive edge, it is important that discussion about raising attainment keeps a clear view of the broader goals of education. Those who share the commitment of many Governments to national standardised assessment must be mindful that although such testing might bring about some desired improvements, it cannot explain whether this is because teachers feel under pressure to 'teach to the test' or because the quality of the teaching is so enriching and exciting that the students take such tests in their stride. It is important that a concentration on 'outputs', i.e. attainment levels, does not distract from concentration on the sources and mechanisms at issue, i.e. the inequality in 'inputs'. Those engaged in the debate in Scotland also need to continue to press to ensure that the increasing diversity at local level encouraged by the new Scottish school curriculum does not lead to increasing inequality.

It is a concern to keep sight of the broader goals of education and the challenge of inequality, that leads me to argue for more serious engagement with three bodies of literature which I believe are currently under-utilised or under-valued. They concern issues firstly, of parental involvement and engagement; secondly, student participation and thirdly, behaviour and relationships in school. In this paper I term these, 'Guidewires'; bodies of work that have the capacity to anchor, stabilise and connect thinking in debates that is currently often ideologically, rather than research, informed.

Pirrie and Hockings's review of the relationship between poverty, educational attainment and achievement in Scotland (2012) suggests that the following approaches can be effective in raising

attainment for children from the most disadvantaged families; 'rigorous monitoring and use of data, raising pupil aspirations using engagement/aspiration programmes, engaging parents (particularly hard-to-reach parents) and raising parental aspirations, developing social and emotional competencies, supporting school transitions, and providing strong and visionary leadership' (2012: 5). However, Murphy (2014), Cummings et.al. (2012) and MacBeath et al. (2007) all emphasise that there are no simple solutions but, rather, a need to consider a change in attitudes to certain key factors. The review by Cummings et. al. (2012) vigorously challenges the current widespread political and policy focus on *raising* aspirations in particular, but also points out the variable quality and reach of the research overall in this area, noting that 'there were almost no studies that tried to test the hypothesis that attitude change leads to impact on attainment' (2012: 4).

In arguing for increased attention to student participation, home-school relationships and behaviour and relationships in school, I am conscious of the criticisms often levelled at the evidence base of educational research (Lawn and Deary, 2008) that 'studies are often quick and micro in scope'. The OECD (2012) has noted the very low (one in ten) rate of evaluations to assess impact of interventions to improve international education systems, while a recent comprehensive review of the evidence in the UK on aspirations, attitudes and behaviour by Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) commented on the disparity between the large number of interventions aimed at addressing these issues and the much smaller body of theoretical support and empirical proof of the efficacy of such interventions. They argue that this lack of robust research,

> along with questionable assumptions about low aspirations among poorer children and parents, has supported a proliferation of 'hopeful' interventions with unknown effectiveness in enabling disadvantaged children to fulfil their ambitions (2012: 1).

Such 'questionable assumptions', about a need to 'raise aspirations' may represent a new version of victim blaming, reminding us of Ladson-Billings' call for us to consider the historical and cultural 'education debt' (2006) owed to some groups and communities. Importantly, though, Carter-Wall and Whitfield also suggest that one of the strongest, and perhaps, least well recognised and utilised body of evidence of relevance is on the positive impact of involving and engaging with parents, and I now turn to examine this issue in more detail.

Parental involvement and engagement: the first set of guidewires

Although engagement with families and communities is one of the key drivers identified in the National Improvement Framework for Raising Attainment for All referred to earlier (Scottish Government, 2016), its Strategic Plan largely represents a recycling of earlier aims regarding parental engagement which have not thus far been fully implemented. It is important to recognise that the aims themselves regarding parental engagement are good ones: acknowledging the central role of families in their children's educational progress, and identifying the need for greater involvement by schools and local authorities with parents. The Strategy talks of the need for plans that are 'co-created with parents' (Scottish Government, 2016: 15); of 'monitoring parental engagement with learning provision' and supporting schools to 'work with partners to develop family learning programmes' (Scottish Government, 2016: 14). It commits too, to providing accessible information through a refreshed parent focused website. The strategy further proposes use of parental satisfaction surveys, though of course there is no evidence that a survey will, in and of itself, improve attainment. The policy advice on working with parents is now ten years old (SEED, 2006). There are plans to update this guidance, but it remains to be seen whether new guidance and this strategy can

bring about the cultural shift needed to ensure that parental engagement takes its place front and centre in schools' plans for raising attainment.

Yet, the research, both national and international (see for example, Voorhis *et.al* 2013, Gorard and See 2013, Shute *et. al*. 2011) strongly suggests that such a shift is necessary rather than simply desirable, if the attainment of poorer children is to be addressed. Mannion et al. have (2015) noted that even in schools where student participation is strongest, relationships with parents and communities generally remain weak and so for example, contact between student councils and parent forums is extremely rare. While noting the absence of robust evidence overall, Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012)'s review advocates the development of interventions and support for innovative interventions which would address such issues. The earlier work of Goodman and Gregg (2010) offers some very helpful findings about poorer children and education, which I believe could refocus efforts to improve home-school relationships if used as principles or 'guidewires' for that work. Challenging an emphasis on the need to *raise* aspirations (see for example, Sharples et al., 2010) and reflecting on these findings, Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) argue that,

> what might look like 'low aspirations' may often be high aspirations that have been eroded by negative experience; and what may look like 'parental disengagement' may actually be the result of a high level of commitment to their child's education, which is not matched by the capacity to provide effective support or by the ability of schools to work effectively with parents (2012: 4).

There is strong evidence from Goodman and Gregg (2010) that 'helping poorer parents to believe in their own actions and efforts can lead to higher educational outcomes' (2010: 8) for their children. The main evidence for success here emerges from research on efforts to involve parents in

school, engage them in their children's learning, acknowledging their expertise and contributions and aligning home-school expectations. I want to suggest therefore that it would be productive to take this body of research as a starting point and look to ways to translate these high expectations and aspirations into changes within schools which can to help fulfil the ambitions of poorer children. This can be aided by the body of evidence on 'what works' in for example, evaluations of Sure Start initiatives in England.

However, bringing about these changes, will involve more than looking at 'what works'. It questions the prevalent discourse about the need to *raise* pupils' aspirations and replaces this with something much more challenging for education. School structures and systems are still too often predicated to a large extent on the idea of a need for change located within the child and the family. A new emphasis on authentic home-school partnership will require schools to redefine this, to consider the role they currently play in constructing and replicating parental disengagement and how they might then actively over-turn this. This has resource implications: it will take time, money and focus at a time when many schools and teachers already face enormous pressures from competing demands and priorities. It will also be important to consider that this may have implications in particular for some minority groups and those who are already multiply disadvantaged in education, an issue highlighted in previous research (Pirrie et al., 2009).

Student participation: the second set of guidewires

The potential for involving parents and recognition of the need to ask different questions about schools' engagement with parents and families, speaks to an important related concern about student engagement and participation. The findings discussed above indicate that there has been a misreading of some parental attitudes. There is a legitimate concern that there has been a parallel

misreading of some aspects of student 'disengagement'. In Scotland, the independence referendum

in 2014 gave 16 and 17 year olds the opportunity to vote for the first time. The energy and

commitment of young people in the political debates and activities became one of the most

prominent features of the referendum and foregrounded the potential for young people more

generally to engage positively in issues that matter to them and to believe in their capacity to shape

and influence its priorities.

By sharing such examples, by building on experiences such as the Independence Referendum, I

would argue that it becomes possible to alter the popular discourse and disrupt expectations about

children and young people as students in school. While teachers seek feedback on

lessons/programmes much more than formerly and many schools have developed sophisticated ways

of capturing student feedback on school life, the research in Scotland and the UK consistently reports

that students' feel their views are not sought, listened to or acted upon consistently (McCluskey et al.,

2013). Although all schools in Scotland have student councils, for example, studies repeatedly report

that only a minority have been involved in making important decisions. The UK Children's

Commissioners' Mid-term Report (2011) emphasised that increased student participation can lead to

improved outcomes. The corollary of this is the evidence in their report that negative outcomes for

children emerge when they are unable to have their voices heard (Keating and Janmaat 2016,

Robinson 2014). Harvard University's Achievement Gap Initiative reinforces this message with a

recent major study on engagement with 16,000 children and young people (Ferguson et al., 2015).

The challenge of closing the gap then, might be usefully reframed in terms of understanding

that some children with high aspirations may be frustrated by the lack of support to turn their

aspirations into concrete positive outcomes. Understood in this way opens up the possibilities for

new approaches to support. Recalling again the evidence from Carter-Wall and Whitfield on the 'questionable assumptions about low aspirations among poorer children and parents' (2012: 1), it is worth considering whether their findings about so-called parental disengagement have a parallel here; and that what might look like low pupil aspirations may be more accurately understood as high aspirations eroded by negative experience, and perhaps especially so in secondary schools.

Reframing the issue in this way may offer a further set of guidewires for policy approaches which can provide opportunities for reflective change in students and staff in schools, and for recognition of the strategic importance of improving the skills, confidence and active experience of young people in making decisions about their own lives within education. It offers schools a way to think again about the role played by the teacher, the class environment, school ethos, home, community, and the interactions of all these factors and how they shape attainment. Again, it would be important to ensure that the reframing is sensitive to the particular issues for children and young people who are the most often marginalised, stereotyped or pathologised in schooling through distinctions of social class but also, for example, by disability, gender, ethnic or linguistic background.

Improving behaviour and relationships in school: the third set of guidewires

Research has consistently pointed to the need for schools to pay attention to teacher-student and student-student relationships (see for example, PISA 2014, Public Health England 2014, James and Pollard 2011, Kane *et. al* 2007). Such relationships are important in themselves because they provide sound foundations for children and young people to learn about positive healthy, supportive relationships as part of their personal and social development. These relationships are also important because of the evidence that suggests they are fundamental to '*supporting participation, influencing*

change, and doing well' (Mannion et al., 2015: 2). Across the UK, recent years have seen a welcome reduction in rates of school suspension and exclusion for reasons of indiscipline and an improvement in teacher confidence in addressing difficult and disruptive behaviour (Munn et al., 2011).

However, the decreases in national exclusion rates have exposed more clearly the persistent and disproportionate rates of exclusion among some groups of children and young people (Department for Education, England, 2014), many of whom already experience serious disadvantage. My own work with colleagues has previously examined the need to distinguish between the most common recorded reasons for disciplinary exclusion (which at least on the face of it are often relatively minor) and the root causes of exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2015; McCluskey, 2008; Macleod et al., 2013). It continues to be the case that young people are more likely to be excluded if they are male, have low levels of academic achievement, live in poor housing, have no parent in work, are 'looked after', experience teenage parenthood, have mental health difficulties, physical and/or learning difficulties, have poor basic skills, or live in a household where there is substance misuse, domestic abuse or financial stress (see for example, Gazeley et.al., 2013). These factors frequently relate directly to experiences of poverty; the single most common determinant of attainment. According to a report from the Department of Work and Pensions (2012), if a young person aged 13–14 years old lives in a family with five or more of these problems, they are 36 times more likely to be excluded from school and to have contact with the police. The national body for young people in care in Scotland, Who Cares Scotland, has renewed its call for action, following publication of statistics that indicate that if children are entitled to free schools meals, if they have additional support needs and if they are also 'looked after', they are 13 times more likely to be excluded from school (Scottish Government, 2014b).

The decrease in rates of exclusion for indiscipline overall in the UK has, perhaps paradoxically then, laid open the underlying and unequal burden of exclusion on those already marginalized; revealing a picture that is of grave and continuing seriousness. A concern was raised earlier in this paper about the heightened impact of the 'glass floor' and 'opportunity hoarding' in times of austerity, along with the willingness of affluent parents to protect and advance the interests of their children. Given the increasing visibility of this issue, it is now incumbent on policy to consider how it can set priorities which aim to improve understanding of behaviour and relationships as an avenue to tackling rather than compounding inequalities in achievement. It is clear from the work of, for example, Lingard and colleagues in Queensland (2003) or Sosu and Ellis (2014) in Scotland, that attention to pedagogy, which takes full account of contexts and circumstances, must be central to closing the gap. Despite this evidence, there continues to be a distance between the national strategic level policy development on pedagogy, curriculum and assessment and policy on social and emotional needs and support. There are for example, separate national departments responsible for policy on teaching/curriculum issues and policy on behaviour, children's rights and relationships. This same separation is then often replicated at the levels of local authority and schools themselves, and so the evidence of the link between improving relationships in schools and the potential impact on rates of attainment is rarely examined. There are few studies which directly consider the link (an interesting exception is the work of Drewery (2016) in New Zealand). There are many more studies where findings suggest it would be worthwhile to examine more closely this connection between attainment and relationships in schools.

Conclusions

Efforts to close the gap in attainment but more importantly, to address the central problem of the link between poverty and attainment, have had too little impact thus far in many countries, including Scotland. This paper has acknowledged the unevenness of the evidence base, the lack of theoretical support and rigorous research, and the need for much greater research investment in this area; but it also draws attention to the need to work with the strongest body of evidence currently available and alongside this, a reorientation of policy that takes much stronger cognisance of this evidence.

I have suggested that there is significant untapped potential for change in three related but distinct bodies of work: parental engagement; student engagement and participation; and finally, behaviour and relationships in schools. Perhaps because these areas of research often have relatively low standing within educational research as a discipline, this evidence has not received the policy attention it merits and their contribution to closing the gap has been under-utilised to date.

I have argued that a reconsideration of the research base on parental engagement has strong potential and it is therefore central to my proposal of a new set of guidewires for tackling the gap in attainment. Reviewing my own and others' work suggests a need to move on from talk of raising aspirations, to think more deeply about cultural, historical and social barriers to achievement, and ways we can offer the kinds of support that can help translate parent and pupil high aspirations into high achievement and avoid high aspirations becoming eroded by negative experience. Secondly, I have suggested that there is much to be gained from mobilising the evidence of the impact on learning from increased, authentic student engagement or participation. Thirdly, I called for a re-examination of schools' approaches to troublesome and troubled pupil behaviour, again asking how we can better use the lessons from research, including that on restorative practices, to rebuild

understanding of student behaviour and relationships in productive ways that tackle the gap and raise the bar. I have discussed these questions in relation to one country context but suggest that these questions resonate with the dilemmas facing many other education systems and contexts. Education continues to fail the most disadvantaged children. These three bodies of knowledge offer new guidewires for challenging this.

Acknowledgement

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