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## **Poverty and Policy Advocacy**

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How are increasing levels of child poverty playing out in the four UK nations, in relation to education? How do the different educational policy contexts across the UK, and different educational structures, affect the curriculum and pedagogy? What flexibility do they allow teachers, in engaging with children and young people in marginalised groups, including those who are growing up in poverty?

The starting point of this BERA Research Commission is the fact that inequality is growing in the UK, with child poverty increasing as a direct result of Government policy. Figures from bodies such as the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission<sup>1</sup> show that across each UK jurisdiction, child poverty is rising, and it is possible to see exactly the point at which child poverty went from being incrementally reduced year on year, to beginning to grow.

Following the financial crash of 2008, the UK Government introduced some tax benefits that protected families and from the worst effects of the economic downturn. From 2013 onwards, Osborne's austerity politics removed these benefits and child poverty has been rising.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2015>

The situation throughout the UK is that although education has long been a devolved power in Scotland, and has been in Wales since devolution in 1999 and in Northern Ireland since the Northern Ireland Assembly was established in 1998, none of these jurisdictions have tax-raising powers. This means that they are limited in terms of spending, and they cannot redress the rolling-back of the welfare state which has been a result of austerity.

There is clear evidence that poverty has an effect on educational attainment. Yet the picture across the UK is not uniform in this respect. Despite the limitations on their powers, across the UK jurisdictions there is still flexibility in curriculum and pedagogy, enabling teachers, to different degrees, to connect with the life-worlds of marginalised groups, except in England. Importantly, recent curriculum reforms in England have restricted what is understood by knowledge, that is, what schools are allowed to teach, and that restriction has disproportionately affected marginalised groups – groups whose cultures, ethnic backgrounds, class or gender mean that they have been given the least support in accessing academic knowledge. This includes children and young people who are growing up in poverty.

### **The work on Poverty and Policy Advocacy**

This Research Commission proceeded by organising seminars across the UK, which collected evidence from practitioners, policy-makers and academics who work on poverty, education and schooling. The methodology of the seminars was carefully designed as a combination of the

top-down and the bottom-up, eliciting information to enable cross-jurisdiction comparisons to be made, but also providing an opportunity for attendees to raise issues that they consider to be important, and thus allowing themes to emerge. If policy is considered simply at the level of the policy-maker (by looking at the White Papers that are published, for example), other views can be excluded: especially the views of other groups, who are differently positioned in society, and who may have different priorities and different constraints.

This Research Commission was also concerned to hear the voices of young people themselves, and a Community Forum was held in a community school in Manchester. The Research Commission worked over several months prior to the Community Forum, organising workshops in schools in areas of Manchester with low socio-economic status, and with a diverse ethnic mix. By taking part in the workshops, young people were given help in articulating their concerns.

### **Emerging findings**

The findings of this Research Commission show how the school systems in the four UK nations vary in their ability to respond to child poverty.

**England** is in many respects the outlier: in England the state has greater direct control of curriculum and pedagogy than in any of the other jurisdictions. Within England the picture is very much a fragmented one in terms of how schools attempt to deal with child poverty. In the past, schools were able, to some extent, to work with social services, with the criminal justice system or with charities – the school could bring those groups together through Local

Authority structures to support young people living in poverty. But this is no longer possible. What happens now is that academy-type schools have to find the support and resources to deal with complex issues relating to child poverty that previously would have been directed to them through their Local Authorities. Many of these schools are now having to commission support for themselves, and as they do so they are reaching out to the many hybrid groups who are emerging in the space opened up by the marketisation of education.

The Cameron and May Conservative Governments have stimulated the market, believing that the more schools can commission their own support, the better the deals that will be made. But what this Research Commission has found is that those who previously held the knowledge about how to help marginalised groups have either been disbanded or starved of money. The system now is much more fractured and in general the pupils who are not being catered for adequately are those who require specialist expertise. The contracting out of Local Authorities educational services accelerated with the Coalition Government of 2010. There is a question now as to whether some of these services need to be brought back in-house.

The distinguishing feature of the situation in **Scotland** is the fact that the education profession still has ownership of curriculum and pedagogy. There are intermediaries between schools and the state, which are recognised as professional bodies, and which still have a strong understanding of teachers and related professionals – bodies such as the General Teaching Council of Scotland, for example. At the same time, Local Authorities still have significant control in making sure that there are enough schools, enough teachers, and enough places for pupils. Scotland has not seen the major swings from radical to

conservative educational approaches and back again and as a result it still has structures that have retained the confidence of politicians and the people.

This means that educators have a whole infrastructure in place to support them. The Scottish government has also recently introduced specific policies for tackling child poverty: policies that are aimed not just at helping schools, but families also – they recognise that poverty cannot be solved by the school alone. There is a joined-up, multi-agency way of working, supported by a politics that is much more ideologically underpinned by the notion of social justice, rather than the free market.

The system in **Wales** is the most radical at the moment. At the time of devolution, the Welsh education minister had attempted to create a distinctive education system with ‘clear red water’ between Cardiff and Westminster. The major part of this to have survived is the early years curriculum, which is radical, well researched and well thought-through.

However, heightened political publicity about the PISA league tables led to the Welsh system increasingly aping what was happening in England with, for example, an increasing concentration on literacy and numeracy. Now there is a third wave, with a very radical new curriculum that is being developed bottom-up, starting with the teachers on the ground guided by the Donaldson Review (2015). Potentially this could provide teachers with the kinds of curricula and pedagogic flexibility required to support children and young people living with post-industrial poverty.

Northern Ireland (NI) has a complex educational system structure with a statutory curriculum somewhat similar in structure to that in England and Wales but which has

progressively diverged since 2007. However, NI suffers from longstanding educational inequality and it is sectarian problems that are the real bugbear of the education system. Historically, Northern Ireland has the most divided education system: not only are there largely Catholic (Maintained), Protestant (Controlled) schools and integrated schools, but also grammar and secondary modern schools with academic selection at age 11 still firmly in place. Annually NI has some of the best results in high stakes tests in the UK; however, when it comes to those who do achieve poorly, NI reflects the worst results with the proportion of young people leaving with few or no qualifications largely unchanged for the last decade. And this is doubled among those young people entitled to Free School Meals (FSM). Although there is a raft of government policies that aim to contribute to a reduction in the attainment gap between those children who are poor and those who are from wealthier homes, the attainment gap persists. Problems relating to social class and religion are endemic in the system and until the current political stalemate is resolved and with the political will to change the system, working class Protestant boys, in particular, are likely to continue to do much worse educationally than others.

## References

Donaldson, J. (2015). *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Government