Ivinson, G., Beckett, L., Egan, D., Leitch, R., McKinney, S. and Thompson, I. (2017) Poverty policy and practice themes. *Research Intelligence*, 134, pp. 25-26.

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Deposited on: 22 January 2018

Poverty Policy and Practice themes

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The following six themes have emerged from the Research Commission's seminars and Community Forum.

- First, Britain is increasingly a **divided nation**. The rise of child poverty, and the divide between those who have and have not, in a sense is outside of education, but the context is hugely important. The picture is one of increasing disparities, which can be mapped across the different annual State of the Nation reports from the Commission for Social Mobility and Child Poverty. Within those reports there is detailed information about household income, for example, and also about educational attainment.

- In terms of **definitions of poverty**, the measures that are often used are the Treasury's equations of absolute and relative poverty, which are based on household income. Part of the Research Commission's work, however, has been to consider more social science-based ways of looking at poverty, which challenge the idea that poverty can be measured just through household income. Children in a wealthy house can still be starved of what they need with no control over their own lives: household income is a crude measure of poverty. In addition, while the central government in the UK suggests that schools use free school meals as a proxy measure of poverty, this is also an

imperfect indicator of disadvantage (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). We know that many

families who live in poverty will avoid the stigma of claiming free school meals. The

Education sector needs to work with the more nuanced definitions of poverty that are

available in the social sciences, such as those outlined by, for example, Danny Dorling

(2011) and Tess Ridge (2009).

- As for **poverty trends**, the pattern is clear: up until 2013, levels of child poverty were

  decreasing incrementally across each jurisdiction, partly as a result of the 2010 Poverty

  Act and the mechanisms around it. Not only did the Act set the goal of eliminating child

  poverty by 2020, but each jurisdiction had to present an annual report to its Assembly

  or Parliament, using the measures that had been devised by the Treasury, to

  demonstrate how far they had progressed towards reaching that goal. But in 2015/6,

  when the UK moved from the Cameron-Clegg Coalition to the Cameron Conservative

  government, 'child poverty' was removed from the remit and the title changed to 'The

  Commission for Social Mobility'. As a result there was no longer the requirement to

  report figures specifically on child poverty and there is now not a body that is

  responsible for doing so. At the same time, there have been increasing attempts to

  define poverty not in terms of family income, but in terms of other factors such as

  involvement with criminal justice, or educational attainment: we are seeing a clustering

  of factors together. These are major changes, which were taking place just as this

  Research Commission was holding its seminars.

- The **lived experience** of children and young people living in poverty is often not sufficiently understood, or recognised (Ivinson et al., in press). Work that gets at the fine-grained experience of poverty needs to be more widely known: there is some excellent research, for example, which uses ethnographic data to show that children in poverty suffer because of the stigma attached to not having the right uniforms or equipment, or not being able to pay for school trips.

- In terms of the relationship between **gender, educational underachievement and disadvantage**, there is still a strong need to recognise the ways in which social structures and social organisations are still to some extent patriarchal. The labour of caring, for example, which is often carried out by women, is still often overlooked and yet it is hugely important for children. In terms of poverty, the focus needs to expand beyond current measures to consider the needs of young people and children. For example, rather than stigmatising a single mother with no job who is struggling to bring up her children, better measures could help us get beyond neoliberal and individualising discourses of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

- Finally, there is the need to bring back critical and informed debate about **curriculum diversity**. Public and policy understandings of curricula and pedagogy are at an all time low in the UK, eclipsed by Government control over narrowly defined 'age and stage' representations of curricular especially in England. A crucial question is whether narrowly defined subject knowledge can be taught in ways that enable children living in

poverty to recognise themselves as legitimate knowers. Curricula are different across each jurisdiction: some give teachers a greater chance of engaging with the cultural reference points that marginalised groups have. Wales could be at the forefront in this regard with teachers leading the development of a new curriculum based on areas of learning and experience rather than subjects. Northern Ireland teachers, too, have a statutory requirement to develop curricular activities to explore issues of social justice and the impact of inequalities at local as well as global levels. In Scotland, again, teachers are empowered: good teachers who know the local area, and who are aware of local issues, can engage with children living in poverty.

This is so much more difficult in England, however. Teachers in England may see that children in poverty need additional support, yet they are driven by an academic curriculum that tends to organise knowledge into stage- and level-based expectations strongly informed by inflexible assessment structures and judgements of teachers' work. In some schools, teachers' pay can even be dependent on getting children through exams. Once the teaching profession becomes controlled and regulated to this extent, they can find it difficult to speak out. This emerged clearly through this Research Commission's seminars: whereas in Wales teachers were able to talk about inequality without fearing for their jobs, in England it was much more difficult. There is a need for further research to understand more fully how and why management structures in some schools in England have cowed the teaching profession and prevented teachers from being able to speak about the effects of child poverty as they experience it.

Recommendations

The Research Commission concludes by making a series of recommendations to BERA, to continue this work on education and child poverty:

1. BERA should organise and host a major public conference in order to articulate the problem of poverty and education in a clear and well-evidenced way.

2. BERA should commission a literature review of poverty and policy advocacy, looking especially at evidence of what works in terms of classroom interventions to help children and young people living in poverty.

3. BERA should endorse and support the pilot studies that have been developed from the Research Commission's work, studies which are looking especially at the knowledge gaps which can affect policy in this area.

4. BERA should include a policy officer and media officer in its office staff, to make educational research more widely beneficial.

5. BERA should develop a structure for organisational deputations, to help extend the reach of the educational research community.

Future and next steps

The networks that this Research Commission has helped to establish are ongoing. This has made us aware of how important it is to develop networks that can hold together academic knowledge and policy understanding, and that can help bridge the gap between the academy and the life-world of people. This is a question of who holds knowledge: in the past, knowledge has tended to reside in different jurisdictions and different universities, but to understand policy problems in a more nuanced way, and create new ways of thinking about policy solutions, networks are essential. The network created by this Research Commission will continue to ask how we bring expertise from the academies together to resonate with the real-life experience of teachers, young people and families living in poverty, and have a dialogue with politicians, power-brokers and policy-makers.

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