



McKinney, S. J. (2016) Poverty proofing schools. *Researching Education Bulletin*, 6, pp. 8-11.

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Deposited on: 25 September 2017

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Poverty Proofing for Schools. **By Stephen McKinney**

There have been a number of high profile international initiatives to preserve the right to the essentials in life and to combat poverty over the last sixty years. These include The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Millennium Goals (2000) and, most recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (2015). Goal 1 of the Sustainable Development goals aims to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce poverty by half by 2030. This is a laudable ambition as poverty affects many aspects of life including growth and development, security, health and the education of children and young people. The impact of poverty on the education of children and young people in Scotland is a major concern for a wide range of public bodies including the government, local authorities, charities, educational agencies and, of course, schools. In the last year two important documents have been produced. First, the EIS document *Face up to Child Poverty* (2015) and the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland report: *The Cost of the School Day* (2015). This short paper will explore *Face up to Child Poverty* and compare this to an earlier EIS document, *Poverty and Education Breaking down the Barriers* published in 1998. These two documents have been produced at certain points in time, within specific contexts and with different aims and purpose. It is, however, instructive to draw a comparison between the two documents to map similarities and the changes in emphasis between 1998 and 2015. The paper will be divided into four sections: (1) the context; (2) the impact of poverty (3) the cost of schooling and (4) recommended action.

(1) The context of *Poverty and Education Breaking down the Barriers* includes a robust support and defense of the comprehensive schooling system that has removed the injustice of the previous selective schooling system and has helped to narrow the gap in attainment. The document claims that comprehensive schools are popular with the public and any failure is attributed to the schools being under resourced – the result of ‘savage cuts in public funding’ (p.6). There is also a discussion about the impact of parental choice in schooling and that this has caused a new model of social segregation in urban areas as many parents exercise their choice to ensure their children do not attend schools that serve deprived areas (p.20). The context of *Face up to Child Poverty* is less focused on the school system and more focused on the challenges of a contemporary society that is characterized by high living costs, a low wage economy and severe changes to welfare (p.3). The document states that 222,000 children are living in poverty and that, under the present austerity measures, this could increase by 50% within five years. The document also warns of the dangers of low-income poverty and the emergence of ‘no-income’ poverty, a consequence of recent sanctions that can result in the suspension of benefits.

(2) The discussion of the impact of Poverty in *Poverty and Education* is very interesting. It is claimed that the term *absolute poverty* is no longer used and the key terms are *relative poverty* and *social exclusion* (p.8). Nevertheless the document refers to the effects of absolute poverty when it discusses the choices that families have to make about essentials in life (p.13). It is striking how contemporary the document appears as it outlines those who are most vulnerable (including lone parents and disabled) and the advocacy of multi-agency approaches to combat disadvantage (p.8, p.10). The document devotes considerable attention to the issue of adequate housing that is ‘warm, well insulated’ and where there is space for studying and

homework (p.16). The document draws attention to the number of children who do not experience adequate housing and the significant number of children who belong to homeless families (p.16). The document comments on rural poverty and the challenges faced by those in deprivation who live in rural communities, e.g. cost of transport which can affect access to Further Education (p.18-19). The impact of Poverty in *Face up to Child Poverty* is a key feature of the document and the impact on schooling will be discussed below in section three. One of the disturbing points raised by the document is the growing problem of child hunger. The report states that the Red Cross has been involved in the distribution of food in Scotland for the first time since the Second World War. The report also points out that there has been a 400% rise in the use of food-banks in the last year and a significant number of those accessing these services are in employment.

(3) The cost of schooling is highlighted in section 3 of *Poverty and Education*. In particular, the document discusses the cost of school uniforms and school trips within the context of families who have very limited financial resource. The cost of schooling and poverty proofing for schools is the main focus of *Face up to Child Poverty*. There is extensive discussion on the costs of schools uniform, equipment and resources (and the effect on completing homework), school trips and charity and fund raising activities. The costs of school uniform can be very difficult for some families to meet and clothing grants may not be adequate (p.6). The replacement of worn items of school uniform is costly and children from low-income families can have incomplete uniforms. The report points out that families living in poverty are often unable to buy even the most basic of equipment, paper, pens, colour pencils and glue and this has an impact on the successful completion of homework activities (p.8, p.10). School trips, even those that appear to be relatively cheap, can place great pressure on some family budgets as can charity and fund raising activities that require some monetary contribution (p. 12, p. 14).

(4) The recommended action in *Poverty and Education* is a series of general points in the conclusion that consolidate some of the earlier issues: necessity of closing the poverty gap; being aware of the complexity of poverty and desisting from blame; resisting the use of crude measurements of attainment and inclusion of achievement; funding models for councils must be changed and comprehensive education must be authentically inclusive. The recommended action in *Face up to Child Poverty* is a series of action points for EIS members in schools that are targeted at local intervention. This takes the form of 'Advice to Members' and 'Poverty Proofing'. The Advice to Members includes, for example, discussion of school/College policies and, at the classroom level, sensitivity to the fact that some pupils will be experiencing the effects of hunger in the school day. The document lists signs of hunger that can be detected in children and young people. The Poverty Proofing includes advice on referrals for children who are hungry, ensuring that these children access all available support (such as breakfast clubs) and that families are advised on all forms of aid including food aid.

The two documents raise awareness of many serious issues. They also provoke many profound questions about the challenges that families on low income face on a daily basis and the difficulties they, and their children, face in negotiating the hidden costs of school education. There are some recent success stories highlighting interventions that are helping families, children and young people to overcome disadvantage and

progress in school (McKinney et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2014 ; McKendrick, 2015) Nevertheless, the serious issues and challenges identified above cannot be ignored and must remain at the forefront of discussion, debate and research into school education.

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