

# People and Work Unit

## Save the Children Wales

### **Beyond the School Gate: Education, Poverty and Policy in Wales**

Feedback Report

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Uned **Pobl a Gwaith**

1. **Introduction:** In October 2006, the People and Work Unit (PWU) was commissioned by Save the Children in Wales to review the links between education, poverty and policy in Wales. This feedback report summarises the study's analysis of the link between poverty and poor educational attainment and highlights some of the implications for policy. The report cites some, but by no means all, of the research reviewed by the study.
2. **Education and Poverty:** within Wales, since the mid 1990s, rates of child poverty have fallen and educational attainment has improved. However, gains in attainment by children from poorer families have been largely matched by gains by children from more affluent families, so a significant gap remains (Kenway, et al, 2005) and poverty remains "the biggest single indicator of low educational achievement" in the UK (HCSES, 2003)
3. **What's the link?** There has been a significant amount of research undertaken throughout the UK in order to try to understand why on average, children from poorer families, do much worse at school than their more affluent peers. One of the key challenges is trying to make sense of this mass of research and evidence (cf. Raffo, et al, 2006). We used the three key factors that shape children and young people's capacity to succeed in education as one way of making sense of all the research. The factors are:
  - Children and young people's personal capabilities, comprising the classic 'academic' skills, such as literacy, numeracy, thinking and reasoning skills and a wider suite of 'social and emotional skills' (HM Treasury, 2007) that have been described as 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1995);
  - The quality of the opportunities and services they can access, most notably schools and colleges (Lupton, 2005), but also social and sporting activities and amenities (IPPR, 2006) and other public services such as health, housing and social services (Jones, 2005; SEU, 2004); and
  - The support of other people, primarily parents (Feinstein, et al, 2004), but also to some extent peers and professionals such as Youth, Education Welfare and Social Workers (Jones, 2005).
4. In our analysis, the three factors are linked. For example, to make good use of opportunities such as school, children and young people typically need support at

home, good basic skills and emotional intelligence. For example, if we imagine Chris and Richard both go to the same school. Chris enters the school gates with strong academic skills and emotional intelligence. As a consequence he does well at school, finds it easy to forge friendships and build constructive relationships with teachers. At home, his parents value his schooling and have the capacity to help with homework and to buy in additional resources. Chris enjoys and thrives at school. In contrast, Richard walks through the same school gates with much weaker academic skills and emotional intelligence. As a consequence he struggles at school, finds it difficult to make friends, making him feel lonely, isolated and unsupported. He may be bullied and struggles to get on with teachers, often eliciting negative responses from them. At home, his parents, whose own experiences of school were also negative, sympathise and maybe even tacitly condone his truancy. Richard dislikes and struggles at the same school.

5. The framework reflects work on protective factors developed by Ingrid Schoon, John Bynner and others (e.g. Schoon, 2006; Schoon & Bynner, 2003) and much of the thinking underpinning the recent HM Treasury review of policy for children and young people, with its focus upon enhancing support and emotional and social skills (HM Treasury, 2007). The framework is also versatile and robust enough to be used to better understand outcomes for other vulnerable groups (e.g. disabled children, children from some Black and Minority Ethnic Communities, Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Children). However, the framework can only help us understand capacity; it tells us nothing about motivation *per se*, which generally means considering the role of culture in shaping aspirations and self-efficacy.
6. **What does this mean for policy?** The framework suggests that trying to close the gap in attainment by concentrating on investing in schools (i.e. improving opportunities) may not be enough; we also need to think about how we can strengthen children and young people's capabilities and enhance the support they can access. Moves in this direction, such as Flying Start and the Foundation Phase, curriculum reforms and Learning Pathways 14-19 are therefore all welcome. But the analysis suggests that more may still need to be done.

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