

The business of eradicating poverty in schools

Wales Centre for Equity in Education

By Dr Christala Sophocleous and Natalie Macdonald

The Wales Centre for Equity in Education is a national policy and applied research centre, led by Professor David Egan. We develop knowledge and understanding of the extent, causes and effects of inequities in educational achievement and of how to tackle the challenges associated with them. Our work is underpinned by a commitment to promote social justice and inclusion in a way that supports the sustainable development of an equitable, fit-for-purpose education system for future generations in Wales and beyond.

We aim to make a significant impact on reducing educational inequalities in Wales by working at national, regional and local levels to bring about change through evidence based developments in policy and practice. The centre, a joint initiative between the University of Wales and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, was established in 2013. The centres' work covers all sectors within the education system, but having recently welcomed 3 new staff, we are now busy developing more focused work streams. These include:

- work with families and communities;
- early years;
- poverty and schools;
- digital inclusion; and
- ethnic minority communities

Here Natalie Macdonald, who leads our work on early years, shares some of her thoughts on leadership in the early years.

The Early Years and Schools

Securing equity in education had been a long-term goal of the Welsh Government evident throughout their policies, guidelines and initiatives. Currently, around 20% of people in Wales live in deep poverty (Egan, forthcoming 2016; Mathers and Smees, 2014). The impact of poverty on learners' attainment has been largely evidenced and is usually measured in terms of tracking and comparing the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those who are not, the use of FSM or not as an indicator of poverty is not without its critics but is the most commonly used indicator. The current gap in attainment is significant standing at 16.3 % points using the Foundation Phase Indicators (FPI) between FSM pupils and non FSM pupils for (Welsh Government, 2015). One of the key priorities of the Welsh Government is to eradicate child poverty in Wales by 2020 (WG 2014a). But how do we do it?

Research has shown that a key driver in reducing the impact of poverty is quality leadership (Egan, 2007); this is true for schools, pre-schools, the maintained and non-maintained sectors. The new joint inspection framework for non-maintained settings recognises the quality and standards of leadership as a crucial element in running a good provision. A third of the assessment is focused on

this issue, with both ESTYN (Wales' inspectorate for Schools) and CSSIW (Care and Social Services Inspectorate of Wales) placing emphasis on efficient and good quality leadership.

The draft ten-year workforce plan for the Early Years, Childcare and Play Workforce in Wales (WG 2014b) places strong, expert leadership as a central element of improving the early years' sector. It focuses on the qualifications, continuing professional development and career pathways of the early years workforce, stressing the critical importance of developing leaders. Indeed, recent research has indicated that graduate leadership in the early years' provisions has a positive impact on the quality of the early years provision narrowing the gap in quality between areas of multiple deprivation and more affluent areas (Mathers and Smees, 2014).

This emphasis on leadership is echoed within local and government initiatives seeking to reduce the impact of poverty in education; strong leadership skills, pedagogy and a high level of education are essential. Within the Welsh Government's Flying Start initiative, managers must be qualified to a level 5 Diploma in Children's Care Learning and Development (WG, 2013a) and Continuous Professional Development over a wide-ranging area is mandatory. Programmes such as Teach First and Initial Teacher Training recognise the need for developing teachers specifically trained to deal with issues raised by the impact of poverty. Teach First provide an intensive leadership development training programme for top graduates, designed to help place excellent, inspirational teachers and professionals in schools with the most challenging circumstances (Teach First, accessed 24/9/2015)

Effective management and leadership of any educational setting require a multitude of skills, knowledge and expertise. Knowledge of education alone is no longer enough. Leaders must be skilled in business, marketing, funding, diplomacy, public relations and community engagement to provide an inclusive, productive and financially viable institution. Many aspirational teachers are now looking to additional Postgraduate qualifications to further their careers and skills such as the MA in Education and the MBA in Education Management offered at UWTSU; as well as the prerequisite leadership courses such as the NVQ level 5 in Children's Care Learning and Development and the NPQH for teachers (National Professional Qualification for Headship).

As the Sutton Trust point out, a well-trained early years workforce is essential to closing the gap between children from poorer homes and their peers. The commitment to early years' practitioners professional development and leadership skills is central to the Welsh Government's aim to eradicate the inequity in education by 2020.

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Natalie Macdonald MA is a researcher with the Wales Centre for Equity in Education, looking at Policy, Practice and Research. With a primary focus on early years' provision, pedagogy, additional needs, and the impact of poverty on attainment, qualifications and professional development for the childcare workforce in Wales. Natalie has over seven years' experience of working within Flying Start and primary school environments, particularly in areas of multiple deprivation.

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Research and policy role exploring the ways in which families and communities support the educational attainment of children and young people.

I am currently exploring the ways in which families and communities support the education of their children. I am interested in how staff from different professional backgrounds (education, community development and social care) work together to support the learning of children, families and communities. This work connects to an interest in place based policy, and the extent to which school / community partnerships can serve as the drivers of change, in terms of 'closing the education attainment gap' and contributing to wider anti-poverty policies.

