

# A review of research on the links between education and poverty

Findings  
Informing change

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There is widespread agreement that poverty and poor educational outcomes are related but there are competing explanations as to why this should be. This study identifies the thinking behind different approaches and the implications for policy.

## Key points

- The relationship between poverty and education is very complex. The research indicates a corresponding need for extensive and complex policy interventions if the established relationship between poverty and poor educational outcomes is to be disturbed. There are no specific problems which can be fixed by either a 'magic bullet' or 'scatter gun' approach.
- Studies tend to fall into one of three groups, focusing on:
  - individuals;
  - immediate social contexts, such as the family, community or school; and
  - underlying social structures and inequality.
- Initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, Connexions, Sure Start, Educational Maintenance Allowance and full service extended schools focus mainly on immediate social factors and the problems these cause directly for individuals and communities. These interventions have been undertaken in a piecemeal fashion and so far have had only a very partial impact in breaking the link between poverty and poor educational attainment.
- The researchers conclude that breaking the link between education and poverty demands a change in underlying structures and power relations and a coherent set of integrated and multi-level interventions. The issues facing policy-makers are:
  - how to make multiple interventions coherent;
  - how to sequence them chronologically; and
  - how to prioritise the most effective or most important.

## The research

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# Background

This review examines research which explicitly addresses the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes. It identifies a framework that organises studies of the link between education and poverty around three different levels:

- the individual
- immediate social contexts
- broader social structures and inequality

The most fundamental difference between studies at these levels appears to be what counts as 'good education'. The review identifies two broad perspectives: 'functionalist' and 'socially critical'.

## The 'functionalist' perspective

Research taking this perspective assumes that education plays an important part in the proper functioning of society but that these supposed benefits often do not materialise for individuals and groups from poorer backgrounds.

### *The individual focus*

These studies highlight concerns about individual identity and actions and about notions of hereditary differences, particularly IQ levels:

- The individual is seen as having high levels of choice. This approach recognises the importance of mentoring programmes to provide opportunities for broadening networks of influence for young people.
- Some research focuses on notions of inherited capability and intelligence that pre-ordains an individual's ability to succeed in society. These inherited capabilities mean individuals have few opportunities to improve the position into to which they are born. This approach has been heavily criticised methodologically, theoretically and morally.

### *Immediate social context*

These studies examine the social and cultural effects that peer groups, families and neighbourhoods have on young people and their understanding of, aspiration towards, and capability within schools. The studies also look at how schooling and other public services have aided or constrained educational achievement. The main themes in this work are:

- Poor neighbourhoods are characterised by a lack of employment and effective public services that is likely to affect self-esteem and a lack of resources that results in poor health and diet. All of these taken together affect the ability of families to support young people through education.
- Different neighbourhoods and communities can provide different levels of social and cultural capital. These can alleviate some material aspects of poverty and improve opportunities for educational success for certain groups of young people.
- Effective parenting is central to young people's educational success. This is linked to the educational aspirations of parents, support and stimulation for young people in the home, secure and stable home environments and participation within school.
- Schools can make a difference in 'challenging' areas. This is heavily influenced by the make-up of schools, the constraints that poverty exerts on the schools, the capabilities of teachers and the nature of educational markets in such areas.
- Improved public sector service delivery can improve access to and achievement within school but professional and organisational boundaries constrain effective multi-agency working.

## Broader social structures

These studies tend to see the relationship between poverty and education as resulting from underlying social structures (though, of course, individual characteristics and immediate social contexts also have an impact). Many analyse the impact of globalisation and the resulting forms of social exclusion. This is reflected in aspects of 'ghettoisation', health inequalities, high levels of unemployment, poor housing and poor infrastructure for such individuals and communities. Together these factors are linked to, and compound, poor educational attainment.

### *Integrating explanations*

Some studies integrate these different levels in their analysis:

- Studies examine how – taken together – particular variables create risk or resilience in the lives of young people and consequently their ability to engage with education actively.
- Research highlights particular risk factors such as maternal depression, violent neighbourhoods or

negative peer group socialising. Some research identifies moderating factors, particularly the development of a warm caring relationship with a significant adult or within a caring community. Other studies examine how, more indirectly, factors such as parents' educational qualifications can result in their children attaining particular levels of educational achievement.

- Such studies are complemented by early child development research that focuses on the importance of these issues in early childhood and recognises aspects of neurobiology. This reflects the more sophisticated work undertaken by geneticists who have examined environmental impact and, in particular, how poor environments can alter capability biologically.

## The 'socially critical' perspective

Research taking this perspective assumes that education is potentially beneficial but that the ability to engage with economic and social developments is itself inherently inequitable and that education in its current form reflects unequal distributions of power and resource. Since research from this perspective tends to be socially based, there is little which focuses primarily on individuals. Likewise, there are few studies from this perspective which integrate these different levels of analysis.

### *Immediate social context*

These studies focus on neighbourhoods, community radicalism, different curricula and cultures within schools and the potential that these have for changing power relations within education. These can be summarised as follows:

- Research that provides an account of people's lives in neighbourhoods and communities.
- Studies that emphasise more radical and democratic approaches to running classrooms and schools which challenge and change existing power relations (for example, in relations between teachers and pupils and in how school governance relates more directly to community needs).
- Interventions that focus on developing community radicalism for empowered engagement with the education system to create more equitable educational opportunities.

### *Broader social structures*

These studies assume that education can both challenge existing power structures and enable democratic development but that current forms of

education create, reproduce and enhance inequality. They do not view the development of education as enabling and teaching all young people to challenge existing social structures. Broadly they are critical of 'functionalist' policy interventions such as educational choice and conclude:

- Global and national social and economic structures determine educational provision and achievement.
- Power structures affect the lives and educational experiences of particular groups.

## Current policy interventions

Recent years have seen a plethora of policy initiatives in England such as Excellence in Cities, Connexions, Sure Start, Educational Maintenance Allowance and full service extended schools.

A review of these initiatives suggests that almost all appear to take a functionalist perspective and focus in a piecemeal fashion mainly on factors concerning immediate social context, such as family and neighbourhood.

There is very little in educational policy that focuses on explanations based on broader social structures or interventions at this level. In addition, none of the socially critical explanations appear to be reflected in policy. It is also clear that interventions so far have had only a very partial impact in breaking the link between poverty and poor educational attainment.

## Conclusion

The review suggests that policy needs simultaneously to address a whole series of factors at different levels if it is to have any meaningful impact. It needs to have an overarching vision of how various interventions fit together and for what purposes.

The researchers conclude that the following are the most fundamental issues facing educational policy-makers:

### *Scope*

There is no single explanation for why learners from poor backgrounds do badly in educational terms. Rather, there are multiple factors implicated at the individual, immediate social and broader societal levels. There are no magic bullets that will enable such learners to perform as well and derive the same educational benefits as their more advantaged peers. Instead, what are needed are interventions which address the full range of factors and which operate at all three levels.

## Coherence

A related problem for policy-makers is the coherence of their interventions. An attractive alternative to the 'magic bullet' approach is the 'scattergun' approach – in other words, undertaking a wide range of relatively small-scale initiatives in the hope that separately or together some of them might make a difference. The issue facing policy-makers is how to make multiple interventions coherent, how to sequence them chronologically, and how to prioritise the most effective or most important interventions amongst all those which might or should be taken. This suggests that policy-makers need to develop more fully their own 'theories of change' about how interventions are likely to work and then develop these through the careful monitoring of the actual impact of interventions.

## Power

The socially critical perspective outlines clearly the view that the relationship between poverty and education is unlikely to be disturbed unless fundamental issues of power and interest, advantage and disadvantage are addressed. This perspective suggests that simply tackling the immediate problems of poverty and education will ultimately prove to be ineffective if underlying inequalities reproduce these problems in other forms.

## About the project

The review was undertaken by identifying research-relevant literature which explicitly addressed the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes. This literature included research texts, policy papers, evaluations and various other reports. A provisional mapping framework was developed and tested in a seminar with academics across the University of Manchester. As the framework developed a wider group of researchers and policy-makers was invited to an international seminar in order to examine and challenge the framework. The seminars and advisory group provided advice on key literature to help refine the framework. The enhanced mapping framework was used to structure database interrogation, keywords searching and screening criteria and the development of a database categorising framework.

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## For further information

Further information about the study can be obtained from:

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The full report, **Education and poverty: a critical review of theory, policy and practice** by Carlo Raffo, Alan Dyson, Helen Gunter, Dave Hall, Lisa Jones and Afroditi Kalambouka, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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