

Candidate 2 evidence

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Poverty and Educational Attainment



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Hypothesis: *Experiencing poverty growing up significantly impedes a child's ability to succeed in life.*

Introduction

Poverty has a significant impact on the educational experience and attainment of many children growing up in the UK. This means that despite being a very wealthy country, 4.3 million children and young people still grow up in what is classed as poverty (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021). To put this into real-life context, this means that on average, 9 pupils in every class of 30 pupils are officially classed as poor (this figure is likely to vary depending on the poverty level in a school's area). However, this hasn't always been the case and child poverty levels dropped significantly by 600,000 children in 2003 when reducing child poverty was a national priority (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020). These government efforts were proven to be a huge success however, in 2016 the targets set out by the Child Poverty Act 2010 were scrapped and subsequently, thousands of families have been thrown below the breadline (Child Poverty Action Group, 2017). This can significantly impede a child's ability to attain education which has been proven by studies carried out on the links between poverty and educational attainment. This is the most common reason for children being trapped in the poverty cycle as even when they grow up, their life chances are limited as a result of the disturbed education they have received as a result of their family circumstances.

A common-sense explanation of why children who experience poverty have limited life opportunities would be that children lack motivation and encouragement from their role models as parents and carers in deprived areas might be more reliant on children working as soon as they can as oppose to them getting a good education.

Although in some cases this explanation may be appropriate, sociologists would challenge these naïve explanations and instead would pursue research-based explanations. In this particular case a sociologist would analyse the educational attainment of children living in poverty using research based on teachers, pupils, and education officials. They would do so using impartial evidence which could include official statistics or reports.

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Source 1

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?

This report by the JRF compares affluence and disadvantage and how these backgrounds influence the educational attainment of children. The report shows that poorer children experience much less advantageous environments at home which strongly associates with poorer children's lower cognitive development in early childhood which ultimately leads to poorer academic attainment throughout school. For example, the research found that a quarter of the gap in GCSE results between children from rich and poor families is associated with a family's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Furthermore, the study found that perhaps it is possible that genetic capabilities can be passed from one generation to the next. For example, one fifth of the attainment gap between the most affluent and most deprived pupils is explained as a direct link between the capabilities of the parent and child respectively. The report found significant differences in aspects of home life between the rich and the poor, from home learning environments to parents' aspirations and expectations for their child's future education during their time at school, measures of family closeness, and the availability of materials such as internet access and smart devices. Children from poor families also tend to display more behavioural problems which might impede their ability to succeed.

The report concluded that parents, children, and schools all have a part to play in improving the issue. Parents could improve their home learning environments and attitudes and raise their aspiration and desire for an advanced education. With help, children could be taught to cope with their behavioural problems and be taught to have better attitudes and efforts which could lead to a better education. Finally, schools could arguably do more such as allocating more funds to children from poorer backgrounds, and direct teaching support to children when it seems they are falling behind.

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Source 2

Goretti Horgan - The impact of poverty on young children's experience of school

This report is about the impact of poverty on children's experience of primary school. It focuses on; what children themselves think about school, how important education is to them, how children think schools work, and how they experience school. It offers a chance to look at life in primary schools from a child-centred perspective. It looks at what conversations reveal about the impact of poverty on their school lives, as well as about the different experiences of those living in poorer and better-off circumstances. It also includes the views of parents and head teachers.

What emerges from this study is a picture of children's school experiences that are shaped by their family background and the area in which they live. The children's views demonstrate that how children experience school is determined by the level of disadvantage they face. They suggest that poorer children get used to the fact of their social position from a very early age. They accept that this will be reflected in their experience of school – that they are not going to get the same quality of schooling or of outcomes as better-off children. In all, 220 children aged five to 11 took part in group interviews in 15 schools – Catholic, Protestant and integrated, advantaged, and disadvantaged, urban, and rural – across Northern Ireland. Disadvantaged schools were those with between half and three-quarters of their pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs), while advantaged schools had between 3 and 14 per cent of their pupils eligible for FSMs.

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Analysis

Functionalists would argue that society is an organism. It would therefore be appropriate for functionalists to see education as an organ of the body of society. This would mean that if school works, society will work with it. Functionalists would argue that education is a key agent in our secondary socialisation growing up and if one person can succeed, everyone has that same ability to do the same.

However, Marxists would argue that those living in poverty are forced to stay in poverty because of capitalism. They would suggest that the bourgeoisie prevent the proletariat from being successful in life due to social closure and the belief that the bourgeoisie rule the proletariat and have them work for them. Marxists state that the existence of poverty is beneficial for the ruling class and that the threat, or realisation of poverty dramatically increases the desire amongst the working class to find employment. Marxists also argue that the rewards for work are unevenly distributed and that the low paid work harder for less than the owners. Whilst this theory is well known there are questions that need to be asked of its philosophy. Marxism doesn't give explanations as to why certain groups are more vulnerable.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the highest rates of child poverty were seen in homes where parents are either unemployed, in part-time employment, single, disabled/sick, part of an ethnic minority group or from a large family (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017)

Some would argue that it is essential for capitalism that poverty in existence, and that it should be well managed (Jones et al., 2014). Furthermore, they say that any available government benefits are not actually designed to help people out of the poverty they are experiencing and instead the welfare state is there to assist poverty, not eradicate it. It is there to ease the capitalism, whilst ensuring that harmony between the bourgeoisie and proletariat is maintained.

J.C. Kincaid claims that "from the point of view of capitalism the low-wage sector helps to underpin and stabilize the whole structure of wages and the conditions of employment of the

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working class." (Jackson and Kincaid, 1974). They also argue that the difference in wage structure is a thought-out process which serves to disadvantage the working-class. If the wages of the unskilled workers were all identical there would be a risk of greater unity and a single class-consciousness might be encouraged, with a possible threat to the capitalist class as a result. Kincaid argues "It is not to be expected that any Government whose main concern is with the efficiency of a capitalist economy is going to take effective steps to abolish the low wage sector."

Herbert J. Gans has identified several functions that make poverty beneficial to capitalists in her book 'The Positive Functions of Poverty'. He states that temporary low-skilled jobs are taken by the poor, and that poverty assists in the creation of careers for middle-class people (Gans, 1972). He states that "poverty creates jobs for a number of occupations and professionals that serve the poor or shield the rest of the population from them. Poverty helps to guarantee the status of those who are not poor." He also stated, "The defenders of the desirability of hard work, thrift, honesty and monogamy need people who can be accused of being lazy, spendthrift, dishonest and promiscuous to justify these norms."

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Evaluation

Both sources largely agree that experiencing poverty growing up can impede a child's ability to succeed in life. The evidence displayed in source 1 was gathered in 2010 and the report written by Goretti Horgan in source 2 was published in 2007. This is extremely relevant as 2010 was the year of the Child Poverty Act being introduced which helped reduce child poverty significantly. However, in 2016 the Child Poverty Act was scrapped in 2016 which plummeted thousands back into poverty and therefore the statistics in this research might not be reliable as poverty levels are likely to have changed significantly for this reason.

Conclusion

It could therefore be concluded that my hypothesis that experiencing poverty growing up significantly impedes a child's ability to succeed in life has been proven accurate by the data gathered in this report. This is because the evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that parents, children, and schools all have a part to play in improving the issue of child poverty and educational attainment. Parents could improve their home learning environments and attitudes and raise their aspiration and desire for an advanced education. With help, children could be taught to cope with their behavioural problems and be taught to have better attitudes and efforts which could lead to a better education. Finally, schools could arguably do more such as allocating more funds to children from poorer backgrounds, and direct teaching support to children when it seems they are falling behind. Furthermore, the report by Goretti Horgan suggests that poorer children get used to the fact of their social position from a very early age. They accept that this will be reflected in their experience of school – that they are not going to get the same quality of schooling or of outcomes as better-off children. All of this leads to children from better social backgrounds doing better in school and those from lower class social backgrounds suffering from behavioural problems, lack of motivation and overall lack of life chances.

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