

# Closing the gap in educational attainment



‘ Closing the gap in educational attainment between social groups has been widely acknowledged as a pressing concern of national importance’

## **Introduction**

“ Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Nelson Mandela grew up in a country divided by apartheid. A black man in a country where a white minority ruled, he had a vision for South Africa; to be one nation regardless of race. In 1994 he became the first black president of South Africa – testament, indeed, that barriers, of any kind, should not be reason for or an apology for lack of attainment or achievement of any kind and, that barriers can be overcome.

It is widely agreed that there are numerous barriers to educational achievement and social inclusion, among them Special Educational Needs (SEN)[1]and disability, Ethnicity and English as an Additional Language, and gender to name but a few. The aim of this essay however, is to look at just one of the barriers faced in this country, poverty, and to look at how pupils within this social group are affected and how poverty affects their educational achievement, further, the essay will look briefly at the evolution of inclusive education and what is currently being addressed by this and subsequent governments in order that pupils, regardless of circumstance can have equality in education.

## **Body of essay**

In order to link poverty with educational achievement and attainment gaps, a background to poverty and social inclusion within education will be outlined

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followed by the first part of the analysis which will look at the historical overview of inclusive education, current policy and guidance and its impact on minority groups; the second part of the analysis will examine the effects of poverty and how, in particular, pupils entitled to FSM's[2] impact on the gap in educational attainment compared against children not entitled to FSM's. The final level of the analysis will look at the importance of narrowing the gap and the introduction of the 21st Century School.

## **What is poverty?**

At this point it is necessary to note that, through research, it became apparent that there is an unclear and infinite definition about what 'poverty' is and how it should be measured. However, most of the research leads to an agreement that poverty is to be related to in terms of 'typical' living standards within the UK and the following definition is widely accepted:

'Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong.'

P Townsend, Poverty in the United Kingdom: a survey of household resources and standards of living, Penguin, 1979, p31

The most crucial point made above and which is the main cause of poverty is 'resources'; to emphasise more clearly, the main cause of poverty is insufficient income/unemployment which, for adults with children directly impacts on them and their wellbeing. Although the UK has a system of

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benefits which should protect families with children from poverty, these too are deemed as too low.

In relation to this, it accepted that whilst adults do not choose for themselves the road of poverty, for children of parents living in poverty there is no alternative and they are therefore not just children but could be described as victims of circumstance. Poverty is not just about going without it is about being deprived of equality in areas such as health, housing and respect and, in the case of children, education.

In conjunction with the definition (above) the DCSF (2009) goes on to describe child poverty alone as

‘ Child poverty means growing up in a household with low income. Research has shown that these children will face a greater risk of having poor health, being exposed to crime and failing to reach their full potential. It means they miss out on school trips, do not have adequate winter clothing and aren’t able to enjoy leisure activities with their peers. As a result, their education suffers – making it difficult to get the qualifications they need to move on to sustainable, well-paid jobs. This limits their potential to earn the money needed to support their own families in later life, and so a cycle of poverty is created.’

[www.dcsf.gov.uk](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk)

[uk/everychildmatters/strategy/parents/childpoverty/childpoverty/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/strategy/parents/childpoverty/childpoverty/)

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## **What is Social inclusion?**

As with poverty, in order to link social inclusion with educational achievement and attainment gaps, a background and understanding of the issues pertaining to social inclusion need to be outlined.

The term ‘social exclusion’ is a term generally used to describe what can happen to people who are subject to the most severe problems, and are therefore no longer ‘socially included.’ As noted above, children have no choice of background; they are born into it and therefore find themselves in poverty as a result of their birth circumstance. For a child not to be socially included brings consequences above and beyond economic poverty alone.

It is generally considered that to be ‘socially excluded’ as a young and impressionable child can have far reaching effects detrimental to both education and health therefore, to surmise, to be socially excluded is to face exclusion not just economically but socially and academically too.

[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social\\_exclusion\\_task\\_force/context.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/context.aspx)

## **Historical development of inclusive policy & guidance**

Bearing in mind the previous points, it is necessary now focus on how this and previous governments have attempted to overcome some of these issues through inclusive education. It should also be noted that whilst this essay is focussing, in the main, on the impact of poverty on educational achievement, the roots of inclusive education lay predominantly with another minority group, children with learning difficulties/special educational needs (SEN). However, as acknowledged above; through circumstance, pupils from families who are deemed as in poverty have now been identified

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as a group who are under achieving academically and, therefore, as with pupils with SEN are a recognised minority group for which an inclusive education should benefit.

Inclusion is not a new idea and in fact has its roots at the turn of the last century where educationalists, in particular child welfare pioneer Elizabeth Burgwin, saw neither the purpose nor virtue in, what was then segregated education and that adaptations could be made to ordinary schools in order to educate all children, whatever their ability or circumstance, together, however, there was another opinion that children could be ‘categorised’ according to their ability and taught in ‘special’ schools. These were children who, in the words of the School Board for London (1904) were children who could not be taught in ‘ordinary’ schools. (Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998)

It became accepted that ‘segregated’ education/special schools was the safe and sensible way forward to meet the needs of children with SEN; further, this format of schooling safeguarded the education of mainstream pupils in ‘ordinary’ schools, indeed the 1944 Education Act scripted an extremely segregative post war education system. It was not until the mid-1960’s when evidence showed lack of success in the system that opinions began to change and education looked toward ‘integration’ and inclusion (Thomas et al., 1998).

Given then that the purpose of inclusion within education is that pupils with SEN are integrated into mainstream education it is important here to note the difference between integration and inclusion. The term ‘Integration’ was introduced in 1978 in the Warnock Report and referred to the idea of

integrating children with SEN into a common educational framework. The idea has since progressed to include all children, not just those with an identified SEN, but children from all minority groups regardless of gender, ethnicity or circumstance [poverty] so that a fully inclusive education should be fully inclusive of all children and is seen to embrace diversity. (Warnock Report ‘ special educational needs’ 1978 chapter 7) (House of Commons: Select Committee on Education and Skills Third Report 2006) Clarification of inclusion policy: Defining inclusion p58).

## **Inclusive education**

‘ Promoting excellence in teaching and tackling disadvantage demands we personalise teaching and learning and back strong, innovative leadership in schools’

Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families July 2007 – present[3]

ECM – Speech to the National Children’s Bureau, 23rd July, 2007

The principle and practices of inclusive education therefore suggests that all pupils in a school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, become part of the school community; that they are included in the feeling of belonging among other pupils, teachers, and support staff further, schools have a legal responsibility to educate all regardless of gender, ethnicity or circumstance in mainstream schools.

Breaking the link (DSCF, 2009) identified that a FSM pupil is also more likely to have been identified with special educational needs (SEN) and will be

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more likely to have a CoP[4]statement or categorised as School Action or SA+, it is possible that this group will also be of a group of BEM or BESD[5]which have also been identified as an under performing social group.

It is generally considered that there is a relationship between these factors and interventions such as personalised learning, as identified within the QCA framework for inclusion, is vital to adhere to in order for progress. For these identified groups, inclusion is not necessarily just understanding that every pupil will not be working on the same learning objectives as every other pupil within that group but that the pedagogy will be about recognising where differentiation would be appropriate in order to support and accommodate the different learning needs and styles of the social/learning group and that a detailed approach to monitoring their improvement is in place in order that targets may be stretched and met.

Personalised learning (differentiation) therefore, will be key to lifting achievement and therefore should be a fundamental component to narrowing the gap and working towards a culture where a child's chances of success are not limited by their socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity or any disability or circumstance.

Working within the inclusive framework however should not be viewed as a barrier for either pupil or staff; inclusion needs to be viewed as a continuing process of breaking down barriers and narrowing the gap to educational attainment for all children and young people.

There are a number of laws addressing discrimination in education and therefore support inclusive education in the UK. Arguably, the most

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important piece of legislation passed in recent years is the Every Child Matters (ECM) policy which, launched in 2003, was published alongside the formal response to the report into the death of Victoria Climbié[6]and gave rise to the 2004 Children's act. ECM covers children and young adults up to the age of 19 (or 24 for those with disabilities) and is the Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or circumstance, to have the support needed to:

Be healthy

Stay safe

Enjoy and achieve

Make a positive contribution

Achieve economic well-being

The ECM policy focussed on Inclusive Education & Equality of Opportunity and placed high on the agenda 3 main areas:

Human Rights - Children have a right to learn and play together, they should not be discriminated against and inclusion is concerned with improving schools for both pupils and staff alike

Equal Opportunities in Education - Children do better in inclusive settings (academically and socially), they should not need to be separated in order to achieve equal academic status and inclusive education is a more effective use of resources

Social Opportunities – inclusive education is on part of inclusion in society, children need to be involved with all their peers.

Assuming then that ECM and the 2004 Children’s act are supporting and sanctioning inclusion, it is interesting to note that there is evidence to suggest, through the attainment gap, that social minority groups, despite progress and the inclusion and integration advocated in the Warnock Report, are still under achieving and, that the concept of inclusive education is still discussed as though it applies only to children with an identified SEN and is not taking account of all social minority groups, but as identified in the ‘ Index for Inclusion’ below, it does, in fact, have a much wider scope, inclusion in education involves: (Booth and Ainscow 2000)

Valuing all students and staff equally.

Increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of local schools.

Restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in the locality.

Reducing barriers to learning and participation for all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorised as ‘ having special educational needs’.

Learning from attempts to overcome barriers to the access and participation of particular students to make changes for the benefit of students more widely.

Viewing the difference between students as resources to support learning, rather than as problems to be overcome.

Acknowledging the right of students to an education in their locality.

Improving schools for staff as well as for students.

Emphasising the role of schools in building community and developing values, as well as in increasing achievement.

Fostering mutually sustaining relationships between schools and communities.

## **Poverty and the effects on education**

It is the aim of this and subsequent governments to raise achievement for all pupils and to break the link between disadvantage [poverty] and low educational attainment.

In 1999, the [then] government pledged to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicate it by 2020, in response to this, in 2008 the government published a paper: Ending Child Poverty - Making it Happen 2008 underlining their commitment to ensure not just that each successive generation is able to gain better jobs, but that everyone has the chance to achieve their potential, no matter what their background, further the paper announced that a child poverty Bill will be introduced in 2009.

The Child Poverty Act 2010[7] ensures that sustained action must be taken to tackle child poverty by this, and future, governments, by devolved administrations, and by local government and their partners. The act sets

targets relating to the eradication of child poverty, and to make other provision about child poverty. The Bill provides a statutory basis to the commitment made in 1999 and to create a framework in which to monitor progress at a national and local level.

Relevant to poverty and education however, is section 26 of the act which makes an amendment to the of the Education Act 1996 and gives the Secretary of State an order-making power to extend eligibility for free school meals (FSM's) if the child meets prescribed conditions and the child's parent is in receipt of a prescribed benefit or allowance. (Child Poverty Act, 2010)

Research carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2007 reinforced that the links between poverty and education were clear but complicated and that to break the established relationship between poverty and poor educational outcomes required a change to the underlying structures (Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, Kalambouka JRF A Review of research on the links between education and Poverty, September 2007).

Since then and with the advent of the Child Poverty Act and the End Child Poverty Campaign, inroads have been made and some 500, 000 children have been lifted out of poverty[8]however, there are still currently 4 million children in the UK living in poverty, as defined above, which equates to an overwhelming 30% of children all within the UK, further, the UK has one of the worst rates of child poverty in the industrialised world.

It could be argued therefore that poverty has the ability to obscure the potential and opportunity of a child and therefore limit the life chances of the child. Evidence suggests that poverty has the capability of shaping a child's

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development; before reaching the age of 2; a child from a poorer family is more likely to be showing lower levels of attainment than that of a child from a better off family and that children growing up in poverty are more likely to leave school at 16 with fewer qualifications (End Child Poverty; 2010).

In the foreword to *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004) a set of specific educational goals were expressed. Primarily, education is targeted as a means to integrate individuals into society and to teach them the skills necessary to participate contribute and achieve their potential. Therefore it can be assumed that the notion of inclusive education is a basic human right of every child regardless of circumstance.

Given then that the opportunity for full time education is available for all and, that under international human rights law (and, in particular, Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which cover the right to education), the UK has an obligation to provide [inclusive] education for all children. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: 1989)

If it is the case then, that ' the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively on the basis of equal opportunity' (Article 28), it is interesting to note that on average poorer children score less well on a range of educational measures such as reading tests in early years and GCSE results in secondary education, highlighting the plight of poverty in education.

With the statement made in the: *Ending Child Poverty* document [to ensure not just that each successive generation is able to gain better jobs, but that everyone has the chance to achieve their potential, no matter what their

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background] it must follow, therefore, that part of the answer lies in education as the path to a better job lies with qualifications.

During the last 10 years schools, nationwide, have benefited from government investment and statistics show that the attainment gap is closing however, evidence shows that there is still a link between family income and achievement. Approximately 15% of all pupils are entitled to FSM's but as demonstrated [below], these pupils are less likely to get 5 good ACEM[9] compared to those pupils not in receipt of FSM. For that reason, poverty and deprivation remain an ongoing area of concern. (DCSF: Breaking the Link, 2009)

The importance then of FSM's for eligible pupils should not be underestimated as a means to closing the gap in educational attainment as, to refer back to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), article 27 states that no child in the UK should go hungry.

Abraham Maslow is known for establishing the theory of a hierarchy of needs, which places, in a pyramid, the order basic requirements need for motivation. At the bottom, are the physical requirements which, although basic, we will not function comfortably without. The basic human need is for food, water and sleep. The middle of the pyramid deals with the emotion and at the very top is self fulfilment. Using this theory illustrates and reinforces the importance of FSM's for pupils eligible as without their basic need met pupils will not function to the best of their ability as demonstrated below.

Assuming then that, a child is fed, research has shown that there is a significant and immediate effect of diet on behaviour, concentration and

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cognitive ability. Areas directly relating to educational attainment affected by nutrition have been identified as:

Developmental disorders e. g. dyslexia and dyspraxia,

Memory

Concentration

Intelligence

Attention span

Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder

Aggression

Achievement

(Sorhaindo, A. & Feinstein, L. 2006 ' What is the relationship between child nutrition and school outcomes?' Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No 18. Centre for Research of Wider Benefits of Learning) p 7, 11.

If it is the case then that nutrition has a clear impact on the performance of a pupil, it must therefore be of prime importance to ensure that all pupils entitled to FSM are in receipt of them. In addition to the above, nutrition is also believed to impact upon behaviour, which has the potential also to affect school performance and interaction with peers, and compromise self-esteem (Sorhaindo et. al., 2006)

However, research carried out for the DCSF by the Key Stage 2 & 4: National Indicator Set has shown that where pupils are in receipt of FSM academic attainment is lower at every key stage (as the focus group identified is secondary pupils, relevant statistics only are identified). By the sheer fact that a pupil is entitled to FSM indicates that they are from a family whose parents or carers are in receipt of benefit and are therefore are on low income and are entitled to apply to their local authority to claim FSM's.

The use of the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) is used in order to determine FSM eligibility. This however, this is by no means a perfect system, as it misses out children from families who do not apply for all the benefit to which they are entitled; in so doing pushes the family further into economic chaos as lunches that need not necessarily be paid for now become, unnecessarily, part of the family budget. (DCSF: Deprivation and Education 2009)

An attainment gap (measured by pupils entitled to FSM) is measured at each key stage; it begins at key stage 1 and increases at each key stage through education. By the end of key stage 4, research has shown that there was a 29 percentage point gap between FSM and non FSM pupils in English and a 28 percentage point gap in maths. This equates to a non FSM pupil having over three times the odds of achieving an A\*-C grade in these subjects compared to an FSM pupil.

In 2007 Only 21% of FSM pupils achieved 5 ACEM[10], compared to 49% of non FSM pupils. This figure had narrowed slightly from the statistics available for 2003, whereby a non FSM pupil had 3.8 times the odds of achieving



5+ACEM, but this ratio has fallen over time to just 3.1 in 2007. (DCSF: Deprivation and Education 2009).

With a link in educational attainment having been identified and linked to amongst others, poverty and FSM's it is necessary to look at how this gap can be narrowed; for as long as poverty exists in childhood there will be an increase in the risk of adult poverty. Intergenerational cycles of poverty are not unbreakable or inevitable, but changes need to be implemented or there will be a risk that, in future years, the gap in attainment will impact on society, as there will be children leaving education with fewer skills required by employers when entering into the workforce, which will ultimately hinder economic growth.

There is evidence to suggest that poverty need not be the cause to achievement or attainment. Research carried out by Jason Strelitz, policy advisor on UK child poverty for Save the Children, showed that with successful financial and policy intervention by national government 'poverty' as a key barrier to educational attainment can be eliminated (Jason Strelitz, The Guardian Newspaper, Thursday 21 August 2008).

It has been shown and is acknowledged that FSM's are a clear indicators of performance however, in London in 2007, the average attainment gap of children on FSM and non FSM's was 27 percentage points, the gap in performance between children on FSM in the best authority and the worst was wider still; 37 percentage points suggesting that it is not FSM in isolation alone that is seen as a barrier but geography and postcode. To illustrate; two contrasting London boroughs: Kensington and Chelsea, with few children on

FSM, besides Tower Hamlets, who had the highest proportion of children on FSM anywhere in the country. In 1998 Tower Hamlets ranked as one of lowest-performing authorities in the country for educational attainment; 10 years later their results were above average across the board and, for the poorest children among the very best. It appeared the answer for Tower Hamlets was investment. During the 10 year period identified, investment and educational initiatives were focused on disadvantaged areas and the results were outstanding. With the exception of one, all of the 30 local authorities that were identified saw improvement in their GCSE attainment since 1998. All, bar one, had above average per-pupil funding. (Strelitz, 2008).

This clearly demonstrates how investment in education can work to narrow the gap in attainment and that poverty, is not necessarily a barrier to education. However, it should be remembered that the investment has been made in the educational system/framework not the individual and that the children themselves, due to family circumstance, are still actually in poverty although the opportunity of a good/better education has been afforded them and which will be the key to their future and the opportunity for them to move on into higher education or employment giving them the prospect of breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty.

It is clear then from the above that problems within the education system have been identified and are being addressed, through legislation drive and forward thinking as financial investment alone will not solve the problem, however, it does indicate that the problem can be solved.

Working on the guidelines for change recommended in ECM the government has produced a series of papers aimed at outlining the way forward to narrow the gap for specific groups. June 2009 saw the publication of the current governments' white paper: Building a 21st Century School System along with Breaking the Link.

Building a 21st Century School System proposes the way forward for education. It documents how this and future governments will build on the existing school system to create a new system that will provide an education that is able to act in response to the challenges of society. Further it looks at and endorses a totally inclusive educational system aiming to break the link between deprivation, disadvantage, disability and low educational attainment and so impacts upon intergenerational poverty as discussed above and where every child, regardless of gender, ethnicity or circumstance [poverty] will have the opportunity to develop and gain the skills necessary to succeed in the ever changing global climate. (DCSF: 21st Century School System)

One element of the 21st Century School is 'Extended' services within schools. This has now been implemented in 72% of schools nationwide and it is intended that by the end of 2010 all schools will offer 'extended' school services. The aim being, to have integrated health and social care on site as well as child care and after school facilities; thereby ensuring that problems which may potentially stand in the way of pupils learning are more easily and readily dealt with. However, data to date shows that whilst awareness of and satisfaction with services among parents is relatively high, there remains a participation gap between FSM eligible pupils and those not

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eligible, with non FSM showing typically a 10% higher participation rate. The issue therefore is to further encourage the disadvantaged groups and, in particular those eligible for FSM, to participate and make use of the offer. The participation gap indicates that children from poorer backgrounds are less likely than their peers to have used to such facilities and are therefore less likely to state that the service meets their needs on the other hand the data shows clearly that progress is being made in enabling disadvantaged children to participate in quality after school activities, but that more needs to be done to maximise the benefits of these activities to bring this groups engagement with learning. (DSCF: Breaking the Link, 2009)

## **Conclusion**

It is not poverty alone that is the barrier to educational achievement. Poverty is circumstance. This and subsequent governments can, and should invest in education in order to give our children the opportunity they need to break away from intergenerational poverty and to close the gap in educational achievement and social inclusion. While children are denied their basic human right of an education – equal for all, no matter their current circumstance, they will remain in poverty. Improving life chances through education, for all, is not an unrealistic aspiration but does demand the commitment of policymakers, both national and local, schools, partner agencies and parents to work together, to be focused on delivering change for all.

As Nelson Mandela broke through his barrier and proved that race need not hold back achievement, this country too can break down barriers; children

from all backgrounds can achieve - poverty does not and should not be a barrier to attainment.