

Poverty: the hidden additional support need, and how Educational Psychology Services can make a difference

Introduction

The intended purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the impact of poverty on the education of children and young people in Scotland and to consider how Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) can contribute to closing the poverty related attainment gap. This paper highlights the role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) skills in supporting effective use of data in researching, planning, implementation, and evaluation of local authority (LA) interventions intended to help close the poverty related attainment gap. Nurture is included as one such example of an EPS-driven evidence-based approach.

Poverty levels within Scotland have been rising since 2010 and continued to rise between 2017 and 2020 (Cebula et. al, 2021). Almost one in four children (24%) within Scotland are living in poverty (240,000). Several groups have been identified as at higher risk of poverty including single parent families (38%), unemployed families (54%) and minority ethnic families (with rates of living in poverty more than double that of white families). Currently, society is also seeing an escalation in families who are working but living in poverty; this is likely to become more problematic as the UK experiences a significant increase in the cost of living.

The publication in May 2014 of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on attainment in Scottish Education heralded the start of a significant policy drive by the Scottish Government to close the poverty related attainment gap that is seen as blighting the life chances of Scotland's poorest children (Sosu & Ellis, 2014). Backed by significant funding distributed to targeted local authorities via the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), and then at individual school level via Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), there are clear expectations on local authorities and consequently schools to continue to work to close this poverty related attainment gap. There is no one route or method to this end point but recognition that local contexts and needs should direct the focus of any work. Local data and intelligence alongside knowledge of evidence-based approaches should guide this work.

The role of Educational Psychology Services in Scotland

EPs support children and young people from birth to 19, working at different levels within the education system from the individual to strategic policy. Present within every Local Authority in Scotland, the statutory functions of the EP are set out within the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 requiring education authorities to provide a psychological service. The 1980 Act does not however prescribe how the service should be delivered or indeed staffing levels. EP practice is therefore guided and planned across a range of statutory and Scottish Government policy frameworks that includes the SAC and PEF initiatives alongside the National Improvement Framework (NIF) as outlined in Education (Scotland) Act 2016. The range and scope of the work that an EPS can undertake is therefore broad and will reflect local and national agendas as well as being enhanced or curtailed depending on local staffing levels.

The potential impact of the EPS working within local authorities to raise attainment is highlighted within recent Education Scotland reports. In a 2019 report, considering the future direction of the profession, it was noted that:

A key role for EPs is prevention and early intervention. EPs work to support schools to create positive, inclusive environments which foster and develop children's and young people's resilience and wellbeing to impact positively on mental health. Much of this work results in

raising attainment and equity for all, thereby extending beyond those children and young people with ASN (Education Scotland, 2019 (a), page 1).

In reviewing evidence from EPS inspections, Education Scotland reported that:

EPS work is most effective when they work at whole systems levels. Systemic interventions designed to build practitioner skills in learning and teaching and based on an audit of need at individual, school, local authority and national levels, have the potential to achieve greatest impact. This is particularly the case given the small numbers of EPs working in education authority EPS. (Education Scotland, 2019 (b), pp. 3).

Poverty, Mental Health and Attainment

There is a well-established link between poverty and the mental health of children, young people and adults. Poverty has been identified as a key factor in both the cause of poor mental health, and a consequence. Multiple factors associated with living in poverty are known to have a negative impact on the development of positive mental health. These factors include social stresses, stigma, potential trauma associated with living in poverty, and increase in family stress resulting from an inability to meet costs or acquire services to support healthy child development (including the cost of the school day) (Kniffton & Inglis, 2020). It should be highlighted that factors which impact negatively on parent/carer mental health and wellbeing are likely to lead to more negative mental health outcomes for their child.

Evidence from the National Health Service (NHS) Scotland illustrates the pervasive impact of poverty on children's lives. It explains the range of ways in which social and economic conditions impact on health and wellbeing, development, educational attainment, and lifelong opportunities (NHS Scotland, 2018). Children and young people who experience such emotional and mental health difficulties are more likely to have disrupted education, relationship and behavioural issues, school attendance issues, and general lower educational attainments and achievements. This correlates with wider research which identifies the link between early childhood adversity and poor later life outcomes, including anti-social and criminal behaviour, substance misuse, unemployment, social exclusion, emotional disorder, and poor quality of life (Felitti et al., 1998; Herman et al., 1997; Bellis et al., 2014; Knapp & Lemmi, 2014; Bellis et al. 2015).

Within Scotland, there is a recognised downward trend in mental health and wellbeing for children and young people, identified before Covid-19. However, the impact of the disruption to learning and social opportunities, reduced access to supports, and potential additional family stress associated with Covid-19, may exacerbate these negative trends, particularly for vulnerable groups including those living in poverty.

As Scotland begins to emerge from the grip of unprecedented disruption due to Covid-19, early evidence indicates that some of the progress made in closing the poverty related attainment gap has been lost and, in some cases, it has widened (Scottish Government, 2021a, 2021b). The challenge for EPSs going forward is how to use their skills, expertise and role, within a GIRFEC framework, to best positive change despite a shrinking workforce. The remainder of this report focuses on addressing this challenge through specific areas of practice where the EPS can demonstrate clear vision and impact in closing the poverty related attainment gap in Scotland.

Educational Psychology practice: Addressing the poverty related attainment gap

As outlined in the Educational Psychology and Children and Young People's Mental Health in Scotland Position Paper (ASPEP/SDEP, 2018), EPs in Scotland conceptualise mental health within a social-ecological model and recognise that it is influenced by a complex array of societal, social,

psychological, and biological factors. Improving the mental health of children and young people is an important priority for Educational Psychology in Scotland (Argyll & Bute National Action Enquiry Research Summary, 2018) and is also an essential consideration in terms of how we close the poverty related attainment gap (Coleman et al., 2009; DeSocio & Hootman, 2004; Humensky et al., 2010; MacKay et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2005; Masi, 2001).

Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, there is significant literature that explores the role of resilience in explaining why some children appear to succeed within certain contexts, including childhood adversity and poverty, whilst others do not (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Rutter, 2012). This literature outlines that fostering resilience in children and young people through exposure to a range of protective factors, including supportive relationships, can help counteract the negative influences that may be present in their environment (García-Moya et al., 2015; McLure et al., 2015). It is recognised that most EPSs across Scotland adopt an ecological and strengths-based approach that emphasises the importance of these factors (including positive relationships, agency and resilience) and seek to improve the wellbeing of children and young people through facilitating change at an individual and systems level.

As discussed, the SAC is one of the key drivers for demonstrating the impact that Education, and in turn, that Educational Psychology has on poverty. The SAC recommends a systemic approach to improving outcomes for children and young people through collaboration with different agencies as well as whole system scrutiny and approaches. Whole school nurturing approaches have been adopted by the vast majority of LAs in Scotland as a way of altering the environment to become a more emotionally sensitive and responsive context. This is especially important for those who have experienced trauma, loss, and deprivation.

Nurture and Nurture Groups have a strong focus on compensating for the missed vital emotional and social experiences for some children and young people. This adversity, closely aligned with poverty, impacts on health outcomes, stress levels, the ability to self-regulate and to develop readiness to learn, all key for success in the school environment and therefore improved attainment. To compensate for early adversity, a programme of early intervention is needed. The focus of whole school nurture is supporting health and wellbeing and in turn, learning. EPs, working with school staff, have been crucial in developing and rolling out whole school nurturing approaches both locally and nationally.

Scotland has been ahead of the UK adoption of Nurture and whole school nurturing approaches. This has been due to a recognition of the need for relationships to be at the core of support for children and young people. A national document was created - 'Applying Nurture as a whole school approach' (Education Scotland, 2017). This provided a clear definition for education professionals to work to:

A nurturing approach recognises that positive relationships are central to both learning and wellbeing. A key aspect of a nurturing approach is an understanding of attachment theory and how early experiences can have a significant impact on development. It recognises that all school/Early Learning Centre settings' staff have a role to play in establishing the positive relationships that are required to promote healthy social and emotional development and that these relationships should be reliable, predictable and consistent where possible...the school environment...incorporates attunement, warmth and connection alongside structure, high expectations and a focus on achievement and attainment (Education Scotland, p13, 2017).

With a core definition to work from, Kearney and Nowek (2019) collated semi-structured questionnaires from all 32 LA EPS'. With a return rate of almost 90%, all of those who responded

indicated that their EPS was supporting the implementation of nurturing approaches within their LA. Poverty was seen, by EPSs, as a basis for the roll out of nurturing approaches. When school staff were asked about the rationale, they noted the need to change the learning and teaching culture. This was coupled with a desire to promote wellbeing for staff and pupils across establishments.

EPs specifically highlighted the need for a nurturing ethos and culture in schools to support the inclusion of those who had additional needs. The use of the language of nurture provided a way to have a shared dialogue between education professionals that was respectful, child centered and used to discuss the different types of needs that young people can present with. In addition, EPs have contributed strongly to the evidence base for Nurture Groups and to the developing research base for nurturing approaches (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Kearney, 2005; March & Healy, 2007; Reynolds et al, 2009).

As stated, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Sosu & Ellis, 2014) was helpful in directing educationalists to 'what works' in terms of helping to close the poverty related attainment gap. In particular the report highlighted the need to generate clear data when designing and implementing interventions and then evaluating them. The report goes on to state the importance of high quality, preschool education. This stratum of education can produce significantly higher literacy and numeracy levels for those who have experienced poverty if the preschool education is well structured and resourced with highly trained staff.

Increasingly EPs nationally have been involved in supporting the roll out of nurturing approaches at a preschool level. With an increase in the time that many children spend in this environment, the rationale for adopting nurturing approaches in primary and secondary schools extends to preschool. The nurturing approach has been coupled with a demonstration of robust data in this area. Indeed, many SAC inspections (e.g. Renfrewshire, Glasgow City Council) noted the impact of nurture on those who live in the most deprived areas as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD 1-3).

In addition, the SAC summary report noted that "where progress is greatest, there are very clear links between strong leadership, high quality data, robust self-evaluation, highly effective professional learning and the focus of interventions" (Education Scotland, 2019). Of the nine challenge authorities, most inspection reports noted the contribution that the EPS had had in relation to supporting data collection, the skills of data analysis and enhancing professional learning. With the new iteration of the SAC, which will run until 2025/26, all local authorities will be charged with the duty to provide strong information and data. This will help with an overall national focus on poverty.

Although the SAC summary is only a snapshot of what is happening nationally, the move towards using an evidence based nurturing approach across Scotland has been demonstrated. This has resulted in the sharing of good practice and local initiatives via forums such as Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP) seminars on nurture and the national hub publications. Whilst these are aimed at EPSs, this sharing goes on to impact directly on teaching staff via research, training materials and coaching in context, and also young people and their families.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined clear evidence that:

- the lifelong impact of growing up in poverty can be seen in children's mental health and attainment
- poverty levels continue to rise in Scotland, compounded by the impact of Covid-19, which has been felt most keenly in vulnerable groups

- EPSs in Scotland have a key role in prevention and early intervention, with practice grounded in ecological systems theory, strengths-based approaches, professional development and research skills, including data gathering and analysis for the purposes of identification of the impact of interventions.

Recommendations

By employing EP skills in research, implementation, and evaluation of systemic interventions, EPSs have demonstrated how the profession can impact on the poverty related attainment gap, for example through the implementation and evaluation of Nurturing approaches.

Educational Psychology Services should

- clearly state in documentation about the service, and in outlining service priorities, that they have a key role in supporting LAs to close the poverty-related attainment gap
- promote their role in prevention and early intervention, and
- promote their skills in the area of implementation science in effective impact from interventions. This includes gathering and analysis of data to support needs analysis at a systemic level (LA and school), identification of appropriate interventions, supporting implementation and evaluation of impact.

Educational Psychologists should highlight with schools that they should have a key role with improving outcomes for those most affected by poverty in the school, and that this should be visible within their casework, staff development activities, and in supporting the school to take forward identified areas for improvement.

ASPEP should ensure that poverty related research generated by EPs is shared nationally and used by EPSs in their LAs to inform practice.

In the context of shrinking Local Authority budgets and increasing levels of need, **Local Authorities should** consider a national agreement that poverty measures are used in the design of service delivery calculations to ensure that proportionately more EP time is directed towards those children most affected by poverty.

EP Training Programmes should maintain a significant focus on the impact of poverty of children and young people to ensure that EP practice is based on a robust understanding of the importance of continuing to work to close the poverty related attainment gap.

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