

Social Inclusion

To achieve their full academic potential it is essential that all pupils are fully integrated into the life of the school. In reality, some pupils may experience exclusion in the classroom as the result of external factors. The importance of all pupils being fully included is reinforced by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) which “pressed for international moves towards inclusion based on rights, recognition and entitlement for all children.” (Walton & Goddard, 2009, p.54) The ‘Department of Education’ policy “excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs” “called for greater moves towards inclusion and for an increase in the number of TA’s working in schools to assist teaching and learning and to meet learning needs.” (Walton and Goddard, 2009, p.54). The National Curriculum “was subsequently modified in 1999 to acknowledge inclusion” however if exclusion is to be effectively addressed a wider range of factors need to be considered.

“Social exclusion refers to the process of being shut out fully, or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society. Social exclusion may, therefore, be seen as the denial (or non-realisation) of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship.” (Byrne, 2005, p.2).

As a result of being excluded many people can feel cut off from vital services and opportunities that the majority of citizens enjoy. According to Pierson “social exclusion is a process that deprives individuals and families, groups and neighbourhoods of the resources required for participation in the social, economic and political activity of society as a whole.” (Pierson, 2010, p.8) It is not only poverty and low income that can cause social exclusion, but social relations suffer and participation within the community is non-existent. (Pierson, 2010)

Important factors contributing to social exclusion include poverty and low income, unemployment, ethnicity, gender, age, mental health and disability, however Pierson suggests that ‘poverty’ is the most significant element in influencing social exclusion. (Pierson, 2010, p.14)

Poverty can be defined in one of two ways; either as absolute poverty or relative poverty. “Absolute poverty means being without the essentials of life, it is sometimes referred to as subsistence poverty.” (Alcock & May, 2012, p.181) Early research by Booth and Rowntree of household incomes, the costs of necessities and size of households sought to identify a minimum level of subsistence, below which an individual was unable to provide for themselves and their families. (Alcock & May, 2012)

Relative poverty on the other hand refers “to the lack of resources needed to obtain the correct diet, participate in activities, and have the living conditions and amenities that are widely approved and generally obtained by most people in a particular society.” (Pierson, 2010, p.14) The resources available to families experiencing ‘relative poverty’ are not sufficient, when compared with the resources of the average household, to enable them to participate in social activities or purchase goods that the ‘average’ household takes for granted.

The concept of relative poverty is supported by the research by Peter Townsend who identifies that “individuals, families and groups 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 at least are widely encouraged and approved, in the society to which they belong.” (Levitas, 2005, p.9)

Although anyone can experience social exclusion, research by the Social Exclusion Unit identifies that “people with certain backgrounds and experiences are disproportionately likely to suffer social exclusion.” Specific factors such as low income, experiencing family conflict, mental ill-health, having

been in prison, and being from an ethnic minority increase the likelihood of experiencing social exclusion. (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Government policy such as 'flying start' and free school meals have sought to tackle these issues.

It is identified that "income does play a major role in determining social position. Even more importantly, the income level of parents is especially significant in determining children's prospects of good health and life-chances. It determines the area and quality of housing, as well as the quality of food and access to leisure facilities, outings and holidays." (Griffin, 2008, p.58)

Single parent families may experience lower levels of income and greater experience of poverty, which correlates to a number of factors being present: "the low earning power of women; the absence of public child care; attitudes to unmarried parents; and the lack of income rights for women caring for children within marriage or outside it." (Levitas, 2005, p.10)

Poverty can "place considerable stress on parents, for example economic stress can limit the range of choices available to parents in raising their children." (Pierson, 2010, p.73) As a result they face uncertainty when considering if they be able to afford nutritious food enabling their child to adequately grow, play and learn and the 'British Journal of Nutrition' identifies that "those with lower levels of education or income purchase a greater proportion of less healthy food products, such as fruits and vegetables." (Nutrition Society, 2015)

If it becomes difficult for parents on low income to afford healthy food, one consequence may be poor performance in school. A pupil unable to concentrate in school "experiences educational disadvantage where the accumulative effect of poverty on schooling widens the gap between the excluded child and the rest year on year." (Pierson, 2010, p.73)

According to Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' individuals strive to fulfil their individual potential. To do so, basic physiologic needs such as food, water and warmth must first be met, before higher psychological needs and self-actualisation such as educational attainment can be achieved. Maslow identified the "learning environment was a vital factor in pupils' motivation to learn, if the mind is concentrating on the fact that the body is hungry, thirsty or in need of a break, learning is not going to take place." (Walton & Goddard, 2009, p.89)

Poverty is recognised as a causal factor of the exclusion experienced by young people aged 16 to 18 and not in education, employment or training (NEETS) thereby excluded for education. The 'Bridging the Gap' report (1999) identified that young people identified as NEETS "are disproportionately from poor backgrounds in deprived areas." (Levitas, 2005) In his foreword to the report Tony Blair states that "the best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, the right training and experience." (Levitas, 2005, p.18) Low educational attainment therefore impacts upon employability and the ability to achieve a higher income. It is argued by a 'redistributionist discourse' that such inequalities can only be redressed through the redistribution of wealth across society "through taxation, benefits and services, will poverty and inequality be eradicated in Britain." (Pierson, 2010, p.9)

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) article 27, "Every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development. Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this." (Unicef, 2019) Bronfenbrenners' macro system "embraces the political and economic context of society that includes social attitudes and values which, although not always articulated in daily life, nevertheless have a huge impact on individuals." (Pierson, 2010, p.33) He suggests "the macro system could be a political decision that is implemented, such as allowing all children to have free school meals. This would allow for more microsystem needs to be met." (Health Research Funding, 2020)

In response, one approach to tackling child poverty in Wales is the provision of free school meals and the Bevan Foundation suggests the provision of free school meals is a key tool for solving child poverty in Wales.”(Bevan Foundation, 2020) This extends to support “children whose families are in receipt of any means tested benefits, or they receive money through Universal Credit are eligible to receive free school meals.” Research highlights that children’s academic performance is linked to the long-term health benefits from nutritious, healthy meals, however “the diets of those living in poverty are not as nutritious as those on higher incomes. The provision of free school meals helps to tackle this inequality whilst also easing some of the financial pressures faced by parents on low income, reducing the risk of poverty.” (Bevan Foundation, 2020)

Although the ‘Free School Meals’ policy is beneficial in reducing hunger in children and providing a balanced meal each day, it has had little effect in solving the problem of child poverty. For example, it is identified that 40 percent of children living in poverty in Wales are not eligible for FSM. “That’s around fifty five thousand children in full-time education who will not be entitled to any support with the cost of their school meals.” (Bevan Foundation, 2020) the stigma and shame often attached to FSM can deter some families receiving their entitlement to this support.

In my educational setting of a Catholic Primary school, only 9% of the 140 pupils receive FSM which is a very low proportion of pupils. Research by Coughlan (2018) identified that only 12% of pupils in ‘Faith Schools’ receive FSM compared to a national state school average of 14% giving rise to the allegation that faith schools are being socially selective and exclude pupils from a more deprived background. (Coughlan, 2018)

Although pupils receiving FSM are provided with a healthy meal at lunchtime it is identified however that many families although not entitled to FSM are unable to afford school dinners. As an alternative their children are supplied with a ‘packed lunch’ frequently filled with unhealthy food, such as white bread with no nutritional value. The school also provides a ‘breakfast club’ where parents can leave their children safely with staff from 08.15 each morning, but no food is provided and there is limited impact in addressing child poverty.

Research undertaken by Saint Mary’s Catholic Higher Education Institution suggests that statistical data such as the number of pupils receiving FSM have become an ‘unreliable indicator of hardship’ as they fail to identify child poverty experienced by the ‘working poor’ who are often in and out of employment, and earn very low wages that provide less family income than those families in receipt of benefits. (Coughlan, 2018)

Research identifies that children’s progress and attainment in schools can be affected in differences in both parents and pupils attitudes to school life resulting from perceived differences in social status and ‘class.’(Lareau & McNamara, 1999) Some families may not possess the necessary skills or motivation to apply for FSM application and “this problem is compounded by complicated and burdensome application processes in some local authorities which deters parents from applying.” (Bevan Foundation, 2018)

Many parents from disadvantaged neighbourhoods may not have the ability to “intervene in a fashion that the educators defined as appropriate and legitimate.” (Lareau & McNamara, 1999, p.48) For example when middle-class parents use appropriate strategies to empower their children to succeed in school, this can be seen as a moment of inclusion. Bourdieu believes this distinction results from the important difference between the possession, and activation of capital or resources. “In the field of interaction, different forms of capital have various values. The value of these resources can take many forms. The concrete and potentially measurable benefits of social relations to promote advancement (social capital), cultural knowledge or resources, (cultural capital) or economic resources (economic capital).” (Lareau & McNamara, 1999, p.39) “Parents who have social and cultural capital may choose to activate capital or not, and they vary in the skill with which they activate it.” (Lareau & McNamara, 1999)

Like Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner highlights the “importance of social supports, social networks and the institutions within communities as fundamental to individual development.” (Pierson, 2010, p.33) Bronfenbrenner believes “there are relationships outside of the close, intimate relationships of the microsystem that can influence the development of a child. Other people, places and events may directly influence the development process, even if the child does not interact with those elements.” (Health Research Funding, 2020)

Both theorists saw the world as being moulded by social context, and procedures of socialization with Bronfenbrenner’s theory that “the person’s access to a range of material and social resources could directly affect his developmental pathway,” (Houston, 2017) consistent with Bourdieu’s vision of capital and “the importance of educational and cultural resources in opening up children’s life chances.” (Houston, 2017)

International comparison with Finland identifies that every child from six to sixteen is given a healthy well balanced meal, once a day regardless of social position, or class. According to the ELO Foundation all children “partake in the kitchen’s activities and decisions. They learn cooking through various school subjects, effects of food on health, the environment, economy and culture.” (ELO Foundation, 2018) The feeling of inclusion, as the “school community all join together to enjoy a warm meal.” (ELO Foundation, 2018) Every child receives the same healthy meal, and knowledge on food gained as a child helps to make good nutritional decisions later on in life.

The example of inclusion in Finland, where all school children are treated equally and receive free school meals demonstrates the impact that an inclusive policy can have on the educational performance of children. The effects of poverty and stigmatisation as elements that contribute to exclusion are removed from the process, and as a result a fully inclusive school community is created. As is identified by Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ for children to achieve self-actualisation and fulfil their academic potential in the classroom, their basic physiological needs must first be met. Poverty and social disadvantage mean that the basic needs for food and shelter are not met, and research by the Guardian newspaper identifies that “32% of children do not have breakfast before attending school.” (Campbell, 2010) Studies by the Economic and Social research council for example demonstrates that “having breakfast was associated with better school performance, improved cognitive function and behaviour at school” (Economic and Social Research Council, 2014) thereby supporting Maslow’s hierarchy.

It is therefore essential that equality of opportunity is afforded to all children, as required by the rights, recognition and entitlement for all children promoted by the United Nations. The provision of Free School Meals is therefore an integral means of eliminating exclusion that may result from poverty, thereby directly impacting on the child’s academic performance in the classroom.

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