

An Exploration Of The Factors Which Put Groups And Individuals At Risk Of Being Excluded In An Educational Setting.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the concept of social exclusion within society today with emphasis on exclusion within education. To accomplish this one will refer to Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Systems theory (Bates, 2019) to provide context and insight. There will be a clarification of what exclusion looks like and the factors that can lead to exclusion as well as a focus on evolving global social and political attitudes and policy within this remit. One will refer to Ruth Levitas' (1998) three discourses defining social exclusion (Levitas, 1998) to give further clarification. The Welsh Governments flagship programme Flying Start will be used as an example of a governmental strategy to support families vulnerable to social exclusion in education with reference to Abraham Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs. To conclude, one will consider how successful Flying Start has been at achieving its objectives as well as providing recommendations for improvement based on research and data.

The concept of social inclusion is defined by the United Nations (2020) as the "process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights" (UN, 2020). A definition of the meaning of social exclusion would also be insightful. The Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion defines it as:

"An individual is socially excluded (from society) if he or she cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens in society (and) would like to participate, but is prevented from doing so by factors beyond his or her control" (Burchardt, et al. (1999), as cited in Tackling Social Exclusion, Pierson 2010).

The negative relationship between poverty and attainment is well established. Wales currently has the worst child poverty in the UK with approximately 200,000 children living in poverty today (ECPN, 2020). However, this will only get worse due to the impact of Corona virus which has hit the poorest in society the hardest (Devlin and Barr, 2020). This is partly due to the ghettoization of the poor (Pierson, 2010) (Raffo, 2007) and the ecosystems that apply within. The Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) can be used to add insight into the impact the socio-cultural environments in which the child matures have on their development. (Bates, 2018). The EST will also be referenced when defining the influences, both environmental and political that hold sway over a child's prospects. For this reason, it is beneficial to provide an explanation of the EST at the beginning of this explorative essay.

Bronfenbrenner used the example of Russian dolls to explain his theory, "where smaller dolls are placed within much bigger ones (Gray and Macblain, 2015). Each layer that surrounded the child was given a name (see appendix A) with the closest and innermost layer to the child such as immediate family, nursery school and community being the **microsystem** (IBID). Next is the **mesosystem** where the child's direct surroundings have influence – their home, classroom and peers (Bates, 2018). The mesosystem also links to the child's various microsystems and to the **exosystem**, a broader system of family and friends, father and mothers work and colleagues have an influence (IBID). The **Macrosystem** includes the child's cultural group, ideologies and politics as well as legal systems. The outermost level, the **chronosystem** includes the child's biological hereditary make-up and events within their lifetime (Bates, 2018), (Gray and Macblain, 2015).

It would be beneficial to explore the evolution of political values and whole world perspectives that have led to the social inclusion perspective guiding the Welsh Government's educational policy today. Great sacrifices were borne by ordinary people following World Wars 1 and 2. Consequently, there followed a societal feeling of collective responsibility

to improve the country's health and wellbeing. This can be seen in the creation of the National Healthcare Service in 1948 and the adoption of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which stated that “all human beings have the right to work and Education” (UN, 1948). Consequently, in 2000, “The World Education Forum adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All. Promoting the rights-based approach to education set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights while collectively committing the world community to achieving education for ‘every citizen in every society’” (UNESCO, 2000, p.3). Then critically, In 2011 the Welsh government made the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child law in Wales (UNICEF, 2019). Article 29 declares that “education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full” (UNICEF, 2019). These rights enshrined in law reflect the governmental, societal and educational macrosystem which influences Welsh educational Policy today. Failure in meeting any of these rights, might then be considered evidence of social exclusion, as all of these rights deal with the ability of the child to interact within society as equals (UNICEF, 2019).

Inclusion has not always been a guiding principle within society, it was not until New Labour came to power in 1997 that social inclusion was adopted as a redistributionist concept to be delivered through benefits to the deserving poor (Pierson, 2010). In an influential text Ruth Levitas (1998) suggested there were three distinct attitudes or ‘discourses’ that represent society's views on social exclusion: (1) The **redistributionist discourse** (RED) whose main concern was with those living in poverty and the societal pressures that result from this happening. Those who agree with the RED discourse believe that it is only through redistributing the wealth throughout society through taxes that social inclusion can be achieved (Levitas, 1998). (2) The **moral underclass discourse** (MUD) which suggests that individual delinquency, lack of morality is the cause of poverty. MUD is also gender focussed, for example, delinquent fathers avoiding maintenance payments and single teenage mothers, having children to gain a council house (Pierson, 2010). The argument is also directed at entire groups of society and neighbourhoods who experience

poverty, it suggests that their delinquent choices effectively exclude themselves from society (Levitas, 1998) (Pierson, 2010). (3) The **social interactionalist discourse** (SID) which focusses on payed work and the acquisition of employment as way of achieving an inclusive society (Levitas, 1998) (Pierson, 2010). Levitas (1998) reflects that it is the social interactionalist discourse that underpins the new Labour neoliberalist policies, but it is also combined with the redistributionist discourse fulfilled through their high tax, high in work benefit policies. The introduction of benefits such as child tax credit and working tax credit succeeded in cutting child poverty in half by 2010 (Pearson, 2010. p75) but the New Labour goal to eradicate child poverty completely by 2020 (Pearson, 2010. p.75) continues to be a challenge for the Welsh Government today.

what does poverty look like in a Western society today? The Welsh Government defines poverty as : “A long-term state of not having sufficient resources to afford food, reasonable living conditions or amenities to participate in activities that are taken for granted by others in society” (Welsh Government, (2014), p. 1).

The UKs economy is still impacted by austerity measures implemented after the financial crash in 2008 (Levitas, 1998). In fact, there are currently 14 million people living in relative poverty today (Welsh Government, (2014). “A household is in relative poverty if its income is below 60% of the median household income, after housing costs” Welsh Government (2018, p.1). Relative poverty also refers to “how many people have been financially left behind, those who can scrape by on the basics but who cannot afford the normal activities and opportunities that average earners have access to, known as an ‘ordinary living pattern’”(Westwater, 2019, p.1). In Pembrokeshire poverty is more extreme, with 30% of workers currently paid less than the voluntary Living Wage (Welsh Government, 2018). Bronfenbrenner's EST indicates that the exosystemic impact of a low income has a negative impact on a child's microsystem. For example, a child's diet may be less nourishing due to money and time constraints (Gray and Macblain, 2015).

The Welsh Government recognised that poverty is not just about economic status but about the exclusion of poor people from ordinary living activities taken for granted by the more affluent in society. The UK Government has identified categories of children at higher risk of being impacted by poverty (ECPN, 2020). These groups include children who derive from ethnic minority backgrounds such as; asylum seeking children; Romani Gipsy Travellers (Burchardt et al, 2018); children with teenage mothers and young carers; children with a disability or disabled parent and children who derive from poverty (ECPN, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's (EST) would suggest that disfunction within the microsystem that accompanies a child reared in impoverished neighbourhoods can significantly impacts their development (Bates, 2018). It has been shown that "poverty can generate parental stress and mental health problems and can locate families in demoralised and violent neighbourhoods" (Raffo et al, 2007. p.31). Consequently, parents impacted by poverty tend to be less nurturing or to adequately supervise their offspring, and tend towards being harsher, erratic and inconsistent disciplinarians (Katz, et al, 2007). It has also been shown that "parents who moved into (relative) poverty became distressed and depressed, and their marital relationship deteriorated" (IBID). Problems have been shown to increase when low-income families suffer stress such as absence of a supportive partner sometimes leading to depression or drug misuse, and to improve when families benefit from developed support networks involving family friends or neighbours (Gray and Macblain, 2015). Conversely, disadvantaged neighbourhoods where people perceive they have a strong social network (microsystem) can be a mitigating factor, helping to alleviate the impact of poverty on families (Pierson, 2010). Such families express strong attachments to such neighbourhoods and report feelings of being 'safe' and supported. (IBID).

It has been shown that a child is much more likely to experience multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) if they live in an area of deprivation

(NHS Wales, 2015). “Exposure to ACEs can alter how children's brains develop as well as changing the development of the immunological and hormonal systems” (NHS Wales, 2015. p3). Subsequently, children are more likely to perform less well in education and “develop health-harming and anti-social behaviours during adolescence” (IBID). Bronfenbrenner (1979) EST informs us that to alleviate the impact of ACEs, one must first strive to improve the child's ecological systems (Gray and Macblain, 2015).

What is clear is that child development is extremely vulnerable in the early years and “early development opportunities are strongly associated with social and economic circumstances that are predictive of subsequent academic performance” (Raffo et al, 2007). Maslow's Hierarchy of needs informs us that children need their physiological, safety, belongingness and love needs fulfilled to enable esteem needs, such as education to be achieved (Bates, 2019). Also, the UNCRC (2011), article 28 states that “children have a right to an education” puts a responsibility on the Welsh Government to help children to access education. Pierson (2010) informs us that that low attainment in GCSEs is strongly associated with social deprivation. “By age 16, children from better off families are more than twice as likely to achieve five good GCSEs, as those from disadvantaged homes” (Welsh Government, 2014. p.2). The Sutton Trust (2014) reports that early years intervention programmes that aim to support disadvantaged children and prioritise supporting parents prepare children for academic success. The Trust elaborates that high-quality provision with well trained and well qualified staff are essential (Sutton Trust (2014). “Such provision is likely to be characterised by the development of positive relationships between staff and children and by engagement of the children in activities which support pre-reading, the development of early number concepts and non-verbal reasoning” (Sutton Trust, 2014. p12).

One's own setting provides a Flying Start playgroup, this is an early years, anti-poverty programme funded by the Welsh Government and available to all families in targeted areas with the aim of giving 0-3-year olds a 'Flying Start' in life (Welsh Government, 2018). Overseen by the Childcare Advisory Team, the scheme provides intensive support services for children and their families, thus supporting disadvantaged and strained microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Bates, 2019). Through the setting, parents can access extra support from Health Visitors, Community Nursery Nurses and Midwives. These offer pre-natal and post-natal additional support to those in need such as teenage mums, unsupported mums or mums who are vulnerable due to health or circumstances. Friendly, non-judgmental relationships are fostered, thus strengthening the family mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Bates, 2019). An example of this is the toddler group which is run by the community nurse and situated within the school. Parents have a chance to form interpersonal relationships with other parents as well as tackling the initial anxiety of entering the school setting, creating positive relationships within the mesosystem with teachers and support staff (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Bates, 2019). Parents can access dependable, free childcare, as well as attending linked adult education classes such as English and mathematics GCSE, therefore giving them access to better job prospects. Thus, people's ideologies regarding their capabilities can lead to increased cultural capital which can lead to an economic improvement within the whole neighbourhood as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Children and parents develop a feeling of having a right to be there and build aspirations for the future.

A Speech and language team is also available through Flying Start to support children's language and communication development. "Research into brain development has shown that the first three years of a child's life are crucial to the development of good language and communication skills" (Pembrokeshire County Council, 2020. P.1). If a child enters mainstream education with speech and language difficulties they will have difficulty understanding and expressing language, this can cause them to struggle with reading, misunderstand social cues, avoid attending school, show poor judgment, and have difficulty with tests (Varghese, 2019). Literacy is further promoted through parent and toddler Literacy and Play (LAP) groups which focuses on communication, language, literacy and play, building confidence, community and providing a healthy snack for children to foster healthy eating patterns which when established, can positively contribute to a child's health throughout their whole life (Pembrokeshire County Council, 2020. P.1).

The effect that Flying Start programme has had is undeniable, 5.7% more uptake of health visits, higher uptake of parenting programmes and language and play and building the reputation of family services as well as satisfaction and uptake of childcare provision. However, there is a potential issue with the allocation of resources only being available in targeted areas (Welsh Government, 2013). Infact, "Recent research found that 44% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds live outside of Flying Start areas" (Holland, 2020). In response to the potential failing in distribution of Flying Start support to children in poverty, the Children's Commissioner for Wales has suggested that the Welsh Government should "look at other options that would extend the offer to a wider group of children, including providing a lower number of hours per week to a wider group". A new more inclusive strategy for distributing Flying Start provision could produce a more socially inclusive result, benefitting more children and families in poverty.

Levatas' redistributionist discourse underpins Flying Start and current educational policy that influences a child in poverty's macrosystem today.

Therefore a child living in poverty today has greater opportunities than previous generations. However, impoverished children still face many difficulties that their more affluent peers do not. Bronfenbrenner's EST informs us that a dysfunctional and impoverished mesosystem and macrosystem can negatively impact on a child's microsystem causing lasting harm to the child. The mesosystem includes the child's school, if the parents of the child have a dysfunctional relationship with the school due to past experiences and feelings of ostracization, this can impact badly on that child's educational prospects, for example, through higher levels of absenteeism. It would seem logical to prioritise the interventions designed to engage parents with educational settings to engender positive attitudes and reap the rewards of a better functioning mesosystem. Furthermore, one would suggest increasing the funding available for Flying Start programmes to allow increased provision within all schools. Thus, providing the early intervention and family support required to close the development gap between impoverished children and more affluent children entering reception.

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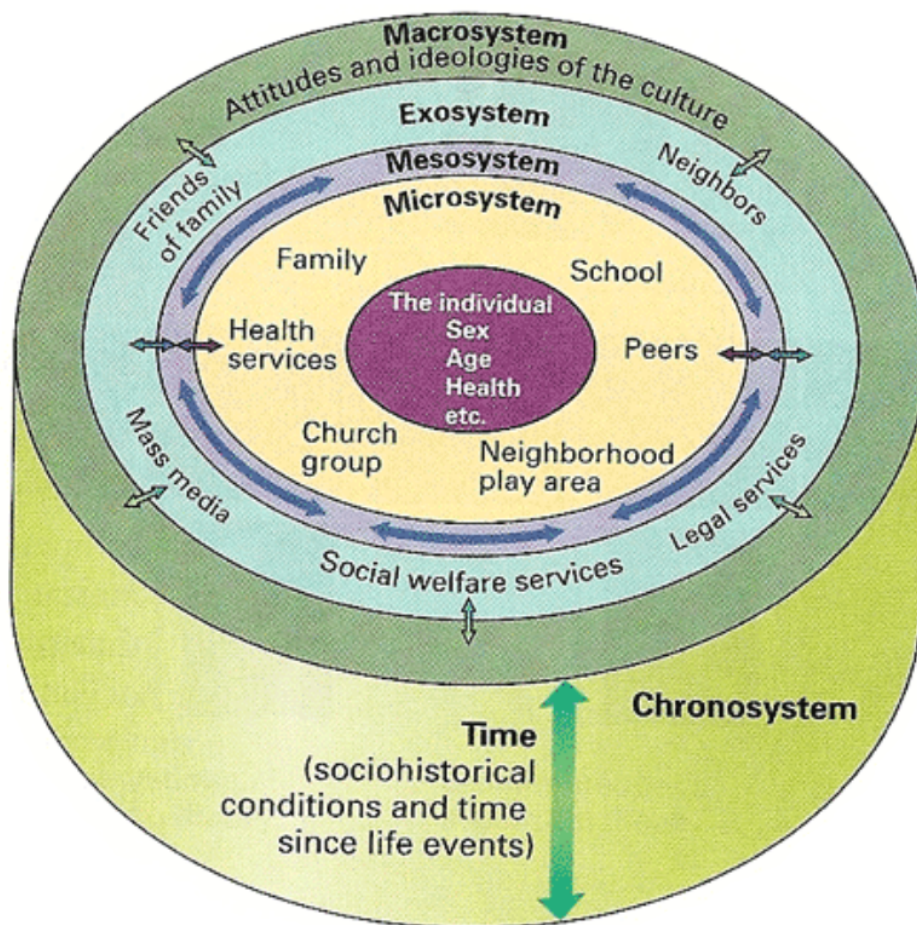
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Appendix A Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory



(Source: Santrock, (2008; p.33) as cited by ResearchGate, 2020)

Appendix B - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



(Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). [Image] available at Professional Academy)