

According to the Welsh Government (2016, p.2) 'Inclusion is a process through which all pupils access common opportunities in ways relevant to their needs, and which ensures that they fully belong to the school community.' Discuss the barriers that can hinder or prevent children from learning and participating fully in educational environments and examine how these barriers can be overcome, in terms of legislation and policy as well as strategies within the learning environment.

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In this essay, the writer will be discussing how poverty can be seen to be a barrier within the education system when supporting inclusion, along with how we can start to overcome this barrier through different strategies in the learning environment and multiple policies and legislations. In regard to education, inclusion refers to all students having equal access to and opportunity for education and learning. There are several types of poverty and how each type effects people differently. These terms would be Absolute and Relative poverty. When a person is subject to absolute poverty, this would suggest they are facing severe deprivation, this would include lack of sanitation, food water and shelter. Relative poverty, on the other hand, refers to poverty based on a person's surroundings. This would include living below the breadline, where households receive 50% less than average household incomes, and don't have enough money to afford anything above the basics. It must be mentioned, however, that Relative poverty is changeable depending on the economic growth of the country. According to Statistica.com, in 2021/22, 29.9% of children in the United Kingdom were considered to be living in Relative poverty after all housing costs were considered.

Globally and in Wales alone, inclusive education has been a major focus of research, policy, and practice in the field of education, which is why the Equality Act of 2010 was introduced, which simply gathered all previous laws and combined them into one piece of legislation. The Equality Act was passed in order to protect children (and adults) from discrimination and harassment of any kind relating to housing, education, work and more. Childrens Commissioners go hand-in-hand with this act, as they promote and protect the rights and best interests of young people (NSPCC, 2023). All of this being said, there is no doubt that there is more needed to be done in order to tackle the barrier of inclusion in education that is poverty, which is what is going to be discussed throughout, in order for readers to gain a more thorough understanding of the topic.

A key component of social inclusion is participation, and children's desire to 'fit in' with peer expectations and routine activities as a powerful motivator, whether this be having the newest pair of trainers, or something as small as inviting a friend over for tea. Poverty can have a significant negative effect on participation, preventing young people from participating in social activities that other, more fortunate children might enjoy and limiting their ability to form and sustain healthy, social connections. Financial restraints may make it difficult for a child to participate in extracurricular activities, social gatherings, or outings that might demand additional costs from the parent or guardian. Due to their limited participation, children may feel isolated and unable to develop shared interests and connections to their peers. Prejudice by parental figures is also a fundamental aspect of how a child is perceived, which is shown a lot during the early years of childhood. More often than not, parents can be guilty of forming opinions on other children due to their family's background, and in turn discourage their child from associating themselves with the other child. This can be demonstrated by birthday parties where children are given invitations to take into school to give their classmates, where some children are not invited due to the opinions of their family from other adults. Excluding a child from activities can be detrimental to their mental wellbeing and self-esteem, as they can start to wonder why they are different to everyone else and obsess over it, which can be equally as hard for the parents who are unsure on how to explain either.

Bullying is always one of the most recognised issues within schools when it comes to children who are of lower class, and is known to be prominent throughout, with one in three children being victims of bullying (UNESCO, 2019), this is a key source of unhappiness. When a child is unhappy where they are, they naturally want to leave, attendance in school will start to go down and suddenly this child is no longer in school. When collecting data, Red Balloon Learner Centre estimated that 16,493 people aged 11-15 are absent from school with bullying being the main reason. When children are out of school for a large period of time, quality of learning will rapidly decrease, leaving a long term negative consequence on their education, the vicious circle that this creates, is that once a child falls behind in school, it is likely that they can become frustrated and suffer from low self-esteem, which in turn contributes to further school avoidance. Furthermore, the physical and emotional health of a student can suffer as a result of bullying. Bullying can lead to stress, anxiety and depression, along with nausea, headaches and fatigue, which can make it difficult for children to attend school on a daily basis.

It is generally thought that poverty is purely just the amount of money one's family has, however there are other aspects of which that tend to be forgotten about. One example being cultural, economic and social capital. Social capital is based on direct social relationships between individuals, whereas cultural capital is based on having a broad set of cultural abilities. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, would argue that poverty is not about economics, rather about those that you associate yourself with, and how who you surround yourself with in terms of social class affects you. A prime example of this is how parents' lifestyles can change a child's experience in school completely. How a parent is perceived by other parents is a major factor when it comes to forming early friendships between peers. Pierre Bourdieu stated that the point of his work is 'to show that culture and education aren't simply hobbies or minor influences' (Bourdieu, 2001). This would suggest that both culture and education are major influences on how a child is perceived to others in terms of social class. To put the scale of children in poverty into perspective, a fifth of schools have set up a food bank since March 2020, according to The Guardian, which really highlights the strain that the Coronavirus put on the economy and how much it contributed to the cost-of-living crisis that we are still living in today.

In regard to resources within the education setting, how 'well-off' a child is can have an enormous impact on how fully they are able to engage in schools and complete tasks such as homework and extra research. Access to necessary learning tools including textbooks, materials, computers, and internet connectivity is frequently hampered by poverty. Children could find it difficult to fully participate in the learning process and stay up to date with their peers without these materials. In this day and age, with technology evolving and being almost a necessity to everyday life, it is almost certain that all children need to have access to some sort of device that connects to the internet. However, it is understood that a large number of children and families are unable to afford such things and so have to go without. This is better known as the digital divide, which focuses on how higher income households are shown to have more access to digital items and internet access, whereas lower income households do not have the access to these items, and even if they do, a wide majority of them do not have the skills to utilise in order to use them.

'In March 2020, only 51 percent of households earning between £6,000 to £10,000 had home internet access, compared with 99 per cent of households with an income over £40,000' (Local.gov.uk, 2021)

Whilst digital inequality is ongoing, 70% of teachers still set homework to be online, which can be particularly challenging for students living in poverty. Not only do they not have the same opportunity to do as well, but they also have to explain why they are unable to complete the work, which can end in embarrassment and often lies, which in turn ends in punishment for something that is completely out of their control. It is obvious that this can be completely discouraging for children and can leave them in a state of confusion as to why they must be different to others. According to the National Education Union, research shows that students with fast internet have better grades, and digitally excluded students are less likely to complete a college or university degree, which can be seen to be completely bizarre, because why should a child have to be disadvantaged because of the format of which they produce work? This links to the point made prior about poverty affecting a child's mental health, as when there is stress in a household, family dynamics and relationships are affected and, repeating the same vicious circle of going to school with worry and stress.

From a psychological point of view, if a child is in poverty, they are more than likely not able to get the nutritional values that they require. All positive nutrients are vital for the human brain to build and maintain its structure while it is still developing. The cognitive development of infants and children depends on proper nutrition. Children who do not get enough nutrients run a greater risk of developing cognitive impairment, which is why poverty is such a huge barrier that hinders a child's quality of education because if a child's brain is not fully developed, they cannot learn to their full potential. This is one of the reasons why most schools put on a breakfast club for their students. According to Independent.co.uk, the characteristics of a child who does not consume breakfast include loss of concentration, irritability and being easily distracted. Along with this, children that live in overcrowded houses are more likely to contract infections such as meningitis.

It is feasible to lessen the effect of poverty on children's education by tackling the barriers of poverty through legislation, policy, and the implementation of measures within the learning environment. This will make it possible to guarantee that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, have equal opportunity to study, flourish, and actively engage in educational settings. It must be mentioned that schools and education staff alone cannot address society-wide inequality and the effects of poverty on educational achievement. It is the responsibility of the government to create the conditions of which all children can thrive and learn in an inclusive environment. Though controversial, it would be highly unlikely that as a nation, we would be unable to completely get rid of poverty, and so there could be ways in which we could support children that are faced with hardships concerning their life at home and support them as much as possible. Firstly, counselling could be offered to every child whose household earns the amount, or less, that makes someone considered to be living in poverty. With help regarding mental health, students are then able to be in the right mindset to deal with educational issues. Sometimes just talking to someone about what is going on can help. According to the Millennium Cohort Study, poor children are four times more likely to develop a

mental health problem by the age of age eleven (cpag.org, 2022). Of course, this would need a considerable amount of funding in order to take place, which the government would have to be on board with, potentially with help from parents and/or guardians.

One policy that is already in place at the moment in Wales is the School Essentials Grant, which provides anyone who is cares for a child, that is claiming any sort of benefits, with a payment of £225 for primary school children and £300 for learners entering year seven. Any children that are in any way 'looked after' (children in care, fostered, estranged), also qualify for this grant. Jeremy Miles, the minister of education mentioned how he was pleased to be able to provide this grant in order to remove some of the financial barriers to education (ITV news, 2022). Not only does this grant relieve parents from stress and remove financial barriers, but it enables all children to be the same as each other to limit discrimination. With everyone able to afford the same uniforms which discourages bullying. One limitation to this is the fact that due to being in poverty, some families cannot afford the sanitary components that would be used to wash these items of clothing and ensure a clean uniform daily, this being said, it does not take away the fact that this grant is a step forward to inclusion within schools and a start to breaking the poverty barrier.

Another initiative that has been implemented in Wales to tackle the barrier of poverty within education is the Flying Start program, which targets families with children from disadvantaged areas in order to safeguard the health, wellbeing and welfare of the children under the programme. The outcomes of the Flying Start programme are similar to those of the Healthy Child Wales Programme (HCWP). The progressive universalism on which the Flying Start programme, dictates that the interventions and support provided to families should always be in accordance with their estimated level of need. Those with the greatest level of documented need should receive the most intensive measures, even while all Flying Start eligible families should receive additional interventions beyond those provided generally through the HCWP. This being said, after a visit from a Flying Start health visitor, a level of intervention will be determined between three levels. The universal, enhanced and intensive options of intervention are set so that each individuals needs are catered to accordingly, with the consideration of family resilience, which is more known as the All Wales Health Visiting Resilience Assessment Instrument Tool (FRAIT) (GOV.Wales, 2017). The area of which a child lives in is a significant component of their socioeconomic status, and so by using this method, the barrier of poverty in education is likely to be lessened due to targeting it at the root cause. Schools are able to be more inclusive as all children are given sufficient extra help from an early age and solutions for any problems that are being faced are provided.

To conclude, the barrier of poverty in education in Wales is a complicated issue that requires united efforts and tailored strategies to solve. Poverty has an indisputable impact on educational achievements, as children from low-income families encounter an abundance of problems that hinder their learning and full engagement in school. Limited access to resources, poor nutrition and health, stress and instability, and limited educational chances all lead to inferior academic attainment and prospects for children in poverty.

It must be noted that the Welsh Government has recognised the importance of addressing this barrier and has implemented a variety of policies and initiatives to mitigate its effects. The Pupil Development Grant, free school meals, The School Essentials Grant and Flying Start are intended to provide disadvantaged students with additional support, resources and opportunities. These policies seek to level the playing field and establish an equitable educational environment in which all children have an equal chance of success.

Furthermore, the recent Curriculum for Wales amendments emphasise the need of overcoming poverty-related hurdles as well as fostering social justice and equality. The new curriculum aims to build an education system that helps learners from all backgrounds by including an integrated strategy that prioritises well-being, inclusion and meaningful learning experiences.

Despite advances, it is critical to continue monitoring and updating these policies to ensure their effectiveness and address the changing needs of disadvantaged children. To address multiple difficulties connected with poverty and education, collaborative efforts among the government, schools, communities and numerous interested parties are critical. Wales can break down the poverty barriers and provide every child with the opportunity to thrive academically and personally by investing in early intervention, comprehensive support services, and equal access to high-quality education.

Overcoming the barrier of poverty in education is a critical step towards creating a more equitable and inclusive society in Wales. The ideal of an education system in which poverty does not dictate fate can be realised through prioritising the needs of economically disadvantaged learners, enacting tailored policies, and encouraging collaboration.

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