

What are the key social elements that impact on a learner's ability to access education?

The concept of social inclusion within educational settings began to develop in 1997. Since that date, the importance of social inclusion has been widely recognised and developed by all individuals working with children (Knowles and Lander, 2011). Social inclusion focuses on the supporting of individuals or groups enabling them to fully participate in society. The term is often used to describe the positive results of deterring social exclusion (The Charity Commission, 2001). The outcome for learner's who are unable to access education can often lead to social exclusion. Khan, Combaz and McAslan (2015) state that the term social exclusion has always been contested. The concept was introduced as a response to poverty, which focused solely on income. However, this has since been altered, and is now recognised as multidimensional, encompassing other factors such as social, political, cultural and economic (Khan et al 2015). The UK's Department for International Development (2005) define social exclusion as "a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against" based on their characteristics.

The purpose of this essay is to explore key social elements that can impact a learner's ability to access education in Wales and the United Kingdom, encompassing barriers, policies, practice, and theory. Smith (2015, 2020) defined education as "the wise, hopeful and respectful cultivation of learning undertaken in the belief that all should have the chance to share in life". Whereas Brown (2007) stated "Education is the greatest liberator mankind has ever known and the greatest force for social progress". Whichever perspective you look at education, there is no denying the diversity of schools across the UK (Smith, 2012). Education in the United Kingdom is compulsory and funded by the Government for all children between the ages of five to sixteen, however there are many barriers which stand in the way of being able to access it (Gov.co.uk, 2020). The social elements which can impact a learner's ability to access education include additional learning needs, poverty, parental views and participation, social class and cultural beliefs. For the purpose of this assignment, the three areas the author has chosen to focus on throughout : parental involvement, young carers,

and poverty. Through research and personal experience, these specific areas are particularly interesting to the author, which will be expanded on further.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement represents a significant social element, which can impact a learner's ability to access education. Parental involvement is defined as the investment a person makes into their child's education. There are many different aspects to consider in regards to parental involvement, including: their behaviour and attitude towards their child's future, the communication they have with their child regarding school, as well as the communication with class teachers, and also the relationship they have built with their child's school, including their participation with activities (Harris and Goodall, 2007). Therefore, parental involvement can have either a positive or negative impact on a child access to education. For example, lack of involvement can often have a damaging effect on a child's educational development and future success (Tabaeian, 2016), which can mean they are unable or not wanting to progress on to higher education and can also result in reduced job opportunities (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). On the other hand, the right amount of parental involvement can lead to successful development and have a positive effect on achievement (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2010). Unfortunately, the lack of involvement a parent displays can be a consequence of several factors. One contributing factor is lack of time; in current times, it is common that both parents have to work full-time, therefore whilst they may want to engage in their child's education their work life could act as a hinderance (Campbell, 2011).

Feinstein and Symons (1999) suggest that parental involvement has the strongest link to attainment, out of all other non-school factors like family structure, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity. This indicates that parents are the biggest influencers on a child's education and future prospects. Parental involvement is often affected by socio-political factors such as, negative experiences with attending school themselves (Jafarov, 2015). Research suggests that parents beliefs and aspirations have a significant effect on their child's educational level of achievement (Feinstein and Sabates (2006). One of the barriers parents with low levels of education have reported is the concerns they have regarding assisting their child with homework and other

school-related tasks. This is why numerous schools offer workshops on literacy and numeracy, in order to improve the support parents can model and provide for their children (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2010). It is believed that if schools are able to break down the barriers, which parents may face, they will ignite a positive interest, and alter their negative attitude towards education, which in turn will affect their child's attitude towards accessing education for themselves (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

One of these initiatives is known as 'Excellence in Schools', first introduced by the government in 1997 with a view to encourage parents to participate in their child's education (Williams, Williams and Ullman 2002). The report illustrates the importance of parental support to children, including approaches which can actively involve them (Education England, 2014). One of the approaches identified was the home school agreement policy. Although this policy is no longer a legal requirement since the government abandoned the initiative in 2016, many schools believe it is good practice to continue to have one in place (Claremont High School Academy, 2017). The agreement itself illustrates the school's values and aims, and identifies what everybody's responsibilities are including the schools, the parent's, and the expectation of the pupils. By having a home school agreement, parents are given a clear indication of where they stand and what as parents they need to do in order to support their child at home, as well as a reassurance of the school's commitment to their child. By having a strong and clear relationship with the school, parents will then feel more trusting to encourage their child's attendance.

It is also an obligatory requirement that all teachers produce school reports, which communicates with parents on their child's progression. Parents are additionally encouraged to attend parents evenings where possible, which will allow them to ask any questions they have concerning the education their child is receiving, as well as having an update to how their child is progressing. This is the perfect opportunity for the school and parents to collaborate in order for the child to reach their full potential, as recommendations can be made by both parties to ensure this happens (Our Lady's R.C. High School, n.d). Building strong rapport between teacher, school and parents can have a strong impact on a child's academic achievements, which can have a positive impact on a child's engagement with their current education and further education opportunities.

Parental involvement can be identified as a form of social capital, particularly in relation to academic achievement. Coleman (1998), suggests that the ways in which social capital can be developed is through building strong relationships with both students and other adults within the school community. An increase in social capital within the community can have a positive effect on parents, encouraging them to participate in their child's education (Perna and Titus, 2005). Suarez-Orozco (2009) suggests that strong relationships between parents and the school community can have a positive effect of school engagement and academic achievements. It has been identified that parents in higher socio-economic groups are more likely to have children who go on to higher education (Topping and Maloney, 2005). Children are known to learn by example, meaning if a parent has previously gone on to higher education and holds a degree, their child is more likely to follow in their footsteps, although there are exceptions to this statement, it is evident that parental involvement is paramount for a child when accessing education.

Young Carers

Often children from vulnerable backgrounds face many difficulties in accessing certain levels of education. Which leads onto the next topic of Young carers. For many young carers in the UK there is often a lack of parental involvement when it comes to their education. This can be for many reasons often linked to their parent's individual needs. A young carer or caregiver is an individual under the age of 25 who is responsible for caring and/or supporting a friend or family member due to illness, disability, mental health problems or addiction (Alexander, 2014). Their caring role will alter, depending on the individual's needs in whom they are caring for, but they can include personal, emotional, financial and domestic support (Hillingdon Carers, n.d). According to Social Care Wales (2017), there are roughly 30,000 carers recorded under the age of 25 in Wales, with a belief that this figure is possibly four times higher and whilst there are limited reports addressing the under eighteen category, there is a belief that Wales has the highest number across the UK (Social Care Wales, 2017).

Poor attainment of young carers represents a significant factor with research suggesting on average young carers miss or cut short forty-eight days of school a year (Sempik, J, Becker, S, 2013). Ofsted (2009) reported that young carers do not always receive the support they need, with one carer indicating they had faced numerous

detentions due to their frequent lateness with lack of empathy to their situation. Not only do young carers find themselves being punished, but now their parents can receive prosecutions and fines for their poor attainment. The Education (Penalty Notices) Regulations 2007 was introduced as a technique to deter any unauthorised absences, which local councils must obey (Department for Education, 2015), unfortunately for young carers with limited support and funding, this can pose a detriment to their education. (Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter, 2016).

In addition, poor attainment combined with lack of support can often lead to poor academic grades (Carers Trust, 2015), for example Hidden from View (2013), reported that young carers are on average attaining the equivalent of nine grades lower at GCSE's than their peers. This deprives them of higher education and other future opportunities, which was supported by research that suggests young carers are likely to fall under (Neet), "not in education, employment or training" (BBC, 2013).

However, there is a suggestion that more support would be available to young carers, if they declared their role. Unfortunately, for schools without this knowledge they are unable to ensure the appropriate support is given to both the student and the family. Factors to why young carers do not declare their role, include the sense that they are letting their families down and that they could be bullied as a result (Morgan, 2019). It has been reported that two out of three young carers experience bullying due to their caring role (Dearden and Becker, 2004). This has led to individuals experiencing social isolation (Family action, 2012), which can also have a negative effect on their mental health.

Statistics show that 38% of young carers suffer with mental health problems, but only half of these cases have received support from members of staff at school (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). Many factors can have a negative impact on a young carers mental health, these can include lack of appreciation, stress, worries and being unable to access extra-curricular activities like their peers. It has been observed that young carers often deal with their mental health by acting out and displaying poor behaviour (Carers Trust, 2012), leading to a lack of engagement in lessons (Family action, 2012). However, there are strategies in place, to support the health and wellbeing of young carers within schools, one of these is the school nurse. Since 2013, the Government have been working towards strengthening their school nurses because it is believed

that they play a vital role in supporting young carers (Department of Health, 2020). A Pathways for Young Carers was first introduced for school nurses, enabling them to use integrated services to support young carers and their families, including: providing a supportive network and implementing adequate provisions, which allows young carers to contact their parents whilst in school (Department of Health, 2020).

Poverty

Carers Trust (2012) suggest that young carers often belong to low income families, which places them in another vulnerable category, poverty. There is a common misconception that poverty means; being extremely poor. However, a range of factors are included in its definition, which include a lack of: resources, clean water, sanitation facilities, healthcare, and education (Habitat for Humanity, 2017). Poverty can affect different aspects of an individual's life, including economic, cultural, political and income. For the purpose of this essay, income poverty will be reviewed to assess the affects it can have on a child's ability to access education.

Figures from 2017-2018 show that four million children in the UK are living in poverty, which amounts to 30% of children (Child Poverty Action Group, 2019). There are various strategies the government introduced to tackle child poverty across the UK with Wales introducing the Children and Families (Wales) Measure (Welsh Government, 2016). A range of schemes were introduced under this act including, Flying Start (In Brief, 2018). Although a very effective scheme, it has been criticized as it is only accessible for individuals living under specific postcodes, excluding many children who have greater needs of the service (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). However, Flying Start has various positive elements, including the support it gives to children accessing education. This element is quality, free childcare for two to three-year old's (Welsh Government, 2014). This aids parents and offers them the opportunity to work, boosting their financial situation. It also allows children, including those in living in poverty to access education from an earlier age, which will help them learn basic skill they could be lacking (Welsh Government, 2014). However, working families are still suffering in poverty, with studies suggesting that two thirds of children in poverty belong to families who are working (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018).

There are many barriers affecting pupils from accessing education, one of these including the school uniform policy. Regrettably for many their financial situation can

often mean they cannot afford the bare necessities to live. Fortunately, families are able to apply for financial help from the school to help fund the school uniform of their child. The school receives a sum of money from the government, known as pupil premium grant which goes towards supporting disadvantaged pupils. The grant is not just for help with uniform but is used throughout the academic year for teacher training, variety of resources, school breakfast clubs, music lessons, different therapies for their disadvantages pupils and the cost of educational trips (Department for Education, 2020). This should allow all pupils to have access to all the resources they need to succeed. The pupil premium grant promotes social inclusion, as no pupil should go without due to their vulnerable situation which in turn has positive impact on their health and well-being.

Similar to the previous key social elements discussed, the most common problem among students living in poverty, is attainment. Pupils attainment is significantly impacted by the poor background in which they belong to, with studies suggesting that academic success can be impacted by parent's income (Ofsted, 2008). Communities with high levels of poverty, do not always have access to high quality schools, which could mean that teachers are not as qualified and have restricted resources (American Psychological Association, 2020). Without adequate support and guidance, pupils can develop low levels of aspirations. Bandura (1977) suggests children with poor self-efficacy are often lacking self-confidence, believe they are incapable of succeeding and are uninterested in attempting activities (Gray and Macblain, 2015).

Pupils with poor attainment are often reported to have poor attendance (Jensen, 2009). Low attendance has often been related to parental attitudes towards school, if a parent has previously had a poor experience within education, they may believe they are protecting their child by discouraging them to attend (Jensen, 2009). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory focuses on individuals learning through observations and modeling (Gray and Macblain, 2015). Parental attitudes can often hinder the views of a child, and through observations they often mimic their parents behaviour, as well as those in their society. Research shows that poverty, as well as low socioeconomic status can lead to poor behaviour, however Bandura would argue that this behaviour is learnt through observing the people around them. Often poor behaviour stems from weak or anxious attachments formed during early childhood (Jenson, 2019). Therefore, poverty has many barriers for pupils accessing education, from the inability

to afford what is necessary to attend, the lack of academic grades to move on to further education, the absence of support from parents, and their behaviour towards education.

Conclusion:

This essay has utilized theories, policies and practice in order to explore the impact social elements have on an individual's ability to access education. Focusing on three social elements including: parental involvement, young carers and poverty this essay has provided a diverse range of explanations as to why educational access differs among certain social groups. In agreement with Feinstein and Symons (1999), parental involvement represents a significant factor when assessing educational access. As research suggests the beliefs and experiences of a parent within the educational system can be paramount to their child's own successes. However, as identified acting as a young carer with the consequential responsibilities and pressures identified can be just as influential on a child's access to education as any other social element. Finally, the concept of poverty and the striking number of children who live within it in the UK offered further explanations for why these disadvantaged youths find themselves struggling within education.

However, whilst there are barriers to education, this essay also explored the Governmental practices developed to foster a more inclusive educational experience for learners. The Excellence in Schools initiative, the development of the school nurse and the Flying Start program represent examples of these. However, whilst work is being done to remove barriers, these initiatives alone demonstrate the impact social elements have on a learners ability to access education.

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