

## Schools, Education and Social Exclusion

-  CASE invited Jo Sparkes from the LSE's Centre for Educational Research to review the literature and research evidence on education and social exclusion, especially during the years of schooling. This brief summarises her findings.
-  Educational differences are crucial in generating and sustaining social exclusion. Low educational achievement increases the risk of adult exclusion in many ways. Test scores at school are strong predictors of adult outcomes. Adults with low basic skills are five times as likely to be unemployed as those with average skills. Poor numeracy is especially important.
-  Overall educational performance at school has improved in recent years, but not that of the weakest pupils, so the gap between top and bottom achievers has widened. The proportion of young people gaining no GCSE passes has not fallen since the late 1980s.
-  Earlier research suggested that schools were relatively powerless against the basic forces creating social disadvantage. Recent work is more optimistic. It remains true that up to three-quarters of school variation in performance at 16 can be explained by pupil intake factors, and two-thirds of variation between LEAs is associated with the proportion of children from families receiving Income Support. But school factors can raise attainment significantly – for instance, by up to 14 GCSE points for average pupils.
-  All forms of pre-school attendance have a positive impact on tests taken at seven and on later school attendance. Attempts to improve family literacy, parents and children together, have been favourably evaluated.
-  Higher per pupil spending, smaller class sizes and teacher quality in schools all seem to make a difference and some have most impact on disadvantaged pupils.
-  Competition between schools may have raised school performance but also encouraged some high demand schools to exclude the least advantaged.

### Further information

A full account of the review can be found in CASEpaper 29, *Schools, Education and Social Exclusion* by Jo Sparkes. Copies are available free of charge from Jane Dickson, CASE at the address below, or can be downloaded from our internet site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/Case/>.

## Education matters

Educational differences are crucial in generating and sustaining social exclusion. We define social exclusion as the capacity to be involved in work, in the everyday consumption patterns enjoyed by most people, in social and political life. The research reviewed demonstrates that education contributes importantly to individuals' capacity to do all these things.

- ◆ Education test scores during compulsory schooling are the most effective predictors of many adult outcomes.
- ◆ Basic literacy and numeracy are particularly – and increasingly – important. Adults with poor basic skills are five times more likely to be unemployed than those with average skills. Poor mathematical skills are especially important.
- ◆ Recent research on employability emphasises the importance of “soft skills” – capacity to interact with customers and other workers, enthusiasm, and dependability.
- ◆ Poor literacy is a strong indicator of low political participation.
- ◆ Poor education is connected with poor general health and depression.
- ◆ Truancy seems to be important to later life disadvantage, independently from actual educational performance and social disadvantage. Schools contribute to reducing vulnerability to adult social exclusion in ways not captured by exam performance.

Low educational attainment is a key mechanism translating childhood disadvantage into poor social and economic outcomes in later life. But education is only part of the story, as childhood deprivation is associated with lower adult earnings regardless of educational performance.

## Can schools narrow the widening gap?

Significant improvements in overall educational performance have been achieved in recent years. These have not been shared by the weakest pupils. The gap has widened.

- ◆ There have been year on year improvements in the proportion of young people gaining five GCSE grades A-C. But the proportion leaving with no passes has remained stable since the late 1980s.
- ◆ Between 1993 and 1997 the top ten percent of pupils improved their GCSE scores by 4.4 points, the bottom tenth by 0.1 points. (A pass at grade A\* is equal to eight points, at C five points, and at G one point.)

Some argue that schools are relatively powerless in face of the basic forces that create social exclusion. Research in the 1970s and 1980s tended to support that view. It is still true that combinations of social disadvantage powerfully affect a pupil's performance, with up to 75 per cent of school variation in 16 year-old attainment of GCSEs associated with pupil intake factors. These include: personal characteristics, such as prior attainment; low income, unemployment and housing; parents' education; family structure; ethnicity; and variables like parental interest and involvement. Two-thirds of

variation between Local Education Authorities is associated with the proportion of children from families receiving Income Support. But recent work on schools' contribution is more optimistic:

- ◆ School factors can raise attainment significantly – for instance, by up to 14 GCSE points for average pupils. Good schools are particularly important for maths and science.
- ◆ Pre-school and early childhood interventions to help poor children can have an impact on their life chances, US evidence suggests. UK research is less conclusive but new work is building up a positive picture, with pre-school experience having a positive impact on national assessment tests taken at seven and improving school commitment.
- ◆ Physical illness is associated with lower educational attainment and poor attendance. Recent school-based interventions such as the healthy schools initiative and breakfast clubs recognise this and there is some early evidence that they are having effects on attainment, attendance and reducing bullying.
- ◆ Parents' educational levels are important determinants of their children's. Sixty per cent of children in the lowest reading attainment group had parents with low literacy levels; only 2 per cent had parents with high literacy. Attempts to improve family literacy, parents and children together, look promising.
- ◆ Schools "succeeding against the odds" suggest the importance of leadership, a vision of success, improved physical environment, and common expectations about pupil behaviour.

New research also suggests that resources can matter:

- ◆ Previous US research suggested that spending more money on schools made no difference. More sophisticated work now contradicts this, and suggests that higher per pupil spending is associated with higher later earnings. In the UK, with poverty held constant, higher spending is associated with better school performance at LEA level. Higher per pupil expenditure in secondary schools is associated with higher subsequent female wages.
- ◆ Class size was also thought to be largely irrelevant at present ranges of class size. Now US experimental work is suggesting that reduced class size can have an important effect – especially for more disadvantaged pupils. This shows up not merely in improved educational test results but in adult earnings. UK research suggests that this is particularly true for lower ability women. In most of the US studies the impact of lower class size on minority children, most of whom were black, was twice as large as for white students.
- ◆ Teacher quality was always one of the variables showing a positive effect. Now that conclusion has been reinforced. More experienced teachers seem particularly effective in developing students' soft or personal skills. This underlines the importance of the Government's drive to keep experienced teachers in the classroom.
- ◆ The role of the curriculum has emerged as an important factor de-motivating some pupils. Experiments with work-based and adult-focused curricula have proved successful for many pupils most at risk of truancy.

But researchers stress that improving education is only one factor which requires a range of complementary measures to provide high pay-offs. Research has drawn attention to the role and behaviour of employers, especially in their hiring decisions.

### **School exclusions**

These pose a special problem. There was a more than fourfold increase in permanent school exclusions between 1990/1 and 1996/7. Primary school exclusions have been rising faster from a low level. Sixty per cent of the excluded come from unemployed homes. Those in care are more likely to be excluded as are those in need of special needs education. Black children are far more likely to be excluded from school. Those who are excluded have lower aspirations, poor relationships with other pupils, parents and teachers. The Social Exclusion Unit has led work on this and government has sought to encourage local authorities to develop facilities for those pupils with behaviour difficulties and school based programmes to reduce exclusions.

### **Competition and incentives**

While there is evidence that competition between schools and budgetary devolution have raised school performance, notably from the poorest performing schools, it may also have had the effect of encouraging good schools with high demand for places to exclude the least advantaged. Crude league tables may have encouraged all schools to concentrate on those who could raise their scores. The incentives that face schools have been to concentrate on the average and above average children. The challenge, this research suggests, is to reorder the incentive structure to give greater importance to pupils who are failing. This could mean making it more financially advantageous to attract and do well by the socially excluded and to give weight to improvements gained – value added – for these children in assessments of schools' success.

### **More Research**

The survey suggests that more work is needed on the following:

- ◆ What exactly are “soft skills” and how can they be taught more effectively especially to those from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- ◆ What measures are most effective in improving school attendance and reducing school exclusion?
- ◆ What kinds of educational measures can schools take to improve social inclusion beyond basic skill acquisition?
- ◆ How best can parents be involved effectively in their children's education?
- ◆ What measures can best address the non-school factors that affect school performance? These include good diet, space to complete homework, better health, better attendance at school.
- ◆ How can we continue to develop the curriculum and approach to learning for the least advantaged and those most at risk of non-attendance?