



Children and Young People Committee

Child Poverty Inquiry - Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL Cymru)

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers represents over 160,000 education professionals across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It draws its membership from teachers and lecturers, leaders and support staff in maintained and independent schools, and Further Education Colleges. As well as campaigning vigorously to protect and enhance members' pay and conditions ATL also believes that the education profession has a key role in developing education strategy and policy. ATL has taken a leading role in publicizing the impact that poverty has on children's wellbeing.

ATL Cymru represents over 6,500 education professionals in colleges and schools across the whole of Wales.

1.1 Child Poverty

- ATL Cymru believes that it is a nothing short of a national scandal that in 2008 child poverty has actually increased (to 150,000 from 144,000 in 2007). This means 25% of children in Wales are affected.
- 70% of ATL members working in state schools said poverty affects the educational performance of children they teach (ATL, 2007).
- An analysis of student results at ages 14 and 16 clearly demonstrates that the level of student achievement decreases as the level of free school meal entitlement increases.
- ATL agrees with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's observation that whilst much has been done in the field of education to introduce policies to counteract disadvantage, there is little hard evidence about the impact of these policies individually or collectively. Crosscutting research and evaluation in this area needs to be done and we welcome the focus of the Children and Young People's Committee on this area.

- ATL believes that action to tackle the impact of poverty on children is a moral and economic as well as an educational imperative.

1.2 ATL's concerns about current policy impact

- ATL fears that the current emphasis on 'social exclusion' that drives many of the Westminster government's policies on poverty is inadequate. We believe that there needs to be a better understanding between socio-economic status and educational outcomes. ATL believes a systematic focus on social class would lead to more comprehensive and effective policies addressing the cause of poverty and deprivation. We believe that specific groups of people are systematically disadvantaged due to structural discrimination on the basis of, or a combination of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, family status and religion/belief. Social exclusion by contrast focuses on discrete individuals in poverty. This focus can seem to suggest that poverty is the responsibility of the individual concerned who must attempt to lift themselves out of it.
- ATL believes that the WAG needs to adopt an explicit and comprehensive understanding of social class if it is serious about tackling low educational attainment, disadvantage and social exclusion. The quality of school activity only accounts for a 14% variation in pupil's performance and the brightest children in Britain's poorest homes are outperformed by the least gifted children from wealthy homes by the age of seven. The low attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is driven more by a combination of factors related to poverty and deprivation than ability (ATL, 2008).
- A fresh debate on education and social class would reveal whether all schools and colleges are offering a broad and balanced enough education to their pupils.

The Vital Role of Education

- Education plays a key role in tackling poverty, particularly in educating people about the causes of poverty and its effects on social cohesion. The role of education is crucial in promoting and advancing the poverty agenda.
- However we have concerns whether constant economic growth and ever-increasing consumption patterns, which are part of the premise that 'better job opportunities are the main route out of poverty' (cf. Strategy of the Welsh Assembly Government for Tackling Child Poverty, 2005), are ultimately sustainable. We think that new and innovative strategies to tackle child poverty need to be developed; including strategies that acknowledge the inter-linked nature of women's poverty and child poverty are ultimately substantial.
- To simply expect education in its current format to provide a route out of child poverty narrows the scope of the issue in an unacceptable way.

Manifestations of Poverty in schools and colleges

- **Aspirational Poverty.** A clear strategy needs to be put in place to tackle the poverty of aspiration. A recent study of aspirations of young people from deprived inner-city areas has suggested that disadvantaged young people overwhelmingly expect to pursue routes into employment that were already 'known' within their families and local communities. These routes into work were commonly seen as promising a higher chance of success, whilst simultaneously enabling young people to draw on existing contacts and networks. Very few expressed 'higher' aspirations to professional careers. This issue needs to be addressed and in many ways it is an important aspect of (financial) poverty and disadvantage.
- **Links between child poverty and women's poverty.** Child poverty is systemically linked with women's poverty, which in turn is closely correlated with women's family status and disproportionate share of caring responsibilities. Lone mothers or female carers make up 90% of lone parent households and more than two-thirds of these are poor. The WAG needs to adopt a more joined-up approach to ending child poverty and women's poverty and address the causes of poverty and inequality within our society through a focus on social justice rather than social exclusion.
- **Creation of Poverty Ghettos.** Some schools, especially in urban areas, can experience multiple reinforcement of poverty which results in the 'flight' of more affluent parents through the mechanisms of choice available to them. We urge the monitoring of faith and other distinctive provision to ensure that the exercise of such preferences are not the preserve of the comparatively well off. ATL also believes that as faith and other schools are overwhelmingly funded by the public purse, they should be under a key duty to promote social cohesion. Their admission arrangements and curriculum need to ensure that the risk of segregation is minimised, and that their pupils have knowledge of, and contact with, other social strata. Schools should not be allowed to adopt restrictive admissions practices which make them unrepresentative of their local community.
- **Rural Poverty.** There is a strong urban bias when looking at the issue of child poverty. Social exclusion in rural areas is rarely captured in official statistical data because of the dispersal of poor rural households and their often close proximity to affluence. Schools in rural areas experience considerable challenges in offering a range of curricular and extra-curricular experiences. ATL is extremely concerned that rural schools and colleges are not able to offer and maintain a full range of post-16 courses and is concerned by its impact upon students' career choices and life chances. The wider menu of choices for students proposed in *Skills that Work for Wales* and other documents will be disproportionately expensive for schools and colleges in rural areas.

- **Transport Poverty.** The lack of well-resourced, regular and extensive provision of public transport and safe routes to school/college in rural areas currently prevents many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds from taking part in after-school and extra-curricular activities, which have been shown to be an important means of raising self-esteem and increasing participation in education. At the 2008 Wales TUC conference ATL Cymru tabled a motion entitled 'Greening Schools: providing sustainable school transport' which highlighted these concerns. The motion which was endorsed overwhelmingly called for cooperation between the TUC, government and other partners to develop school transport policies that are safe, healthy, and environmentally friendly, and promote walking, cycling, and the use of public transport.
- **Cultural poverty.** We are concerned that the costs of providing non-statutory educational experiences can deter schools with high concentrations of poorer pupils from offering the widest possible educational experience. We wish to contest the stereotyping that can sometimes characterise children from backgrounds of poverty as uninterested in certain cultural activities. Interest has to be fostered by giving children the widest access to a range of cultural activities.

1.3 Examples of school policies having a positive impact on child poverty

Members report the following:

- Many schools supply polo and sweat shirts at cost and discretely offer some families free uniform. Some schools only require children to wear black trousers and plain black footwear in an attempt to keep the uniform affordable.
- Needy children are invited to take part in breakfast club in school to ensure they eat before lessons
- One school supplies exam kits for pupils (paper, pens, pencils, etc)
- Family learning is supported through a group for parental literacy. We are concerned that the curtailment of the RAISE funding will affect programmes such as this and above all pupils and students.
- Homework clubs support pupils who do not have a quiet space, a flat surface to work on, access to reference materials or a supportive adult
- One member's school has an emergency clothes and shoes bank. Most items are donated by staff members

1.4 Recommendations

- WAG needs to move from a concentration on individuals in poverty to a renewed and systematic focus on social class in relation to education
- There should be a fresh debate on whether every part of our education system in Wales can and does in fact promote social mobility

- All WAG's policies and educational initiatives on poverty should include a rigorous rural impact assessment
- WAG should consult with socially excluded households, school, colleges, trade unions, local communities and above all pupils and students in devising practical strategies for tackling socio-economic disadvantage in relation to education.
- WAG should seek to disseminate best practice amongst schools in tackling the effects of poverty.

References

- ATL survey on child poverty, 17th July 2007
- David Egan- Joseph Rowntree Society (2007) *Combating child poverty in Wales: are effective education strategies in place?*
- ATL position paper on poverty and social exclusion in rural areas (2008)

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