

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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INDEPENDENT REVIEW ON POVERTY AND LIFE CHANCES

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

October 2010

ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

Section 1: Early Years and Life Chances

Which aspects of children's early years are the most important determinants of positive outcomes and good life chances? What single aspect of early childhood has the greatest influence?

How can early years support, from parents, children's services and the community best deliver positive outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and their families?

Over 70% of respondents to an ATL survey on child poverty said that poverty has a major impact on the educational performance of children.¹ This reinforces research findings which show a clear correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and low educational attainment even after controlling for measures of family background, such as parental education, and a child's ability.² Low educational attainment from an early age generally leads to fewer qualifications, leaving school earlier, limited employment and career progression prospects, and restricted opportunities to participate and contribute to society (social exclusion). As a result, growing up in poverty, the effects of which can be amplified by additional disadvantage, for example, due to ethnic background, disability or English as an additional language, is the single most important aspect of early childhood which has the greatest influence on children's life chances, particularly with regard to education, health and housing.³

Whilst there are a range of measures that can be identified to offer crucial and most needed support during the early years for disadvantaged children and their families, it is also important to recognise that some very fundamental steps need to be taken by the government to create a framework for any initiatives at familial, local and community level to succeed. At the level of government, these include the need to address:

- in-work poverty (59% of children live in a household where at least one adult works)⁴, for example, by ensuring a living wage and training and career pathways to low earners;

- child poverty as intrinsically linked with women's poverty (42% of poor children live in a household headed by a lone parent; 90% of lone-parent households are headed by women)⁵; for example by enshrining a right to flexible working, equal pay and taking measures to highlight the parental responsibility of fathers; and
- societal and structural barriers based on stigmatisation, prejudice, and discrimination, together with the assumption that poverty is the result of an individual's 'failings', for example, through the implementation of the public sector equality duties and socio-economic duty under the Equality Act 2010 and greater investment in benefits and tax credits.

Other measures include addressing the need for:

- consistent, high-quality early years settings, led by teams which include qualified teachers, well-trained Early Years Professionals and specialist support staff;
- free entitlement to early years provision and a funding formula, including a quality factor and a mandatory deprivation factor, that recognises the strategic importance and parity of this sector with formal education across the key stages and enables flexibility for local authority providers to prioritise support for the most disadvantaged children;
- ensuring high-quality and sustainable early years provision in disadvantaged areas, which cannot rely on any subsidies from more affluent families; at present, less early years provision is available in the 20% most deprived wards⁶;
- involving community focussed supplementary schools and classes;
- effective outreach strategies, including home visits, together with help and support that disadvantaged families would value and use; and
- a continuum of services to offer provision appropriate to the level of need.

Section 2: Family Environment

In what ways do family and home environment affect children's life chances?

What role can the government play in supporting parents to ensure children grow up in a home environment which allows them to get the most out of their schooling?

What role do family earnings and income play in children's outcomes and life chances?

Family earnings and income play a decisive factor in children's educational outcomes and life chances. We have already alluded to the intergenerational poverty trap whereby poverty is closely correlated with low educational attainment, which in turn tends to result in poor employment prospects, little or no career progression, low income and (in-work) poverty. Disadvantaged families in employment are regularly forced to work longer and more unsociable hours which creates increased childcare costs. Their employment status means disqualification from claiming most benefits; and even those with the lowest wages can face such a sharp downturn in benefit eligibility that it actually costs them money to work, especially once travel and clothing costs are taken into account. This is why it is vital to develop at the very least a 100% subsidy of childcare costs for disadvantaged families.

Lack of time, family pressures, including the stress and relationship breakdowns resulting from poverty and debt, poor health and inadequate housing, also frequently act as barriers to a positive home learning environment (HLE), which has been shown to have a key impact on children's life chances by facilitating the early development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills.⁷

Parental education has been shown to affect the home learning environment, and we would therefore urge the government to support parents and communities by promoting a learning society, that is, placing an emphasis on and making sustained provision for lifelong learning. ATL is extremely concerned about cuts to adult and community education in favour of the redirection of funds to vocational training for business and industry. Recent figures suggest that 1.5 million adult and community education places in England have already disappeared in the past three years.⁸ The progressive loss of adult and community learning undermines universal access to education, particularly of those who are out of work or struggle to find employment and has a direct impact on the HLE and the life chances of children.⁹

Reading regularly with 3-year-olds makes a significant difference to a child's later educational outcomes, so there is a clear case for the proper resourcing and support of local and school libraries, together with reading activities led by specialist staff.¹⁰ Home visits and early childhood intervention programmes such as Sure Start have helped, by working with both parent and child together with a focus on enhancing interactions, to increase the quality of the HLE. Children with three years of high quality early years provision have also been shown to be a year ahead in terms of cognitive and social skills by the time they start formal education. The best and most effective early years provision is found in socially mixed settings, which we believe is testimony to the strength and success of the state-maintained sector and a clear indication of the need for and value of well-resourced public services.¹¹

Play and play-based learning both in the HLE and in early years settings are vital to a good childhood and in preparing young children for later education. Young children must have access to high quality outdoor space and facilities, particularly in areas of disadvantage.¹² Opportunities for outdoor play and the provision of play facilities must be a core criterion for any local development programmes.

Section 3: Poverty and life chances and how they are measured

What constitutes child poverty in modern Britain?

How can our measures of child poverty be reformed to better focus policy development and investment on delivering positive outcomes and improved life chances for children?

What are the strong predictors of children's life chances which might be included in any new measure on child poverty?

ATL shares the United Nations Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (2001) definition of poverty as *"a human condition characterised by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights."* This understanding of poverty relates not only to the socio-economic standards of a particular society at a particular time but it is also intrinsically linked with inequality. Poverty, therefore, is a form of multiple deprivation rather than just material deprivation, which includes severe and chronic disadvantage, for example, in relation to education, health, housing, representation, and decision-making. It requires a need for broader social changes in addition to increasing the income of the worst-off members of society to eliminate poverty.¹³

Child poverty manifests itself in the context of families living in poverty and includes educational disadvantage, poor housing, inability to participate in extra-curricular and after-school activities, health problems, including mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, poor nutrition, lack of adequate clothing and access to transport, individual and institutional discrimination, and an inability to participate in social and leisure activities.

Furthermore, the stigma of poverty has a particular detrimental impact on children who generally do not want to be seen as different from their peers.¹⁴

The official definition of the poverty line in Britain is a household income of less than 60 per cent of the contemporary median household income, but this measure fails to take into account any housing and childcare costs, for example, the household size, or any explicit standard of living.¹⁵ Poverty is a complex problem and, beyond income, many of its factors, such as stress or social exclusion, cannot be easily measured. However, ATL believes that in order to improve the focus of policy development to secure better life chances for disadvantaged children, a 'measure' of poverty should include:

- fixing poverty thresholds on a measure of living standards, such as the minimum income standard researched annually by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹⁶;
- an audit of inequality and discrimination, based on stereotypes and prejudices, which disadvantage some groups of people living in poverty even further, such as families from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, children in care, children of asylum-seeking parents and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, parents with disabilities and/or children with disabilities, and lone parent households, in particular those headed by (young) mothers;
- a recognition of the impact of community deprivation, or living in the most deprived areas, but also of the hidden poverty in rural areas¹⁷;
- a poverty threshold which measures actual living standards *after* housing costs¹⁸;
- household size; and
- a measure of the risk of poverty¹⁹.

Any other views:

ATL believes that an effective policy aimed at the elimination of child poverty needs to move away from a concentration on individuals in poverty, within the context of an 'individualised society', and be based on a renewed and systematic focus on social class. An 'individualised society' places an almost exclusive responsibility on the individual for their socio-economic position and detracts from the institutional or structural barriers that make 'success' far more difficult to achieve for some groups of people than for others. If child poverty is to be tackled effectively, there needs to be a clear acknowledgement that poverty is not a problem predominantly for a random collection of individuals but that it affects specific groups of people who are systematically disadvantaged on the basis of, or a combination of, race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, family status and religion/belief.²⁰

An emphasis on employment as the main route out of poverty, in our view, is not only unsustainable at a time of job losses, but it also ignores the inflexibility of the labour market, for example, to provide adequate jobs for people with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities. The welfare state, therefore, fulfils a vital function in tackling poverty, including child poverty, and it is important that its role and contribution to a cohesive and fair society are neither eroded nor undermined through unsustainable cuts to public services.

ATL also believes that the government needs to lead a concerted campaign to tackle gender stereotypes which continue to act to assign caring responsibilities to women and simultaneously disregard the social and economic contribution of women's unpaid work in this area. Our references to the home learning environment above serve to reinforce the need to value parents, both socially and financially, who stay at home with their children for the first year or more. Lone parents should not be threatened with cuts to their benefits but should be properly supported by the state and within their communities.

We would recommend that the Government consults fully with disadvantaged households, early years providers, schools, colleges, trade unions and local communities in devising practical strategies for tackling poverty, including child poverty.²¹

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¹ ATL, 'Poverty has a major impact on children's education and schooling', press release, 11 September 2007.

² DCSF, *Deprivation and Education – The Evidence on Pupils in England*, March 2009, p.6.

³ End Child Poverty with ATL, NASUWT and NUT, 'Child Poverty in the UK: Resource Pack for Schools', 2008.

⁴ *Ibid.*, see also IPPR, *In-work poverty in the recession*, September 2010.

⁵ End Child Poverty with ATL, NASUWT and NUT, 'Child Poverty in the UK: Resource Pack for Schools', 2008.

⁶ National Audit Office, *Early Years: Progress in developing high quality childcare and early education accessible to all*, 2004.

⁷ DCSF, *Deprivation and Education – The Evidence on Pupils in England*, March 2009.

⁸ ATL, *Sustainable Education: Rethink, Review, Reform*, 2009.

⁹ DCSF, *Deprivation and Education – The evidence on pupils in England*, March 2009.

¹⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Poorer children's educational attainment: How important are attitudes and behaviour?* March 2010.

¹¹ DCSF, *Issues in Earlier Intervention: Identifying and Supporting Children with Additional Needs*, March 2010.

¹² End Child Poverty with ATL, NASUWT and NUT, 'Child Poverty in the UK: Resource Pack for Schools', 2008.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *Child Poverty in the UK*, second report, vol.1, 2003-4.

¹⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *A minimum income standard for the UK in 2010*, July 2010.

¹⁷ ATL, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*, position statement, 2008.

¹⁸ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *Child Poverty in the UK*, second report, vol.1, 2003-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. ATL, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*, position statement, 2008.

²¹ *Ibid.*