

Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas

"Poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life."

Nelson Mandela, speech in Trafalgar Square, London, 2005

Introduction

Tackling poverty and disadvantage have been amongst the Government's core priorities for nearly a decade. Crucial to this is a perception that education, and in particular educational attainment, would mitigate the effects of socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusion and ensure opportunities for all. At present, however, children who are eligible for free school meals show substantially less progress across all subjects between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 than their more affluent peers, and young people leaving school at the age of 16 without any or with only very limited qualifications are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds.

To break the link between poverty and low educational outcomes, the Government has implemented a number of policy initiatives in England in recent years, including Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones, Connexions, Sure Start and Educational Maintenance Allowances. Most of these initiatives, which have often been subject to competitive bidding by local authorities, have been targeted at urban areas with high concentrations of poor and deprived households. Yet research has shown that these initiatives have had only a moderate impact so far.

More generally, we also know that the quality of a school only accounts for a 14% variation in pupils' performance and that 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, therefore, is driven more by a combination of factors related to poverty and deprivation than ability.

The persistently strong link between poverty and low educational attainment suggests, in ATL's view, that we need a better understanding of the relationship between socio-economic status and educational outcomes. ATL believes that a systematic focus on social class rather than the Government's current emphasis on 'social exclusion' would lead to more comprehensive and effective policies addressing the causes of poverty and deprivation.

Whilst poverty and deprivation are more prevalent and visible in urban areas, ATL recognises that rural poverty remains a significant, persistent and no less severe problem. We believe that a renewed focus on social class and education would remove the strong urban bias, encouraged by the Government's current understanding of social exclusion, which is reflected in the cluster of initiatives targeted at urban poverty and deprivation.

A fresh debate on social class and education would also have to include further research on whether our schools and colleges are in fact offering a broad and balanced education to all pupils. There is little doubt that at present a considerable number of rural schools and colleges are facing significant obstacles in securing the foundations for the provision of such a broad and balanced education.

ATL believes that the Government needs to adopt an explicit and comprehensive understanding of social class if it is serious about tackling low educational attainment, disadvantage and social exclusion in conformity with the vision and ethos of its *Every Child Matters* agenda.

Social exclusion in rural areas

Breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment remains as much of a challenge for rural schools and colleges as it is for their urban counterparts.

One in five households in rural areas in the UK, including 700,000 children, live below the official poverty line. About half of these are households where someone is in work, but mostly in seasonal, low-skilled and low-paid jobs with few or no prospects for career progression.

Nearly a quarter of 16 year olds in rural areas attain no GCSEs above grade D, and one in twenty does not pass any GCSEs. Similarly, in 2007, over a quarter of 11 year olds in rural areas did not achieve Key Stage 2 Level 4 in Maths and a quarter did not achieve Level 4 in English.

Although a majority of factors due to poverty and deprivation are similar for urban and rural dwellers, ATL believes that the factors due to disadvantage and social exclusion are somewhat amplified for deprived rural households and hence for rural schools and colleges working to facilitate social mobility. Whilst urban poverty is highly visible and well documented, 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.

The invisibility and isolation stemming from rural poverty is compounded by a lack of understanding and collectivity around social exclusion in rural areas. Neighbours often do not share the same experiences and poor rural households have little or no means to join forces in order to campaign for a better future.

ATL believes that this isolation and invisibility is significantly reinforced by the Government's inadequate understanding of social exclusion. On this understanding, social exclusion is perceived to be a problem predominantly for a random collection of individuals in poverty rather than specific groups of people who are systematically disadvantaged due to structural inequalities.

When this is linked with considerations of cost-effectiveness, which favour large-scale interventions that might deliver quick, measurable outcomes, it is no surprise that the Government's understanding of the problem has produced a range of initiatives to tackle deprivation and low educational attainment in primarily urban areas with high concentrations of poor and disadvantaged individuals. ATL believes that a focus on social class, by contrast, would have led to a more comprehensive, root and branch approach to poverty and disadvantage.

Challenges for rural schools and colleges

Aside from the lack of public acknowledgement of rural poverty and its effects, current curriculum and planning demands are adding to the difficulties of many rural schools in contributing towards breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment. Schools in rural areas are experiencing considerable challenges in offering a range of curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

In the post-16 sector, the funding of courses by volume of students at small town further education (FE) and sixth form colleges as the main service providers for rural areas means that it is often not viable for these colleges to run any courses for fewer than 15 students. It is even more difficult for colleges serving rural areas to offer new courses, particularly those which require specific equipment, without at the same time dramatically increasing student participation rates. In practice, many small colleges have had to cancel a number of courses and students have effectively been forced into choosing different and often less suitable courses.

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.

Transport

A recent ATL survey of members working in rural schools and colleges has established that transport is one of the most substantial obstacles to providing a broad and balanced education for all pupils and students in rural educational settings. The lack of well-resourced, regular and extensive provision of public transport and safe routes to school/college 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.

Furthermore, most transport providers for rural schools and colleges already work to capacity in providing home-school transport to an often widely dispersed pupil population.

This means that school and other educational trips will effectively have to take place outside home-school travel times, thus limiting the range and scope of activities that can be undertaken during this time. Where rural schools and FE colleges rely, at an extra cost, on additional transport providers to move pupils or students between different sites, they also often have to commit staff time to ensure adequate supervision.

ATL is concerned that for a majority of rural students, reaching their local college requires travelling significant distances and that many have to travel even further to access appropriate courses. This is compounded by travel problems resulting from the infrequency and inadequate timetabling of public transport servicing rural areas. As a result, many students refuse to undertake these long and often complex journeys on a daily basis and instead restrict themselves to the limited choice of locally available courses.

ATL believes that it is a necessary precondition that a college serving rural areas must at least be sited near the focus of the local public transport system and therefore calls on the Government to pursue a coherent, joined-up approach to public transport to ensure equal access to education for all.

Curriculum, resources and provision


The provision of a broad and balanced education, including for the poor and disadvantaged, in rural areas is also seriously affected by a range of additional factors, some of which already pose specific challenges for often better-resourced urban schools and colleges, such as:

- insufficient resources to recruit and retain specialist staff around special educational needs (SEN), English as an additional language and a range of pastoral support issues;
- a lack of alternative provision for excluded pupils owing to travelling distances;
- persistent difficulties in recruiting headteachers and in making adequate provision for a senior management team;
- the difficulty of providing pay incentives to attract highly skilled staff and the divisive impact of any allocation of teaching and learning responsibility payments on a small staff body in rural schools;
- a lack of employer engagement and inconsistent or patchy provision across institutions of the 14-19 Diploma programme;
- insufficient availability of apprenticeships and an almost complete lack of GCSE evening classes outside major towns, making it impossible for poor rural households to gain or improve their qualifications;
- poor quality buildings, an often limited range of equipment and resources;
- the difficulty of teaching multiculturalism when pupils, parents/ carers and communities have only a very limited experience and understanding of what it means to live in multicultural Britain today.

ATL believes that any new government policies and educational initiatives must not only take into account the above factors, but must also be based on a comprehensive rural impact assessment.

Collaboration of schools/colleges and better provision of information and communication technologies (ICT)

Collaborations of schools or colleges and better provision of ICT in rural educational settings are frequently cited as possible remedies for some of the difficulties of rural schools and



colleges in delivering a broad and balanced curriculum, but ATL believes that these solutions are not necessarily without problems.

Collaborating schools or colleges often encounter logistical and time-tabling difficulties due to long travelling distances for pupils and staff to reach different sites. Discipline procedures and pastoral care systems may also vary between providers, with teaching staff reporting that details of collaborative arrangements are mostly decided amongst senior managers who might subsequently fail to communicate this information in full to their staff.

The partnership working of schools or colleges to support a broad range of educational provision in rural areas is further affected and effectively undermined by mechanisms of choice and competition that have crucially determined the Government's educational policies. As long as schools and colleges have to seek to maintain or raise their local status according to government targets, the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils will continue to be unmet.

Whilst the use of ICT might represent a cost-effective means that goes some way towards tackling issues of remoteness and practicality, ATL believes that ICT provision in itself cannot address the underlying socio-economic issues of social exclusion and deprivation in rural communities. A disproportionate emphasis on ICT, in our view, is irreconcilable with teaching and learning as a collaborative and social experience that fosters mutual understanding, shared values, a sense of community and social cohesion.

Rural schools with a highly mobile pupil population

Similar to their urban counterparts, rural schools providing for pupils with high mobility face explicit challenges around social exclusion. Research has shown that at all key stages of education, mobile pupils perform less well than their peers. This, together with the difficulties presented for mobile pupils' education, is beginning to be acknowledged for vulnerable groups such as refugees and asylum-seekers, Gypsies and travellers and children in care.

A largely unrecognised vulnerable group of mobile pupils, however, are children of armed services personnel who are disproportionately represented at schools in rural areas. Due to the high mobility of many households of armed services personnel, pupils repeatedly show gaps in their education and are often not adequately catered for if they have SEN.

At present, there appears to be no effective tracking system for SEN pupils from armed services backgrounds and the exchange of pupil information between schools with service children is frequently inconsistent. More generally, local authorities do not recognise SEN decisions made by other authorities, requiring a mobile child to undergo a new assessment when moving into a new area. Schools are only accountable for the educational progression of a mobile pupil whilst the child is enrolled in the school, yet progression issues tend to occur most prominently during the gaps in education.

Children from armed services backgrounds are also frequently living in quasi lone-parent households, often in isolation from civil communities and other sources of support which would reinforce any experiences of social exclusion, particularly in times of crisis.

ATL believes that the neglect of service children as a vulnerable group with high mobility is another example of the shortcomings resulting from the Government's approach to social exclusion with its exclusive focus on concentrations of individuals in poverty.

Breaking the cycle of low aspirations through extended services?

A recent study of young people's aspirations from deprived inner-city areas has suggested that disadvantaged young people overwhelmingly expect to pursue 'known' routes 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. No comparable research has so far been undertaken on the aspirations of disadvantaged pupils in rural areas, but anecdotal evidence appears to confirm that these findings are just as valid for rural areas. It has also been reported that disadvantaged pupils' low aspirations often go hand in hand with a lack of parental encouragement and support.

ATL welcomes the Government's determination to challenge this 'poverty of aspirations' as part of its commitment to greater equality, but would caution against any initiatives and strategies that are more of the same. As a starting-point for the development of any effective policies and actions to tackle poverty and disadvantage, including in relation to education, ATL would expect a fundamental re-think of the Government's current approach to social exclusion. Rather than focusing on concentrations of individuals in poverty, ATL recommends that the Government starts to acknowledge that poor individuals are part of a social class and are therefore systematically disadvantaged.

Rooted in a fresh debate on social class and thus based on a better understanding of the link between poverty and educational attainment, ATL believes that extended services around the core curriculum offered by schools might in principle be able to mitigate some of the factors related to structural inequalities.

However, extended services must not be about lengthening school hours. Instead, the Government must encourage local authorities to provide extended services that offer support to those who need it most, and to develop more effective strategies to tackle poverty and deprivation through greater local-level consultation and decision-making.

Conclusion

ATL believes that there are at present serious shortcomings in the Government's approach to tackling poverty and disadvantage, including an insufficient understanding of social exclusion and a lack of acknowledgement of rural poverty as a significant problem, which creates fundamental difficulties, particularly for rural schools and colleges to deliver a broad and balanced education for all. ATL therefore recommends that:

- the Government urgently moves 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 about whether our education systems in the UK can support social mobility;
- that all Government policies and educational initiatives should include a rigorous rural impact assessment;
- the Government consults with socially excluded households, schools, colleges, trade unions and local communities in devising practical strategies for tackling socio-economic disadvantage in relation to education.

This position statement is based on existing research and educational thinking around these issues in the UK.

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