

...children, their world, their education

Cambridge Primary Review Trust Research Briefing 4 (new series)

MIND THE GAP: TACKLING SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

Kate Pickett and Laura Vanderbloemen

In 2009, the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review concluded:

Britain remains a very unequal society. Child poverty persists in this, one of the world's richest nations. Social disadvantage blights the early lives of a larger proportion of children in Britain than in many other rich nations, and this social and material divide maps with depressing exactness onto the gap in educational attainment ... While recent concerns should be heeded about the pressures to which today's children are subject, and the undesirable values, influences and experiences to which some are exposed, the main focus of policy should continue to be on narrowing the gaps in income, housing, health, care, risk, opportunity and educational attainment suffered by a significant minority of children, rather than on prescribing the character of the lives of the majority.

This concern has been carried forward into the work of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, whose eight priorities for primary education are headed by the need to 'tackle the continuing challenge of social and educational disadvantage, and find practical ways to help schools to close the overlapping gaps in social equity and educational attainment.'

In addition to the committed efforts of members of its Schools Alliance and regional networks, the Trust has launched two research projects in pursuit of this priority. One, supported by the Educational Endowment Foundation and run in partnership with the University of York, is developing and evaluating an intervention aimed at elevating the quality of classroom talk and maximising its power to increase engagement and improve attainment among disadvantaged pupils. The other is the focus of this briefing: a review of research in this area commissioned from Professor Kate Pickett and Dr Laura Vanderbloemen.

Kate Pickett is Professor of Epidemiology at the University of York and co-author, with Richard Wilkinson, of *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone* (2009), which was chosen as one of the Top Ten Books of the Decade by the *New Statesman* and won the Political Studies Association's Publication of the Year. She is a co-founder and trustee of The Equality Trust. Dr Laura Vanderbloemen is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College, London. She is an epidemiologist and former teacher and was seconded to The Equality Trust to work with Kate Pickett on an ESRC-funded project to develop educational materials on inequality.

Their CPRT research report, *Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality*, reviews the evidence that unequal educational outcomes and inequalities in educational attainment are related to social inequality. It briefly reports the effects of poverty on educational outcomes, but as it is widely accepted that poverty negatively affects an individual child's ability to learn and to perform at a high level in school and this has been addressed in earlier reports from the Cambridge Primary Review, it gives greater attention to the less well known effects of economic inequality, generally measured as income inequality.

Having shown how, by comparison with many other countries, inequality in Britain is associated with educational under-achievement on key measures such as PISA, the report reviews evidence on the impact of inequality on childhood, parenting, relationships and family life. The report then assesses a number of policies and initiatives intended to narrow or close the gap between disadvantaged children

and the rest, including the coalition government's Pupil Premium, the current government's free school and academy schemes, random and selective allocation for schooling, 'big education' and the 'what works' interventions subjected to randomised control trial for the Educational Endowment Foundation. The report concludes:

Inequality and educational outcomes

- The most important influence on educational attainment, on how well a child develops in the early years, performs in school, in later education and in adulthood, is family background.
- Children do better if their parents have higher incomes and higher levels of education and they do better if they come from homes where they have a place to study, where there are reference books and newspapers, and where education is valued.
- Average levels of educational attainment and children's engagement in education are better in more equal societies.
- Inequalities in educational attainment and outcomes have a social gradient. It is not just poor children who do less well than everybody else: across the social spectrum children do less well than those with household social position just above their own families.
- Inequalities in educational outcomes are more profound in more unequal countries, such that even the children with the highest social position in high inequality societies do less well than their counterparts in more equal societies.

Inequality and childhood

- Parental experience of adversity is passed on to children through pathways that include poverty of time and resources, domestic conflict and violence, parental mental illness and substance use.
- Both quantitative and qualitative evidence show how low relative income and income inequality increase the strain on family life and relationships.
- When children believe themselves to be judged negatively by others, their stress levels are heightened, their cognitive performance is adversely affected, and they feel bad about themselves. In more unequal societies, the quality of social relationships between children suffers they are less likely to find their peers kind and helpful and more likely to bully or be bullied.
- Whether consciously or not, teachers are affected by class and social status prejudice and may discriminate against children with low status. Teacher training in the UK does not systematically include explicit consideration of the meaning of social class and inequality within education.

Closing the gap: what works?

- Spending on education, including targeted spending such as the Pupil Premium, can certainly make a difference, and the evidence shows that it is most likely to do so in schools which are already successful. Yet targeted spending is not sufficient on its own to close the attainment gap and reduce educational inequalities.
- With regard to other policies of the current government, the Swedish experience suggests that free schools lead to deteriorating educational achievement and DfE's claim that academies improve attainment among disadvantaged pupils has been challenged on evidential grounds.
- Yet school-based interventions can help and there are good summaries of evidence available to teachers and policy makers from organisations such as the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF), which promotes and evaluates practical strategies for narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and others.
- One promising area, the focus of several EEF projects including one led by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust itself, is the substance and quality of classroom talk. Another is a 'big education' which raises its sights beyond the traditional fixation on the 3Rs and education for work, essential though these are, and attends no less to education for human fulfilment, interdependence and the good society, also prominent in CPRT's vision.
- Many publicly funded and independent statutory and third sector organisations produce evidence and interventions to tackle education with significant reach and impact.
- However, reducing educational inequality will ultimately depend on reducing social and economic inequality.

Related sources:

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009), The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone, Allen Lane.

The Equality Trust: https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/

The Educational Endowment Foundation: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects/projects-a-z/

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 1: http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/equity/

Cambridge Primary Review, relevant publications:

Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (eds) (2010), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge: Ainscow, M., Conteh, J., Dyson, A. & Gallanaugh, F., 'Children in primary education: demography, culture, diversity and inclusion' (pp 195-216); Barron, I., Holmes, R., Maclure, M. & Runswick-Cole, K., 'Primary schools and other agencies' (pp 97-135); Mayall, B., 'Children's lives outside school and their educational impact' (pp 49-82); Muschamp, Y., Wikeley, F., Ridge, T. and Balarin, M., 'Parenting, caring and educating' (pp 83-96); Daniels, H. amnd Porter, J., 'Learning needs and difficulties among children of primary school age: definition, identification, provision and issues (pp 217-239).

Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge: chapters 4 'Childhood today', 5 'Children's lives outside school', 6 'Parenting, caring and educating', '7 Children's development and learning', 8 'Children, diversity and equity', 9 'Children with special needs', 11 'Foundations: the early years', 20 'Schools, local authorities and other agencies', 24 'Conclusions and recommendations'.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Pickett, K. and Vanderbloemen, L. (2015) *Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality* (CPRT Research Survey 4), York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust. ISBN 978-0-9931032-4-7

The report is available at <u>www.cprtrust.org.uk</u>. The website also contains information about other surveys in this series, and those related to the Cambridge Primary Review.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust was established in December 2012 with the aim of consolidating and building on Cambridge Primary Review's evidence, findings and principles. Supported by Pearson Education, it is based at the University of York and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Trust has eight priorities (equity, voice, community, sustainability, aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and four programmes (policy, research, schools, professional networking and development).

Enquiries: The Administrator, Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Derwent College M, University of York, York, YO10 5DD. Phone: 01904-323468.

Email: <u>administrator@cprtrust.org.uk</u>. Website: <u>www.cprtrust.org.uk</u>.

Note: the views expressed in the Cambridge Primary Review Trust research surveys and briefings are those of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Pearson Education or the University of York.





Copyright © 2015 Cambridge Primary Review Trust