


2 skint 4 school

**Time to end the
classroom divide**

**CHILD
POVERTY
ACTION
GROUP**

 we support
end child poverty

Gabrielle Preston

CPAG policy briefing: March 2008

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CPAG promotes action for the prevention and relief of poverty among children and families with children. To achieve this, CPAG aims to raise awareness of the causes, extent, nature and impact of poverty, and strategies for its eradication and prevention; bring about positive policy changes for families with children in poverty; and enable those eligible for income maintenance to have access to their full entitlement. If you are not already supporting us, please consider making a donation, or ask for details of our membership schemes, training courses and publications.

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Executive summary

Progress on child poverty appears to be faltering, and the educational gap is widening. Although the Government is focusing on education to reach its 2020 target to eradicate child poverty and expenditure on education has risen by more than 60 per cent in real terms since 1996–97, the gap between rich and poor pupils gets steadily wider as they progress through the education system.

Although this gap is in place well before a child reaches school-age and is inextricably linked to multiple socio-economic factors beyond the school gates, charging policies within schools are damaging children's access to educational opportunities.

Exclusion from the system

- ◆ **Selection.** The UK has one of the closest associations between social class and educational performance in the OECD and one of the highest levels of social segregation in schools.
- ◆ **Disadvantaged schools.** Poor children are more likely to attend schools lacking in resources, but poor performance is more closely associated with low income than the quality of the schools.
- ◆ **Complex funding streams.** A failure to target resources effectively on poorer children is an ongoing problem.
- ◆ **Targeted interventions.** These can be effective, but may not reach the children who need it most.
- ◆ **Truancy and exclusions.** Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to be excluded, or to exclude themselves, from school.
- ◆ **Outside the system.** Children who face the greatest risk of poverty may end up out of education, employment and training altogether, sometimes when they are as young as 14.

Exclusion within the system

- ◆ **School costs.** Charging policies exclude poorer children from cultural, social and educational activities within schools.
- ◆ **Access to the national curriculum.** Costs deny access to the core curriculum – for example, the internet and revision guides – and to more creative activities – for example, music, art, photography and food technology.
- ◆ **Poor nutrition.** This affects children's concentration, and yet, despite the extended school day, free school meals are often available only at lunchtime, and take-up is low.
- ◆ **Low expectations.** Disadvantaged children tend to view schools as a punitive environment more than their more affluent peers.

Meanwhile, a great deal of education takes place outside of school. So, government policies which focus on benefit sanctions to improve 'behaviours' among disadvantaged groups are likely to *increase* child poverty and *exacerbate* educational inequalities. To reduce the educational gap, the Government needs to ensure that:

- ◆ Parents have a sufficient income to safeguard themselves and their children from the entrenched problems associated with living in poverty, irrespective of their work status;
- ◆ Children's well-being is placed at the forefront of the Government's childcare and educational reform programme;
- ◆ Charging policies reduce or eradicate educational costs for poor families;
- ◆ Nutrition is improved;
- ◆ Child poverty in the UK is placed on the curriculum for all teacher training courses.

Introduction

In 1990, CPAG published *The exclusive society: citizenship and the poor*, which showed that 'the institutional injuries inflicted by punitive social security regulations, racist and sexist welfare legislation, or increasingly differentiated educational provision, deny large numbers of people their full social rights'.¹ Today, although the Government has implemented a huge array of policies designed to reduce child poverty, disadvantaged children living in the UK are still not faring well. Child poverty may well be on the rise, and research suggests that far from reducing disadvantages, the education system is increasing them.

Problems at school are undoubtedly compounded by poor and inaccessible services, an inadequate benefit system and poor labour market practices. However, some educational policies are also actively damaging poor children, blighting their childhood experiences and perpetuating disadvantages from one generation to the next. Although Butler's Education Act of 1944 stipulated that 'no fees shall be charged in respect of admission to any school maintained by a local education authority, or to any county college, or in respect of the education provided in any such school or college',² some schools today use both overt and disguised charging mechanisms in a discriminatory way.

Can schools do more to support children living in poverty?

Building on CPAG's policy report, *Chicken and egg: child poverty and educational inequalities*, and drawing on comments and emails from parents, teachers and other practitioners, this briefing places the link between child poverty and education into a wider socio-economic context – and at the heart of the Government's 'rights and responsibilities' agenda. *2 skint 4 school* – an expanded version of CPAG's chapter in *Why Money Matters*, by Save the Children³ – considers to what extent the education system can and should redress socio-economic disadvantages. Do educational practitioners know

enough about the impact that poverty has on children and parents? Could the Government do more to support teachers? Are government policies helping or hindering children's progress at school? Are resources being sensibly and effectively allocated?

We would like to hear teachers' views on this briefing. You can send your comments to us at education@cpag.org.uk, or you can fill in a short questionnaire online at: www.cpag.org.uk/2skint4school.

Child poverty – the political context

On 18 March 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair famously delivered his promise that the Labour Government would 'eradicate' child poverty by 2020. The Government asserted that its child poverty strategy would be based on 'work for those who can, security for those can't'. A significant increase in financial support for children was hence accompanied by a massive 'welfare to work' programme designed to get disadvantaged groups (primarily disabled people and lone parents) into employment. However, the commitment to provide financial 'security' via the benefit system has been eclipsed by the promise of 'support', much of which is designed to get families into work and is insufficient in itself.

It was within this context that 'education, education and education' was placed at the forefront of the child poverty agenda. A massive programme of government expenditure was promised – and delivered – as part of a 'learn and earn' society.⁴ The implementation of a 'world class' education system to improve the UK's performance in a global market was accompanied by improvements in training and skills as outlined in the Leitch report, which boldly pronounced that "economically valuable skills" are our mantra.⁵ But are children being viewed simply as prospective employees rather than citizens with rights?

Chicken and egg?

A broad perspective is needed when considering the ways in which education and poverty are inextricably linked, and policy initiatives should take a 'life chances' approach. Children whose parents may themselves have experienced disadvantages are predisposed to educational failure from the moment they are born.⁶ By the time they go to school, they are already falling behind their better-off peers and the attainment gap gets steadily wider as they progress through the system. As adults, children who are let down by the educational system are more likely to be reliant upon benefits or to move into low-paid, insecure jobs. Their children are more likely to be poor and to experience educational failure.

The links between socio-economic disadvantages and educational failure are complex, but they provide some insight into the sort of issues that children, parents and teachers are coping with on a daily basis.

- ◆ **An inadequate income.** Research indicates that in the UK ‘income has an independent effect on children’s outcomes, on top of key aspects such as family background and children’s measured ability’.⁷ Low achievement is closely associated with economic disadvantage. Not only does poverty leave parents struggling to provide nutritious food, warmth and appropriate clothing for their children, which has a huge negative impact on their ability to engage with the educational process, but it also profoundly affects the physical and mental well-being of both parents and children.
- ◆ **Health inequalities.** Children born into poor families are more likely to have a low birth weight and experience disability and ill health. There are marked differences in cognitive development and behaviour between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.
- ◆ **Housing.** Poor housing impacts significantly on a child’s ability to attend or engage with the educational process. Constant moves interrupt a child’s schooling, and lack of a quiet space at home inhibits a child’s ability to do homework or interact with friends.
- ◆ **Labour market disadvantage.** Children who are failed by the education system are likely to be disadvantaged by a labour market which demands skills and training they may not have. Discriminatory practices, low wages and inflexible employers keep employment levels low for some disadvantaged groups (eg, women and disabled people), irrespective of their academic qualifications. This has an impact on children’s identity and aspirations for the future.

The early years

For many decades, research from a wide spectrum of disciplines has indicated that a child’s earliest experiences have a life-long impact on their development. It is therefore hardly surprising that problems start early for poor children – well before they arrive at school. The link between a child’s attainment level and their social class is evident by the time they are 22 months, and becomes more marked by the age of ten.⁸ More recent evidence has found that by the age of 3 some disadvantaged children are lagging a full year behind their better-off peers in terms of cognitive development, social skills and school-readiness.⁹ This has been linked to high levels of stress and ill health associated with low social status for both parents and children.¹⁰

Schools: making a bad situation worse?

Research undertaken in 2003 exposing a close link between a child’s progression at school and family income ‘found no evidence that entry into schooling reversed this pattern’, and concluded that ‘schools face an enormous challenge if they are to reduce the effects of economic inequality.’¹¹ Despite strenuous efforts to reduce the educational divide, government statistics show that the gap between rich and poor pupils achieving good GCSEs is widening, with better-off pupils performing better at all stages than those eligible for free school meals, ‘irrespective

of race or gender'. Recent statistics show that just over 5,000 pupils entitled to free school meals remain at school to do A-levels, out of whom a mere 176 received 3 As.¹² By the time children reach higher education, the gap has become a yawning chasm and the drop-out rate for poorer students remains high. Only one-fifth of the lowest achievers progress to a further education college or receive additional training. Yet the Government is increasingly reliant upon the education system to help reach its 2020 target on child poverty. What more can schools do to reduce child poverty?

Education and child poverty – a joined-up approach?

The Government has implemented wide-ranging educational reforms, designed to improve outcomes for poor children, get disadvantaged parents into work and increase choice for parents and schools. A flurry of initiatives designed to help disadvantaged children has been accompanied by a significant increase in educational resources.¹³ Per-pupil spending levels are now 'up to record levels.'¹⁴

A vast array of sometimes contradictory policies has been implemented on a wide front. Welcome and positive initiatives – such as the extension of free nursery entitlement to all three- and four-year-olds, one-to-one tuition in English and maths and the introduction of a new Diploma have been accompanied by more aspirational announcements, such as the new guidance on 'schools' duty to promote community cohesion' and the recent directive that disadvantaged children should have access to five hours of cultural activity a week. While additional funding to address mental health in schools, improve the quality and take-up of school meals and enhance support for disabled children are very welcome, fundamental structural reforms have done little to even out inequalities and may have made them worse. Some policies – for example tightening the admissions code – seem designed to counter-balance the impact of others, such as the creation of City Academies and moves to facilitate greater independence for some schools and enhanced 'choice' for some parents.

'There are great dangers...[of a Trust School] becoming isolated and cut off from the rest of borough schools and colleagues in those schools – no common admissions arrangements, no buy-in to properly qualified and resourced local authority services, but instead widespread use of consultations, no joined LEA training, nowhere to turn to in the LEA when things go wrong. The school ends up existing in its own little bubble – out of touch and believing it is great.'

A parent commenting on school consultation

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) – the purpose of which, according to its website, 'is to make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up' – has

assumed responsibility for ‘promoting the well-being, safety, protection and care of all young people’. This sent out hopeful messages about the Government’s recognition of the need for a more holistic approach to children. New policy initiatives designed to reduce educational inequalities and enhance child well-being and childhood experiences are generated almost on a daily basis. A new **Child Poverty Unit** has been set up within the DCSF, to include representatives from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), ‘with the remit of co-ordinating and developing policy with HM Treasury and across Whitehall that will support the ongoing work to end child poverty’.¹⁵

A **Children’s Plan**¹⁶ has been put in place to ‘strengthen support for all families during the formative early years of their children’s lives’, ‘take the next steps in achieving world-class schools and an excellent education for every child’ and ‘help to make sure that young people have interesting and exciting things to do outside of school. **Children’s Trusts** will take a ‘leadership role’ in every area, with schools playing ‘a new role ...as the centre of their communities.’ However, as is the case with so many new policies, anecdotal evidence suggests that they may undermine existing provision.

‘Funding via the Children’s Fund is being taken away by Children’s Trusts, but they aren’t that well established...if the money [we have been administering for the last five years] goes to someone new in the local authority it won’t get out to the grassroots level. They don’t have the skills, the understanding of local needs, or the contacts...’

Spokesperson for a voluntary sector organisation that has been providing support and services to disadvantaged children and young people for many years and administering support to local groups via the Children’s Fund for five years

Although the Children’s Plan stresses the need for more effective links between schools, the NHS and other children’s services ‘so that together they can engage parents and tackle all the barriers to the learning, health and happiness of every child’, it remains to be seen whether a sufficient change in attitudes, political will and resources will be put in place to make these laudable aspirations a reality.

Although spending on education is essential to eliminate wider inequalities, and well-targeted educational initiatives are of course beneficial, recent research has exposed a discrepancy between investment in educational support and improvements in the educational experiences of children.¹⁷ While the DCSF has dismissed such findings as ‘cherry picking’,¹⁸ the Government’s own approach is sometimes selective, drawing for example on research emanating from the USA on welfare reform and parenting behaviour programmes, while ignoring more positive home-grown solutions that emphasise the need to prioritise minimum income standards and benefit adequacy. While the DCSF is committed to implementing the *Every Child Matters* agenda, discussion of a child’s right to ‘economic well-being’ – one of the five outcomes – has been muted, particularly within the educational arena. Educational initiatives that ameliorate the symptoms of poverty continue to take priority over providing families with the money they need to avoid it in the first place. The Government’s spending priorities ignore strong evidence that factors outside school are significant, ‘with the family being of fundamental importance and financial and material

resources playing a key role'.¹⁹ Ed Balls is right to say that 'those who use poverty or deprivation as an excuse for poor performance are letting children down'.²⁰ It is clear that lack of family income is damaging children's educational outcomes.

Welfare to work – creating problems?

Meanwhile, genuine attempts within the DCSF to enhance the lives and engage the trust of disadvantaged children, young people and families are being actively undermined by an increasingly punitive approach to welfare reform. Despite incontrovertible evidence of a close link between family income and educational outcomes, the Government is increasingly threatening the use of benefit sanctions to improve 'behaviours' among disadvantaged groups. Yet research shows that while even short-term drops in income have a negative impact on parent and child well-being, rises in income produce noticeable improvements in parent-child relationships, a reduction in truancy and smoking, general well-being and a higher staying-on rate at school.²¹ Although CPAG supports strategies to help people who want and are able to work to access good quality jobs, stigmatising and sometimes threatening announcements from various government departments targeting the most disadvantaged groups (lone parents, disabled people, young people, people living in social housing and asylum seekers) are doing little to reassure them that the Government has their best interests at heart or to persuade them to participate in education, training or employment. Misleading rhetoric may well have a negative impact on educational practitioners' attitude to disadvantaged groups.

Despite a significant increase in support, contradictions within the welfare to work agenda have direct implications for educational inequalities.

- ◆ On the one hand, policies to improve outcomes for children and reduce the gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers have focused on increasing free, part-time early years education for all children.
- ◆ On the other hand, policies driven by the Government's conviction that paid employment is the most effective route out of poverty have focused on childcare policies and extended school provision designed to support more parents into work. Unlike state schools, childcare and extended school providers can levy charges. While financial support is provided to working parents via the childcare element of working tax credit, it is only available to people who work 16+ hours and access formal childcare, so take-up is low among disadvantaged groups. Workless families are not entitled to claim.

Although the Government argues that this two-pronged approach constitutes a coherent strategy on child poverty, it has muddled the boundaries between family, education and employment policies in ways that are not necessarily in the best interests of children, and has led to a system in which some educational support for children – whether it is

provided via childcare or extended schools – is dictated by a parent’s work status rather than a child’s needs. This may be having an impact on families’ approach to early years’ provision. Disadvantaged families are less likely to have access to sustainable, high quality, affordable childcare. They may not know about or choose not to avail themselves of early years’ services that are on offer. Take-up of formal childcare is low among disadvantaged groups, partly because the childcare tax credit is provided only to working parents, and an evaluation of Sure Start suggests that in some areas services are failing to reach the most disadvantaged families.²² Take-up of educational services is also directly affected: use of free nursery entitlement is low among some disadvantaged groups. Although the reasons for this are not fully understood, a recent report reveals that some providers of ‘free nursery provision’ are in fact charging parents.²³

The predominance of a ‘welfare to work’ approach within childcare has also resulted in erratic and variable provision, with private and voluntary sector providers being vulnerable to fluctuating demand and funding, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Some voluntary sector providers are being forced to charge for services that they previously provided for free.

‘We get funding from the local authority, but we’re expected to establish ‘self-sustaining’ provision, so we need to keep schemes full, ensure parents are paying their contribution and run schemes on a business model. Problems arise when there is a financial shortfall. Who’s responsible for costs if the scheme is not making a profit?... If the Government is serious about using childcare schemes to get parents into work, they need to subsidise the scheme for five years to establish the sort of stability of provision that will earn the trust of parents. For the moment however, we’re taking financial risks – with a potentially negative impact on our long-term relationship with local families.’

A spokesperson from a voluntary sector organisation that has been providing after-school play schemes in an area of high child poverty for over 30 years

Welfare to work policies may increase stress (but not necessarily incomes) for some groups, particularly lone parents, and their children.

‘When you actually work with [lone parents], quite often what happens is: they’ll come in and they’ll say something like, “I’m in work and now I’m in debt. I’ve been encouraged to go into work by the Government. Everything’s going wrong. I’ve got one child with this childminder. I’ve got a child in an after-school club. How can I get [to] one from the other?” ...We can help people into employment without thinking, in a sense, about the consequences to their mental health and the consequences for their children.’

Welfare rights worker

Furthermore, there is some confusion about the merits of childcare for very young children. On the one hand, access to high quality childcare is considered to be particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. On the other, poor quality group care from an early age can accentuate problems, generating high levels of stress and is associated with developmental issues. A longitudinal study suggests that while children aged 36 months+ benefit from two or three hours of

high quality pre-school nursery education, younger children, who need a more intimate and predictable bond with their carer, may experience emotional disturbance from a very early age if they spend too long in unsuitable care.²⁴ There is significant variation in outcomes depending on the type of provider, the number of hours and the age of the child. Little is known about the impact on young children of moving in and out of childcare as their parent moves in and out of work. Is current childcare provision helping or hindering children's development? Has moving parents into work and improving 'outcomes' for children taken precedence over enhancing childhood experiences? Meanwhile, the Government should take note of the OECD's directive that while year early years' programmes can lessen the consequence of disadvantage, they cannot resolve issues associated with structural poverty.²⁵

Schools – redressing disadvantage?

Given the broad socio-economic problems, the policy constraints and contradictory agendas within central and local government and complex funding streams, the role that schools can play in the area of child poverty is perhaps limited. A good school and a committed teacher cannot compensate children for poor housing, a lack of books and a computer at home, or for social and cultural exclusion generated by poverty or discrimination. Teachers cannot ignore league tables or the national curriculum. They cannot improve delivery of benefits and tax credits, or rectify a fundamental lack of trust in public services.

'Schools and teachers in poorer areas from that point on are constantly playing catch-up, and finding ways to speed-up the process. In many cases they are trying desperately to meet the emotional needs of the child so they are in a position to learn.'

A teacher

However, while poverty and its impact on children are complex and wide-ranging, it is undoubtedly the case that a high quality education system can make a difference throughout a child's schooling. For the moment however, while many schools strive to be inclusive, and teachers in disadvantaged areas are struggling to balance the social, emotional and behavioural needs of disadvantaged poor children alongside delivery of an increasingly prescriptive and demanding curriculum, children who are at the greatest risk of poverty (for example, children with special educational needs) are faring worse in schools.

Exclusion from the educational system

There are a number of school-based policies that are having a negative impact on children's outcomes.

- ◆ **Selection.** Although research shows that children from disadvantaged

backgrounds do best in educational environments with a wide socio-economic range, the UK has one of the closest associations between social class and educational performance in the OECD and one of the highest levels of social segregation in schools. 'Good' schools continue to defy the law and select children on the basis of their socio-economic background.²⁶ This tendency may reflect the need to enhance a school's performance in the league tables or reduce teaching problems associated with socio-economic disadvantage. Research also shows that 'even when they are situated in deprived inner city areas, religious schools have fewer poor children than local authority secondary schools'.²⁷

- ◆ **Disadvantaged schools.** Teachers in disadvantaged areas are struggling to cope with a huge variety of problems that may not be present in schools in more affluent areas. Disadvantaged children are more likely to attend disadvantaged schools, though poor performance is more closely associated with 'the disadvantage that free school meal (FSM) status reflects'²⁸ than the quality of the schools they attend. The fact that middle class children do well in disadvantaged schools²⁹ suggests that problems are not necessarily associated with poor teaching, although the aspirations of teachers, parents and children may also be a factor.

'It's a sought-after high school, but personally I don't know what the hoo-ha is about...It has very few disabled children, or children on FSM, or children with any difficulties at all. You have to wonder how hard it is to be a 'good' school in these circumstances.'

Lone parent

- ◆ **Complex funding streams.** These often impede money reaching the children who need it most. A fundamental failure within the system to target resources efficiently and effectively on poorer children is a problem.³⁰ Local authorities are less redistributive than central Government, and schools sometimes fail to target additional funding appropriately or effectively.

'On paper, his position is a dream – he's got 35 hours' support in this area and that area, [his statement of special educational needs outlines] all the things that are provided and supposed to happen for him, but the reality is the resources aren't there, so they have very little effect on my child. The school doesn't have the budget...The local authority have entered a legal agreement with me, but if I have to fight for what I want for my child. I have to get a solicitor...'

Lone parent whose child has special educational needs

- ◆ **Targeted interventions,** Although some forms of support – for example Reading Recovery Schemes – can be very effective, research suggests that targeted measures may generate segregation and generally fail to provide support to many of the children eligible for special programmes.³¹
- ◆ **Truancy and exclusions.** Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to be excluded, or to exclude themselves, from school. New figures show that truancy rates have risen to their highest levels since records began in 1997.³² Research indicates that 'pupils' attendance tends to be lower in schools with higher levels of

socio-economic disadvantage'. While the reasons for this are complex, she suggests it is in part 'likely to be due to higher levels of sickness' which are directly associated with poverty.³³

- ◆ **Outside the system.** A shocking number of children who face the greatest risk of poverty end up out of education, employment and training altogether, sometimes from as early an age as 14. Although disaffection and formal exclusions are factors, these children are more likely to report having left education 'because of the need to earn money or because their parents could not afford for them to continue.'³⁴

Exclusion within the educational system

A number of factors associated with poverty prevent children from getting the most out of school.

'The fuss [the school] made about school uniforms is a disgrace...When he started I also had to buy an introductory kit for £22 – a plastic folder with stationery with the school logo ...'

Lone parent

- ◆ **School costs.** Recent research has identified that wide-ranging costs 'vary considerably between schools and can cause difficulties for low-income families.'³⁵ Poorer children may not be able to go on school trips or participate in foreign exchange arrangements; they may not attend social, school-based events or concerts because of entrance costs or an expensive 'dress code'.

'I'm still paying for a school trip...They went away for five days...The whole class has been told they're going on the trip, how am I supposed to say he can't go?...He feels like an alien half the time, he doesn't feel like the others, he doesn't feel like one of them. He asks me "Why am I different, why am I different?" I'm not going to make him feel that he's different.'

A lone parent whose son has special needs

- ◆ **Access to the national curriculum.** Poorer children may not be able to buy set books or revision guides, and are less likely to have access to computers and the internet at home.³⁶ Children whose access to creative and cultural activities at home and in the wider community is limited because of costs may not be able to access the more creative aspects of the curriculum – such as music, art, photography or food technology – because of charging policies.

'All governing bodies are required to have a charging policy, which parents can see. Although governing bodies can decide to remit the charges – for example, for music classes or after-school clubs – schools often don't understand their legal responsibilities. Legally, no parent on income support should be required to pay for residential trips. [But] parents tell me that the headmaster asked them to come in and explain why they can't pay. Parents don't necessarily want to meet the headteacher, so they usually pay themselves, or their children don't

participate. One parent with three children told me that when she saw the headteacher she was told she had to make a contribution to a school trip anyway.'

A school governor

- ◆ **Poor nutrition.** Although research and common sense have indentified a close link between educational attainment levels and nutrition – both long-term and during the school day – poor families may not be able to buy high quality, nutritional food. Children often arrive at school hungry, and yet, despite the extended school day, free school meals are frequently only available at lunchtime. Furthermore, take-up of free school meals remains low, entitlement is limited to workless families (and many poor children have parents in work) and delivery may be stigmatising.

'My son is in Year 7 and receives free school meals, which is loaded onto his smart card on a daily basis. However, his use of the card is restricted by the school, and he is unable to use the card before 1.15pm. This rule apparently does not apply to children whose parents can independently afford to load the card; they have no time restrictions placed upon their usage.'

A lone parent

- ◆ **Low expectations.** Research has found that disadvantaged children tend to view schools as a more punitive environment than their more affluent peers.³⁷ Some parents may find it difficult to engage with schools, and some teachers may have lower aspirations for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

'The teachers ... had low expectations of us. I remember a conversation and they said "what do you want to be?" and I said "I want to be a computer programmer", and they said "Be more realistic!"'

A youth worker

'A great deal of education takes place out of school'

There is increasing awareness of the fact that a great deal of education takes place outside of schools – at home and in the wider community. Yet children from disadvantaged backgrounds who often have a shorter school day than children in private schools are frequently unable to engage in social, sporting or creative activities in the wider community because of costs, inaccessibility, poor transport, lack of information, unsafe neighbourhoods or fear of stigma.

Although the Government recognises the need for disadvantaged children to access extra-curricular activities, the damaging conflict between its desire to improve disadvantaged children's outcomes on the one hand, and get their parents into work on the other, is plainly illustrated within extended schools. Recent research shows that young people on free school meals are 'less likely to participate in after school activities than those from more affluent homes... because rich parents

were able to buy their children access to such clubs, while poorer parents could not'.³⁸ Children in workless households may be excluded because their parents don't receive financial support via the childcare element of working tax credit. This means that the most disadvantaged children may be missing out on opportunities to socialise and participate in extra-curricular activities in and out of school. They may therefore fall behind other children during long summer breaks.

Although the Government has announced a £1 billion boost for extended schools, and promised that every child will be able to access breakfast clubs, out-of-hours tuition and after-school clubs in sport, music and drama and has stipulated that local authorities must ensure that 'children with disabilities or special educational needs must be able to access all the services',³⁹ other disadvantaged groups – for example children with sick or disabled parents, who may experience high levels of social exclusion – are not specifically mentioned. As discussed above, lack of funding and skilled practitioners is an ongoing issue. Meanwhile, somewhat confusingly, guidance has also been issued to schools allowing them to charge for extra-curricular activities.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Government could do better

The fact that the gap between poor children and their better-off peers is in place well before a child goes to school suggests that there are limitations to what the education system as a whole can do to compensate children for the disadvantages associated with living in poverty. However, while differentiating between the impact that educational interventions rather than increased financial support for parents are likely to have on children's lives is difficult, the current balance is completely wrong. While the welcome increase in educational funding has secured progress on a number of fronts, statistics reveal a widening educational gap between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers. It is worrying that the Government seems to be intent on passing responsibility for reducing the impact of poverty on children's lives to local authorities, schools and increasingly to parents themselves without necessarily providing them with the financial resources – or the legal rights – to enable them to do so.

In the interests of both humanity and equity, it is essential that more emphasis is placed on safeguarding parents from the poverty that blights their children's lives than on costly and sometimes ineffective interventions designed to resolve its symptoms. As Save the Children's report *Why Money Matters* makes powerfully and poignantly clear, low incomes exact a high price on children's lives – particularly in the educational arena – reducing their standard of living 'well below what most people would deem an acceptable level for a country of the UK's wealth'.³⁴¹

Furthermore, contradictory policies emerging from and within different departments are proving costly for government and families alike. In the

misguided belief that work is always a route out of poverty, the Government is putting in place punitive policies that will reduce income for some of the most disadvantaged groups in the UK and potentially increase child poverty. The use of stigmatising language about worklessness and ministerial threats about benefit sanctions are undermining public support for the Government's child poverty targets. Driving disadvantaged groups who have been systematically let down by educational, housing, health and social security systems into low-paid employment and/or sanctioning benefits is damaging vulnerable young people, parents and children.⁴²

Meanwhile, the Government's failure to address wider financial inequalities in society as a whole is damaging childhood experiences and shrivelling hopes, aspirations and expectations among children, parents and educational practitioners.

'It's getting worse ... It's both race and working class – white, Asian, black – and there's a divide between rich and poor.'

Youth worker

And so could schools...

2 skint 4 school provides strong evidence that local authorities and schools can and should do more to enhance children's access to and experiences of the educational system. Charging policies, selective practices and elitist attitudes within the educational establishment are creating wider disadvantages. On the other hand, although schools reflect the society around them, they cannot change attitudes single-handedly. Schools must be supported to recognise and meet the needs of poor children by ensuring they are included in every aspect of school life.

Recommendations

Parents must have a sufficient income to safeguard themselves and their children from the entrenched problems associated with living in poverty, irrespective of their work status.

Children's well-being must be at the forefront of the Government's childcare and educational strategy, irrespective of their parent's work status. Early years' provision must be driven by the needs of the child, and not the Government's employment strategy. Children in workless households, who do not qualify for financial support for childcare, must be included at all times – for example by separating the childcare element from working tax credit, and/or increasing free nursery care.

Educational costs continue to pose significant barriers to education. **Charging policies that reduce or eradicate educational costs for poor families must be put in place.** Extra-curricular activities that enhance children's social, intellectual and emotional development should either be provided free, as an integral part of the curriculum, or

should be funded by local authorities or the schools themselves so that every child can benefit from extended school provision. Furthermore, schools in disadvantaged areas should receive additional funding to ensure that children whose access to creative activities at home and in the community is limited are the beneficiaries of enhanced provision.

Improving nutrition for children is also crucial. While the introduction of the Free School Meals Eligibility Checking System (the DCSF 'Hub', which will enable local authorities to check FSM eligibility automatically against data held by a number of government departments) is very welcome, **all children should have access to healthy food before, during and after the school day.** Schools should be given sufficient resources to ensure that all children are provided with the healthy food they need to participate actively in the education process.

'I'm seeing children who are hungry all the time... What I've observed is nothing to do with parental ignorance, it's because there's no money. The mother – who's usually a lone parent – is trying to cope on completely inadequate benefits, often while paying off lone sharks.

Chief Executive of a social enterprise, which delivers life skills and opportunities in areas of high child poverty

Child poverty in the UK should be placed on the curriculum for all teacher training courses. Understanding its causes and impact is particularly important for early years' practitioners.

We would like to hear your views

Teachers are dealing with children from a wide range of backgrounds on a daily basis. CPAG would like to hear your views and opinions on the current debate. For example:

- ◆ Is there a fundamental lack of understanding of child poverty in the UK and its impact on families and children?
- ◆ What sort of issues related to child poverty affect teachers in the classroom? Are these changing?
- ◆ What policy initiatives are having a positive impact on your ability to support disadvantaged children?
- ◆ Are there any initiatives that are making your job harder?
- ◆ Can schools do more to compensate children for low parental income?
- ◆ Could more be done to reduce educational costs or provide non-stigmatising support to poor children?
- ◆ Does your school receive sufficient funding to provide support for disadvantaged children?
- ◆ What schemes do you think are the most effective?
- ◆ What initiatives do you think are failing to have an impact?
- ◆ What other issues would you like us to consider?

We would particularly like to hear about school-based strategies and schemes that are making a real difference – for example breakfast

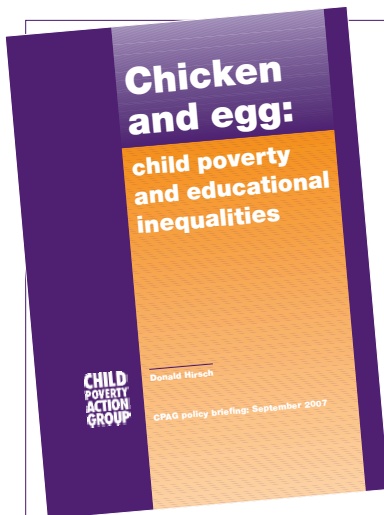
clubs, youth mentoring schemes, after-school clubs, and about situations in which schools are working well with, and being supported by, other service providers.

CPAG would very much like to hear your views on this debate. The campaign website, www.cpag.org.uk/2skint4school, is hosting a survey for teachers that will inform a major report to be published later this year. We would like the views of parents, governors and pupils too. To receive updates on **2 skint 4 school** and other CPAG campaigns, email your full name to education@cpag.org.uk, or use the sign-up form on the campaign website.

Notes

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Chicken and egg: child poverty and educational inequalities

Donald Hirsch

The goal must be to break the cycle in which children growing up in poverty do worse in education, and those with low educational qualifications go on to form the poor families of the future.

Summary

- ◆ Children from poorer backgrounds experience multiple and cumulative disadvantages which are inextricably linked. Low educational attainment is associated with:
 - ◆ Low income
 - ◆ Health inequalities
 - ◆ Poor and inadequate housing
 - ◆ Labour market disadvantages

The poverty gap at age three

- ◆ Some children in poverty are doing well, despite their circumstances. But over a quarter of children in poverty aged three are well over a year behind the average child in terms of school readiness.

The poverty gap in school attainment

- ◆ At each stage of compulsory schooling, the poverty gap grows.
- ◆ By the end of primary school, many disadvantaged children are starting to become alienated from the school system.
- ◆ A child in poverty has worse prospects at secondary school than a non-poor child with exactly the same results at primary school.
- ◆ By the time they are 16, children on free schools meals are, on average, more than one and a half GCSE grades behind their peers.

The social gap in University entrance

- ◆ Although children from families with manual occupations had nearly twice as much chance of going to University in 2000 than a decade earlier, the expansion in higher education has mostly benefited the middle class.

- ◆ The gap is particularly high in higher-status Universities, which only one in six students from a lower socio-economic attend.

The poverty gap at age 16 and its knock-on effects

- ◆ Nearly one in five girls and one in four boys receiving free school meals leave school without at least five GCSEs.
- ◆ 22 per cent of unqualified young people are not working in their late twenties compared with just five per cent of graduates.
- ◆ There are more teenagers outside education, employment and training in the UK than in most other countries, and the rate is rising.

Poverty is transmitted to the next generation

- ◆ Those whose parents received little education were more likely to be poor.
- ◆ Evidence suggests that a decline in social mobility among those who entered work in the late 1980s compared with people 12 years older is linked partly to a more powerful association between childhood poverty and adult poverty.

Implications

- ◆ Unless poverty is tackled alongside educational inequalities, children growing up with unequal chances will become the next generation of parents without the resources to give their own children a good chance – an endless ‘chicken and egg’ cycle.

<http://www.cpag.org.uk/campaigns/education/EducationBriefing120907.pdf>