

What can states do to reduce the poverty gradient in education? Evidence from a series of studies.



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This brief paper summarises the findings of a series of international studies looking at why there is a 'poverty gradient' in education, and what can be done to reduce it. The poverty gradient is a metaphor used by policy-makers and researchers to describe the gap in educational outcomes between the poorest members of any society and the rest. All states have such a gap, although the scale of the difference can vary between regions and over time. The most direct way of addressing the poverty gradient is to reduce or eliminate poverty. In addition, it is also possible to address the educational component. We can work to reduce the existing level of poverty, and we can work within the existing level of poverty to reduce the gap in educational outcomes, but both together is likely to be a more powerful approach. Therefore, nothing in what follows should be interpreted as meaning that wide disparities in income should be accepted.

Some of the gradient is structural in origin. Poorer families might cluster together in terms of where they live and so be equally clustered in the provisions of public services like initial schooling. In fact, the provision of services like state-sponsored housing areas might be responsible for much of the residential clustering in the first place. Poor children therefore tend to attend schools with others like them. The evidence is that this clustering influences how they are treated, how their problems are (mis)diagnosed, what their qualifications are, and what they envisage their future will be like. This negative school mix effect may be small in relation to the influence of 'objective' disadvantage, but it is entirely avoidable. Overcoming such clustering involves changes to the procedure of allocating school places, enhancing transport to schools, reducing diversity of school provision especially in terms of religious provision, and the abolition of tracking or selection. The pay offs could be considerable and would extend beyond attainment to social cohesion and civic participation.

Some of the gradient may be individual in origin. It is tempting to suggest that the attainment gap is caused by a lack of aspiration on the part of some poorer children, or a negative attitude to school by their family, or low expectations by their teachers. Indeed, many governments have committed considerable funding to raising aspirations. However, the existing evidence is quite clear. Raising aspirations and expectations or changing attitudes to education may be valuable in its own right, but will not cash out into improved attainment or post-compulsory participation among the most disadvantaged individuals. There are individual-level interventions that offer promise. One is to get the parents of potentially marginalised children more involved in school. Another is to focus on providing individual incentives for the behavioural components of improvement in attainment – such as attendance, behaviour in lessons, and completion of work. This could work better than providing incentives for direct improvement in attainment, since otherwise the individual might not know how to improve.

Some of the gradient might be addressed pedagogically. This could be through catch-up schemes in normal curriculum time, such as individual early attention for those struggling with literacy or numeracy. Or it could be compensatory for those struggling later, and include activities outside normal schooling such as Saturday clubs and Summer programmes. However, there is very little evidence on these issues, mostly because governments do not fund rigorous evaluations, such as complex randomised controlled trials, of what works to overcome disadvantage. This lack is crucial because many well-meaning policies that have been adopted have subsequently been shown to be useless and often even harmful. If we genuinely care about the poverty gradient then changes are needed in structure, the treatment of learners, and the kind of research that is publicly funded.

Suggestions for further reading

Gorard, S. (2010) School experience as a potential determinant of post-compulsory participation, *Evaluation and Research in Education*, 23, 1, 3-17

Gorard, S. (2012) Experiencing fairness at school: an international study in five countries, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 3, 3, 127-137

Gorard, S. (2012) Querying the causal role of attitudes in educational attainment, *ISRN Education*, Volume 2012, Article ID 501589, 13 pages, doi:10.5402/2012/501589

Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2010) *Equity in Education: an international comparison of pupil perspectives*, London: Palgrave

Gorard, S., See, BH and Davies, P. (2012) *The impact of attitudes and aspirations on educational attainment and participation*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 103 pages, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/aspirations-educational-attainment-participation>

Gorard, S., Siddiqui, N. and See, BH. (2012) *Process and summative evaluation of the Edmonton Summer School Programme 2012*, London: Educational Endowment Foundation, 44 pages

See, BH, Gorard, S., Cooke, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2012) *Improving literacy in the transition period: What do we need to know about what works?*, London: Educational Endowment Foundation, 57 pages