

NSPCC Scotland response to the equal opportunities committee consultation on a draft Education (Scotland) Bill 2015

Key points

- The poor educational outcomes realised by too many children in Scotland must not be considered in isolation, but as symptomatic of a larger issue, often stemming from inequality, disadvantage and a lack of effective, early support pre and post birth.
- The cycle of poor outcomes will not be addressed via school or classroom based initiatives on their own but rather requires a focus on early intervention, and investment in therapeutic interventions which are evidenced to provide a secure and protective foundation from which a child can grow and develop¹.
- Due to the cross-cutting nature of the actions required to successfully reduce the attainment gap in education in Scotland, it is important that there are strong links with all other relevant legislation, policies and strategies including the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the Child Poverty Strategy 2014 -17.

About NSPCC Scotland

The NSPCC aims to end cruelty to children. Our vision is of a society where all children are loved, valued and able to fulfil their potential. We are working with partners to introduce new child protection services to help some of the most vulnerable and at-risk children in Scotland. We are testing the very best intervention models from around the world, alongside our universal services such as ChildLine, and the NSPCC Helpline. Based on the learning from all our services we seek to achieve cultural, social and political change – influencing legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours so that all children in Scotland have the best protection from cruelty.

NSPCC Scotland welcomes the increasing focus on addressing the educational attainment gap in Scotland in recent years. Much of this focus has concentrated on educational initiatives, however we believe that equal attention should be paid to children’s early experiences and circumstances.

¹ See Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*, London: Tavistock Publications; and Zeanah, C. and Emde, R.N. (1994). *Attachment disorders in infancy and childhood*, in Rutter, M, Hersov, L. and Taylor, E. (eds) *Child and adolescent psychiatry*, 3rd edition, Oxford: Blackwell.

Introduction

NSPCC Scotland support the general principles embodied in the Education (Scotland) Bill 2015 proposals. We particularly welcome efforts to *“Promote equity of attainment for disadvantaged children and take steps towards narrowing the attainment gap by imposing duties on education authorities and the Scottish Ministers in relation to reducing pupils’ inequalities of educational outcome together with a duty to report on progress”*.

The gap in educational outcomes is rooted in economic and social inequality. To successfully reduce the educational attainment gap, it is important that there are strong links with all other relevant legislation, policies and strategies including the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the Child Poverty Strategy 2014 -17.

NSPCC Scotland response

NSPCC Scotland welcomes recent efforts by the Scottish Government to close the attainment gap in education in Scotland. Policy in this area has tended to focus on school or classroom based initiatives e.g. Curriculum for Excellence², Schools of Ambition³, and Journey to Excellence: How good is our school?⁴, and Getting it Right for Every Child⁵.

Growing Up in Scotland findings show that by the time children are of nursery age (3 years) significant gaps are present in the cognitive ability of children based upon social background.⁶ This gap persists until children enter formal education at age five, and subsequently widens throughout primary school.⁷⁸

This is why NSPCC Scotland believes the cycle of poor outcomes must be addressed in the first three years of life, beginning with high quality support pre-and post-birth, and in the first year of life. There are some excellent school-based initiatives. However we cannot afford to wait until children start school. Nor must we neglect to tackle the wider structural drivers of poverty and social disadvantage that impact on children’s attainment; we need economic policies that benefit children.

Education and the early years

Scotland has a well-developed policy and legislative framework for the early years and early intervention, which we fully endorse and welcome. However, implementation remains slow and the transformational change in investment towards prevention and early intervention is struggling to become a reality.

² <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2004/11/20178/45862>

³ <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1005/1/lisai.pdf>

⁴ http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/hgios1and2_tcm4-489369.pdf

⁵ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright>

⁶ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/05/31085122/2>

⁷ <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Thrive-at-Five-report.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/08/3497/3>

The growing awareness of the lifelong impact of adverse experiences in infancy and early childhood is of particular concern when we have so many children in Scotland growing up affected by poverty and deprivation; parental mental ill-health or substance misuse; or living with domestic abuse. Nowhere is this truer than Glasgow.

NSPCC Scotland welcomes recent developments in early years educational initiatives i.e. Formative Assessment⁹, Early Years Collaborative¹⁰ and programmes e.g. Early Intervention Programme¹¹. However, these have largely focus on the pre-school 3 to 5 years age group. Very little research has been carried out on the effectiveness of these approaches leading to insufficient data, evaluation or evidence to build useful practical knowledge of what works¹².

Closing the attainment gap in education in Scotland

The Joseph Rowantree and Strathclyde University report 'Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education' states that the achievement gap in children's cognitive development begins at pre-school age. NSPCC Scotland recognises that the attainment gap is evident pre-school but would highlight that the fastest development takes place pre-birth and continues during infancy.

The Marmot report concluded that *"the foundations for virtually every aspect of human development are laid in early childhood. What happens during these early years (beginning in the womb) has a lifelong effect"*.

Therefore, we would like to see a bias toward prevention on the face of the Bill in line with duties introduced in part 3 and 12 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Initiatives to target pre-birth to 3 years must be prioritised to prevent the attainment gap in education from opening in the first place. This is not currently the case in Scotland or across the UK¹³.

The importance of attachment and permanence

There is a growing body of evidence which highlights the significance of attachment and permanence for children, particularly in the early years, in providing a secure and protective foundation from which a child can grow and develop¹⁴.

Where an infant experiences trauma in the early years of life, there is evidence to show that this can impact on the child's mental health, harming brain development, as well as having longer-term impacts on physical health. Secure attachment acts as a protective 'buffer' for a child to

⁹ <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/assessment/>

¹⁰ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/early-years/early-years-collaborative>

¹¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/215889/0057733.pdf>

¹² <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-attainment-scotland-full.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.wavetrust.org/our-work/publications/reports/conception-age-2-age-opportunity>

¹⁴ See Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*, London: Tavistock Publications; and Zeanah, C. and Emde, R.N. (1994). *Attachment disorders in infancy and childhood*, in Rutter, M, Hersov, L. and Taylor, E. (eds) *Child and adolescent psychiatry*, 3rd edition, Oxford: Blackwell.

withstand better external stresses, while impaired attachment increases the risk of child maltreatment of neglect.¹⁵

Poor attachment increases the likelihood that a child or young person will have low self-esteem; find it difficult to make and sustain close relationships with their peers; to be at risk of psychosocial malfunctioning; be identified as bullies by their peers; be hostile and aggressive; be vulnerable to further abuse as they seek closeness in inappropriate relationships; and may deal with the anger by self-harm, offending behaviour or risk-taking behaviour.¹⁶ Poor educational attainment can likewise be seen as linked to these wider social and emotional difficulties.

If the Scottish Government is to realise its ambition to *“Promote equity of attainment for disadvantaged children and take steps towards narrowing the attainment gap by imposing duties on education authorities and the Scottish Ministers in relation to reducing pupils’ inequalities of educational outcome together with a duty to report on progress”*. Much greater consideration must be given to the socio-economic factors adversely affecting children from their earliest years. Scottish Government’s Child Poverty Strategy 2014 – 17 has the potential to embed the wide ranging, equity enhancing policies to improve children’s wellbeing which will impact on attainment levels more generally.

We would also welcome more detail on how the proposed duties in the Education (Scotland) Bill 2015 will interface with the preventative measures introduced in Part 12 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2015 to support vulnerable expectant and new parents and carers to form healthy, secure attachments with their babies. We consider this a significant step forward in creating a strong statutory basis for practical, prevention-oriented policies and practice with the potential to enhance the earliest months and years of childhood. We believe preventative duties in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2015 must run as a golden thread through all children’s services planning and decision making, not to do so will lead (over time) to the earliest years receiving lower priority and less support than other areas.

Conclusions

The poor educational outcomes realised by too many children in Scotland must not be considered in isolation, but as symptomatic of a larger issue, often stemming from inequality, disadvantage and a lack of effective, early support pre and post birth to secure healthy parent/child attachment.

NSPCC Scotland would welcome greater acknowledgment of the wider structural drivers that impact on children’s attainment such as poverty and deprivation - which remains too high, and growing, throughout the UK – within the Bill proposals. General principles must also be developed to reflect a bias towards prevention as set out by the Scottish Government in Getting it Right for Every Child.

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¹⁵ Shonkoff, J.P. and Phillips, D.A. (2002). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: the science of early childhood development*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press

¹⁶ NSPCC (2010) *Scoping report: looked after children and young people* (unpublished), p 32



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