

Title

Explorations of factors that mediate the poverty related attainment gap, pupil views.

What did we ask? (Research Questions)

Aims

- To gain an understanding of the variables (academic self-efficacy, emotional self-efficacy and attendance) that have been identified as influencing better attainment in groups of Glasgow young people who live in SIMD 1 & 2.
- To consider if these variables are present in pupils attending schools where achievement is higher than predicted levels.

Objectives

- To explore staff and pupils' views on their school experiences.
- To explore staff and pupils' views on what they feel helps them achieve success at school.
- To consider possible interventions that promote attainment in more vulnerable groups.

What is the evidence base? (link to your definition of the poverty gap)

When comparing the academic performance of primary and secondary school children between the most affluent areas and most deprived areas, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (Scottish Government, 2013) suggested an attainment gap of:

- 14-17% for reading
- 21% for writing
- 12-28% for numeracy

This is consistent with the substantive educational research literature that indicates that the most important variable influencing educational achievement is social class (Sosu and Ellis, 2014).

However, McKay, Dempster and Perry (2017) suggest that the patterns of lower academic attainment linked to areas of lower socio-economic status can be overcome if individuals attend school more frequently and have a higher level of belief in their own academic ability. This assertion is based on data obtained from 546 pupils, across five high schools in a local authority in

the West of Scotland. The data was collected at four time points, when the pupils were in S1, S2, S3 and in S4.

The data obtained for each pupil included Individual-level Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD); tariff scores; attendance data; and individual responses to the Self-efficacy Questionnaire for Children (SEQ-C; Muris, 2001).

Self-efficacy is defined as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance” (Bandura, 1986, p391). Bandura further differentiated between ‘efficacy expectations’ and ‘efficacy outcomes’. With regard to academic performance, ‘expectations’ may concern pupil beliefs that they can meet the demands of effective school engagement; whereas ‘outcomes’ relate to each pupils belief that effective engagement in school will lead to desired academic attainment.

What did we do?

In order to identify the sample group for the research, published exam results deriving from all Glasgow schools over the past four years were analysed. From this analysis six secondary schools were identified as consistently outperforming both their virtual comparator schools and their expected benchmarked levels of exam results. Of these six establishments, two were omitted from the study due to unique school characteristics and four schools were targeted.

Pupils attending these high performing schools in Glasgow were targeted with a view to identify how these pupils experience school and to explore their perceptions of how school fosters achievement among pupils.

Focus group methodology was used in the present research. Although it was important that the focus of the research was clear, it was equally important that group members felt able to talk openly and without the constraint of having to respond to set questions. A set of prompt questions were provided but essentially the group process guided the discussion.

In total six focus groups were carried out with senior pupils across three schools (total n = 37 pupils).

Focus groups were facilitated and scribed by an educational psychologist (EP). Focus group data was then collated and thematic analysis carried out to identify key themes.

What have we found?

Following analysis of focus group responses a number of key themes emerged. Themes are presented below with a sample of illustrative quotes:

Theme 1: Teacher support

“They (teachers) will sit you down and give you tips on where you can improve.”

“Teachers give you all the opportunities to do well and if you don’t take them up, it’s your fault.”

Theme 2: Supportive school ethos

“It’s normal to go to supported study during prelims.”

“Good class atmosphere starts with the teacher.”

Theme 3: Parental support

“(Parents) comfort you; can tell you’re stressed and just talk to you.”

“They (parents) help me keep on top of things during my exams.”

Theme 4: Intrinsic motivation

“I want to do well because I know what I want to do when I leave school.”

“I put a lot of pressure on myself. (rather than parent/ teachers)”

Theme 5: Importance of assessment

“Lots of tests.... Constantly trying to better you....It does help.”

(Teachers have) “Learner conversations (i.e.) why you got a B.”

Theme 6: Importance of attendance

"If you're off you miss a lot."

"You come to school to do what you need to do."

Theme 7: Mental health support

"Always felt that we had someone to talk to."

"It's all there – you just have to look it out."

What do we plan to do next?

Results from the focus groups reflected a number of key themes which detailed the pupil's perceptions of the conditions within their schools which allowed them to thrive. Pupils reported and gave examples of how they are supported by their school and their teachers. They reported feeling understood by their school, involved in their education and they perceived a high level of control over their educational choices and their post school options.

The next step is to analyse the focus group responses from the schools' SMT in regards to how SMT views correlate with the views of the young people. It is also the intention to disseminate findings to each individual school, staff and pupils. A full research report will be compiled with links made between the current research findings and past research. This will be disseminated throughout Glasgow with a view to identifying recommendations for good practice.

To explore the validity of the finding of the present study it would be of interest to carry out a second phase of research looking at the views of young people in schools with similar characteristics, where pupils are not attaining highly. The ethical implications of this would have to be fully explored before undertaking this research.

References

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