Narrowing the Gap: Lessons from RAISE Ten Years On

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ABSTRACT

Breaking the link between poverty and poor educational attainment has been a long-standing goal of the Welsh Government. Progress has been made, but a large gap remains in Wales. This paper revisits RAISE, the Welsh Government's first major funding programme aimed at closing the gap. It considers the impact of RAISE upon pupils and schools and the lessons for contemporary interventions like the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales and Pupil Premium in England. The paper concludes that given the challenges many schools in disadvantaged areas face, integrating additional funding for schools (like that provided by the Pupil Deprivation Grant) with support and challenge, through programmes like School Challenge Cymru, and area-based programmes, like the proposed Children's Zones, is needed to maximise the impact of additional funding.

Key words: poverty, disadvantage, educational attainment, narrowing the gap, school effectiveness, evaluation

Introduction

The impact of poverty upon educational attainment is perhaps the key challenge facing the Welsh education system (Egan, 2017). Breaking the link has been a long-standing goal of the Welsh Government (NAfW, 2001). Progress has been made, and the attainment gap between pupils

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from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more affluent backgrounds has narrowed. Nevertheless, a large gap remains in Wales (Hill, 2013): for example, at Key Stage 4, the gap between the percentage of pupils achieving level 2 including English/Welsh and mathematics who are and who are not eligible for free school meals currently stands at 31 percentage points (Estyn, 2017). This is an indicator of social injustice and threatens Wales's economic competiveness (OECD, 2014). This paper revisits Raising Attainment and Individual Standards of Education (RAISE), the Welsh Government's first major intervention to tackle the attainment gap, ten years on, in order to consider lessons for current programmes which aim to narrow the educational attainment gap, such as the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales and Pupil Premium in England. In doing so, it highlights continuity and also change in policy and practice over the last ten years, and makes the case for greater integration of programmes to support school improvement, with additional funding to help schools narrow the educational attainment gap.

The link between poverty and poor educational attainment

Poverty remains a key predictor of poor educational attainment in the United Kingdom (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). The impact, in terms of a gap in cognitive and non-cognitive skills, is measureable from as early as nine months, and by the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds (defined in terms of family poverty and low level parental education) are up to a year behind children from more advantaged families (Feinstein et al., 2007). This developmental gap means that children growing up in poverty are likely to start behind their peers when entering primary school. Most struggle to catch up, and instead fall further and further behind, causing the gap to widen throughout their time at primary and secondary school (Feinstein et al., 2007; Estyn, 2017). Moreover, even the minority of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who start ahead of their peers from more advantaged families struggle to maintain this lead and instead tend to fall behind as they progress through school (Shaw et al., 2017; Feinstein et al., 2007; Cassen and Kingdon, 2007).

Although the correlation is clear, there is no necessary link between socio-economic disadvantage and poor educational attainment. Not all children growing up in poverty are exposed to the 'risk' factors linked to poor educational attainment. Research exploring children's and young

people's 'resilience' – their ability to cope with adversity – has sought to identify why some children exposed to these risk factors still succeed 'against the odds' (Rutter, 1985; National Children's Home, 2007) and programmes like RAISE have sought to help narrow the educational attainment gap.

The relationship between poverty and poor educational attainment

There are competing theories about the nature of the relationship between poverty and poor educational attainment. For example, accounts of the relationship can focus upon:

- the 'micro' level, such as individual characteristics and capabilities;
- the 'meso' level, such as family, school and neighbourhood level factors; and
- the 'macro' level, such as class, race and gender (Raffo et al., 2007).

Explanations focused upon the micro level have highlighted the impact of factors such as: children's and young people's cognitive and non-cognitive skills; their needs, such as special educational needs (SEN); the level and type of aspirations they hold; their attitudes such as their motivation and desire to learn; and their behaviours. These factors are all associated with poverty, for example, children growing up in poverty tend to have weaker cognitive and non-cognitive skills. The relationship between each factor and poverty is disputed though: for example, it is not clear why the incidence of SEN is higher amongst children growing up in disadvantaged areas (Chowdry et al., 2009; Duckworth et al., 2009; Feinstein et al., 2004).

Explanations focused upon the meso level have highlighted the impact of factors linked to:

- the family – such as: the quality and richness of the 'home learning environment'; parental engagement in education; parental aspirations and interest in their child's education; parental and, in particular, maternal levels of education; family size, stability and relationships; the mother's age (having a teenage mother is a key risk factor) and the family's material resources (Shaw et al., 2017; Chowdry et al., 2009; Duckworth et al., 2009; Jones, 2005; Feinstein et al., 2004; Desforges, 2003); and

- schools and locality – such as: the quality of education and, in particular, the quality of teaching and learning; the quality of school leadership; and the level and extent of deprivation in the child's or young person's neighbourhood and school (Dyson et al., 2013; Day et al., 2009; Harris et al., 2006; Lupton, 2005).

These factors are all correlated with poverty: for example, disadvantage is associated with more impoverished home learning environments and weaker school effectiveness (Dyson et al., 2013; Feinstein et al., 2004).

Explanations focused upon the macro level have highlighted the impact of factors such as social exclusion and inequality, which contribute to factors like health inequalities, unemployment, poor housing and public services, which are all associated with poverty and weaker educational attainment (Raffo et al., 2007; Macdonald and Marsh, 2005).

The micro-, meso- and macro-level explanations can be presented as competing theories – illustrated most sharply by debates over the influence of structure and agency – but are in many ways complementary: for example, macro- and meso-level processes, such as the influence of social class and of community can help explain how differences at the level of individuals, such as attitudes and behaviours, emerge (Dyson et al., 2013; Chowdry et al., 2009; Feinstein et al., 2004). A more ecumenical approach can also aid analysis of how factors interact and may compound one another: for example, the child entering school with poor academic, social and emotional skills may struggle and become disaffected and disruptive. As a consequence, they may receive less support from their family and school and their teachers may focus more upon managing their behaviour than teaching them, impacting negatively upon both the individual child and the school.

Most policy interventions in the UK have focused upon meso-level factors (Raffo et al., 2007). They include programmes:

- aiming to enhance early childhood development, such as Sure Start in England and Flying Start in Wales, through targeted support for children and families living in disadvantaged areas;
- providing additional resources to schools through grants like the Pupil Premium and Excellence in Cities in England; RAISE and the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales;
- providing additional challenge to schools through, for example, reform of inspection arrangements and a focus upon data through new

performance measures and accountability structures, such as school categorisation in Wales and school league tables in England;
- providing additional support alongside challenge to support school improvement through programmes using a range of advisors and peer learning models like the School Effectiveness Framework and School Challenge Cymru in Wales, the City Challenges in England and Journey to Excellence in Scotland.
- developing schools' community orientation through, for example, the Full Service Extended Schools programme England and the Community Focused Schools programme in Wales, which extend schools 'offer' to communities by proving new services and activities during and beyond the school day; and
- providing additional support for young people judged at 'risk' of under-achievement or disengagement through, for example, the Connexions Programme in England[1] and the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework in Wales.

Despite the range of interventions, the results have tended to be disappointing, when measured in terms of success in narrowing the gap in attainment (Crisp et al., 2014; Ipsos MORI and NPI, 2014; Raffo et al., 2007). This reflects a number of factors including: weakness in the effectiveness of funded activity; failures by schools to only target disadvantaged pupils (diluting any impact); and the limits on the impact a school can have upon attainment, given the range of (non-school) factors that influence attainment. The most promising interventions are those focused upon providing additional support and challenge for schools, most notably the City Challenge programmes (Hutchings et al., 2012). These have focused upon whole school improvement, rather than more narrowly focused interventions, helping maximise the effect a school can have upon attainment.

Narrowing the gap: Welsh Government policy

The Learning Country was the then newly formed National Assembly for Wales's first 'comprehensive strategic statement on education and lifelong learning in Wales' (NAfW, 2001: 5). It aimed to define a distinctive Welsh education agenda and highlighted the importance of education in tackling inequality and boosting Wales's economic competiveness. The strategy

was bullish about the strength of the Welsh education system, celebrating both Wales's 'distinctive approach to school improvement' and progress in raising attainment compared to England (NAfW, 2001: 6). For example, as the National Assembly stated:

> Wales has led the field in a distinctive strategy towards school improvement-evidence-based; locally managed; and professionally valid. Holding this line with teachers' support, together with a constructive inspection regime; responsive strategies for literacy and numeracy; and progressive provision for initial and in-service training, has been highly effective. (NAfW, 2001: 6; emphasis omitted)

Nevertheless, the strategy identified the need to narrow the gap: 'Inequalities in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged areas, groups, and individuals must be narrowed in the interests of all. Children facing special disadvantage and poverty of opportunity must be better provided for' (NAfW, 2001: 10). In order to achieve this, the strategy focused primarily upon area-based approaches, such as Communities First, supplemented by Additional Revenue for Schools, which provided £3 million per annum for 'low performing' schools (NAfW, 2005: 5). This did not prove an effective approach. The Communities First programme had a difficult start, given the small numbers of experienced community development workers in Wales and difficulties communicating the vision of the programme, which made it challenging to establish the programme across Wales (WAG, 2006a). Moreover, the impact of Additional Revenue for Schools was limited both by its small size (£3 million per annum), particularly when spread across twenty-two local authorities and by poor targeting by some local authorities (Holtom et al., 2012).

In the period following the publication of the *Learning Country,* a number of studies, including the Narrowing the Gap project (WAG and WLGA, 2002, 2005), *Low Performing Secondary Schools 2004–2005* (Estyn, 2005) and *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Wales 2005* (Kenway et al., 2005), all highlighted the stubborn links between social deprivation and low attainment by pupils and consequent need for renewed action (Davidson, n.d.). In this context, the Welsh Government unexpectedly received additional 'consequential funding' of £16 million in 2006–7 and £28 million in 2007–8, following the announcement by HM Treasury of additional funding for education in England. The Welsh Government Cabinet agreed that a proportion of the money would be allocated to help schools break the link between poverty and poor educational attainment, leading to the creation of the RAISE programme.

Raising Achievement and Individual Standards in Education (RAISE)

RAISE was launched in 2006 as a two-year programme that would 'target disadvantaged pupils and seek to raise their levels of performance' (WAG, 2006b: 1). In 2008, the funding for schools was extended for a further two years. It was targeted at all schools with at least fifty statutory-school-age pupils, where 20 per cent or more of whom were eligible for free school meals (FSMs), meaning it funded roughly 30 per cent of the maintained schools in Wales. The amount of funding schools received depended upon the numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals. Primary schools received funding of between £11,000 and £30,000; secondary schools received funding of between £47,000 and £220,000 and special schools received funding of between £16,000 and £22,000. An additional grant of £1 million per annum was provided to the twenty-two local authorities in Wales to support the attainment of looked-after children (Holtom et al., 2012).

During the early stages of RAISE, there was considerable opposition from local authorities who felt sidelined. This was caused by the Welsh Government's decision to devolve RAISE funding directly to schools, given concerns about the way the School Improvement Fund (part of the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme) had been administered by local authorities, the limited initial consultation with local authorities about the programme design, and proposals to appoint regional school improvement officers employed by the Welsh Government (Holtom et al., 2012). A compromise was reached with local authorities, in which funding provisionally assigned to School Improvement Officers was instead allocated to the four regional educational consortia, who would appoint RAISE regional coordinators.[1] This compromise, coupled with the RAISE team's efforts to work with local authorities, led their engagement with the programme to improve over time (Holtom et al., 2012).

Schools were required to target the funding at 'pupils who are disadvantaged or most at risk of low attainment – or of leaving full time education with no qualifications' (Davidson, n.d.). Fifteen types of eligible activity ranging from additional support into classroom, through collaboration with other learning settings and the community were identified, giving schools very wide latitude about how they planned to use the funding.

Because the Welsh Government team managing RAISE was small (limiting its capacity), local authorities and regional co-coordinators

needed to play a key role in supporting and challenging schools' decisions about how to use the funding. In practice, there were delays in establishing the regional coordinator role (following the re-allocation of funding), and the effectiveness of the support and challenge provided by both local authorities and regional co-coordinators was mixed (Estyn, 2010). This meant schools had more autonomy in choosing how to use the funding than was originally envisaged (Holtom et al., 2012).

In the fourth year (2009–10), the programme was re-focused, with the identification of eight themes to replace the long list of eligible activities (outlined above). The themes were intended to encourage a more holistic and community-focused response and schools were encouraged to address multiple themes (Holtom et al., 2012). The themes were:

- multi-agency approaches to support the progress of disadvantaged learners;
- greater involvement of the wider community in the life and work of schools;
- increased efforts to engage parents in the learning of their children;
- the adoption of nurture approaches to supplement the impact of the home on pupils' learning;
- broader approaches to language development that are set in the context of a holistic skills package, as a means of improving learning;
- making the secondary school curriculum more relevant and vocational;
- strategies for improving learners' motivation, behaviour, attendance, self-esteem; and
- improved transition processes for disadvantaged learners moving between the stages of education. (Holtom et al., 2012.)

The eight themes were developed in response to the recommendations made by a series of studies for a greater community focus. These included:

- the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Expert Group, which concluded that: 'schools have a major part to play in overcoming the relationship between child poverty and low educational attainment but they cannot do it alone' (Welsh Government Child Poverty Expert Group, n.d.: 3);
- the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Viewpoint *Combating child poverty in Wales: are effective education strategies in place?* which argued that: 'action in the major areas identified by the JRF studies, particularly the development of the Community School programme within disadvantaged areas,

as a way of offering a greater range of education opportunities and support to young people experiencing poverty' was needed (Egan, 2007: 10); and

- the National Assembly for Wales's Children and Young People's Committee, which recommended that: 'the Welsh Assembly Government enable the establishment of more appropriately funded, well planned and community focused schools, starting with areas of high socio-economic disadvantage'. (NAFW, 2008: 31)

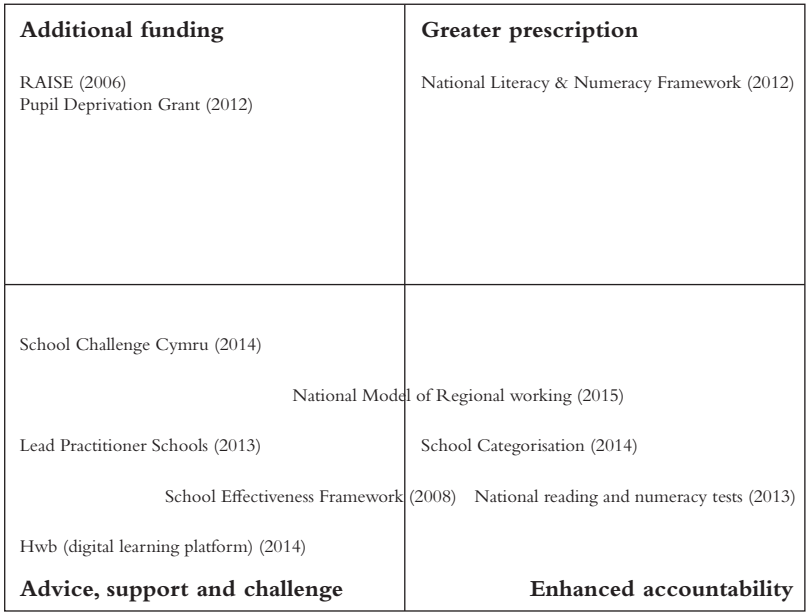
The post-RAISE policy landscape

RAISE represented a step change in funding for narrowing the gap, and also an approach that gave schools considerable autonomy in determining how to use the additional funding. Particularly in its fourth year, the focus shifted to a more holistic approach to narrowing the gap. The School Effectiveness Framework for Wales (SEF) (WAG, 2008), launched two years after RAISE, continued the shift towards a more holistic approach, with its focus upon integrating work with schools, families, statutory services and the voluntary sector, in order to raise standards and narrow the educational attainment gap. The SEF also:

- placed greater emphasis upon enhancing pedagogy and school leadership, key aspects of school effectiveness, which did not feature prominently in RAISE, despite their importance as key determinants of pupil performance (Day et al., 2009; Barber and Mourshed, 2007); and
- sought to balance support and challenge for schools, with a strong emphasis upon the development of 'networks of professional practice' to help drive improvements. (WAG, 2008; West, 2010)

However, concerns about Wales's poor performance in the 2010 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) led to a shift towards greater accountability and prescription through, for example, the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) (WG, 2013) and National School Categorisation (in which each primary and secondary school is placed into one of four colour-coded 'support categories' (WG, 2016)) and sidelining of the SEF (Egan, 2017; Hill, 2013). The impact of austerity following the recession (2007–9) has also limited the Welsh Government's scope to provide additional funding to narrow

Figure 1. Key school improvement policies and year of introduction



the gap. As a result, as Figure 1 illustrates, policy has oscillated between support, challenge and/or funding for schools, through programmes such as School Challenge Cymru offering targeted support for thirty-nine schools facing challenges given their circumstances and stage of development (Carr and Morris, 2016) and greater prescription and greater accountability through, for example, programmes like the LNF.

In 2012/13, following the introduction of the Pupil Premium in England (in 2011/12), the Pupil Deprivation Grant was established by the Welsh Government. Like RAISE, the Pupil Deprivation Grant is a distinct funding stream for schools based on the number of pupils eligible for free school meals (or looked after by the local authority). In many ways, it represents a return to the RAISE approach, although there are important differences: for example, unlike RAISE, the Pupil Deprivation Grant is not limited to schools where more than 20 per cent of their pupils are eligible for free school meals and there is a greater emphasis upon accountability.

The evaluation of RAISE

The external evaluation of RAISE, undertaken by People and Work, an independent charity, sought to respond to the widespread fear amongst schools that the programme was going to be over-evaluated, given the different processes already in place, including schools' own self-evaluations; local authorities' reviews of RAISE funding; RAISE regional coordinators' role evaluating the work; and Estyn's remit to review RAISE funding. In response, the external evaluation maximised the use of these existing layers of monitoring and evaluation, drawing upon and synthesising the data generated by them and enriching them with a desk-based review of school action plans (to map RAISE-funded activity), visits to sixty RAISE-funded schools and interviews with a range of stakeholders from the Welsh Government, Estyn and regional consortia (Holtom et al., 2012).

Key findings from the evaluation of RAISE

In assessing the impact of RAISE, the external evaluation focused upon four key questions: did RAISE target disadvantaged pupils? What impact did RAISE have upon practice in schools? What impact did RAISE have upon pupils' attainment? And what impact did RAISE have upon the attainment of looked-after children?

Targeting

The evaluation considered whether eligibility for free school meals was a suitable proxy measure of the socio-economic disadvantage of pupils at a school level; whether the thresholds were appropriate; and how effectively RAISE-funded schools targeted pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The evaluation concluded that:

- whilst imperfect, eligibility for free school meals was the best available proxy measure of the socio-economic disadvantage of pupils;
- there was a case for focusing resources on schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage, as poverty can affect both individual children and young people and also schools (Lupton, 2005);
- the 20 per cent threshold struck an appropriate balance between reaching

as many disadvantaged pupils as possible, while ensuring that the available resource was not spread too thinly; and
- although 'most RAISE schools targeted disadvantaged pupils', RAISE schools 'also targeted a small number of pupils who were under-achieving but who were not from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds' and 'few pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with higher levels of achievement were targeted'. (Holtom et al., 2012: 8)

The impact upon schools' practice

The evaluation identified that RAISE made an important contribution to:

- increasing awareness of the link between socio-economic disadvantage and poor educational attainment in almost all schools and fostering a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the link in many schools. For example, as the head of a primary school put it:

  > 'RAISE focused us, made us stand back and think about what we really needed and became the basis of pedagogy. It created discussion for us as a staff and it changed us. The impact has been profound' (Holtom et al., 2012: 77);

- most schools were already taking action to narrow the gap, and RAISE funding helped consolidate, sustain and/or extend this. In a smaller number of schools, it provided the catalyst for more radical action: for example, one head teacher described the injection of RAISE funding as a sort of 'rocket fuel' which accelerated their improvement journey (George, 2009: 8);
- developing and enhancing the role of school support staff in narrowing the gap, through training and new responsibilities;
- developing and extending the curriculum offer, particularly for pupils in Key Stage 4; and
- enhancing schools' use of data to identify pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions to support them.

The evaluation identified that one of the key factors that affected the impact of RAISE upon practice in schools was schools' effectiveness. The funding was sufficient to make a real difference and schools were given considerable freedom in how to use it. Effective schools were well placed to exploit this, using the funding imaginatively, to produce a transformative step change

in their practice. However, the multiple pressures facing many RAISE schools (given the socio-economic disadvantage of the areas that they served) meant that many were more focused upon 'firefighting', to use Ruth Lupton's metaphor (Lupton, 2006: 6), and were struggling to be effective. This limited their ability to exploit the opportunities offered by RAISE and many opted for 'tried and tested', often narrowly focused, interventions, most notably literacy initiatives (Holtom, n.d.; Estyn, 2010). As the evaluation identified: 'In some cases the funding was used to continue existing activity and the effect was at best evolutionary and at worst simply maintained a steady state without allowing the school to look at broader issues' (Holtom et al., 2012: 85). Nevertheless, a small number of schools were able to use RAISE funding to enable school improvement by enabling them to put out some of the (metaphorical) 'fires' that they faced, giving them the breathing space to plan more strategically, helping catalyse and enable their school-improvement journeys (Holtom et al., 2012).

The impact of RAISE upon pupils' attainment and achievement

The evaluation identified that the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals increased in Key Stages 2 and 4 after RAISE started in 2007 and a key challenge for the evaluation was to assess the extent to which this increase was attributable to RAISE. The design of the RAISE programme meant that no direct comparison group was available to enable impact to be measured empirically. The closest proxy measures that could be used to estimate the counterfactual were comparing:

- the gap between the performance of pupils who were and were not eligible for FSMs before and after the introduction of RAISE; and
- the performance of pupils eligible for FSMs in RAISE schools, with the performance of pupils eligible for FSMs in non-RAISE schools, following the introduction of RAISE.

As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, the time series data showed a modest narrowing of the gap in attainment of pupils who were and were not eligible for free school meals before and after the introduction of RAISE (in 2007) in key stage 2 and a modest increase in the gap in key stage 4 (Holtom, et al., 2012).

The comparison of the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals in RAISE and non-RAISE schools identified that the gap between

Table 1. The percentage of pupils eligible for FSMs and those not eligible for FSMs achieving the Core Subject Indicator, Key Stage 2, 2005–9

	2005	*2006*	*2007*	*2008*	*2009*
Pupils not eligible for FSMs	80%	76%	79%	80%	81%
Pupils eligible for FSMs	55%	55%	54%	57%	59%
Attainment gap (percentage points)	25	21	25	23	22

Source: Welsh Government

Table 2. The percentage of pupils eligible for FSMs and those not eligible for FSMs achieving the Core Subject Indicator, Key Stage 4, 2005–9

	2005	*2006*	*2007*	*2008*	*2009*
Pupils not eligible for FSMs	42%	44%	45%	49%	51%
Pupils eligible for FSMs	29%	29%	29%	30%	31%
Attainment gap (percentage points)	13	15	16	19	20

Source: Welsh Government

the performance of free school meal pupils in RAISE and those in non-RAISE schools fell from 10.2 percentage points to 4.4 percentage points at Key Stage 2, but increased slightly at Key Stage 4 (Estyn, 2010).

Neither measure was perfect: for example, RAISE schools did not only target pupils eligible for free school meals, diluting any impact, and neither of the comparison measures (pupils not eligible for free school meals or pupils eligible for free school meals in non-RAISE schools) was 'equivalent' (HM Treasury, 2011). Nevertheless, it indicates that the impact of RAISE upon educational attainment was modest and greatest in primary schools.

This data was at odds with the assessments of schools, regional coordinators and Estyn inspectors, who all reported that most RAISE-supported pupils were making good progress in both primary and secondary schools. The evaluation concluded that the discrepancy reflected differences in what was measured, as the quantitative data analysis focused upon attainment, whilst schools, regional coordinators and Estyn inspectors

focused upon a broader measure of achievement that included attainment, but also pupils' progress, gains in their basic skills and also in their social and emotional skills and dispositions.

The impact of RAISE upon looked-after children's attainment

Children entering the care system often experience many of the risk factors associated with poor educational attainment, such as growing up in poverty and experiencing abuse. Although there is a lively debate about whether the care system compounds their problems (see e.g. Borland et al., 1998) or can help address the challenges that they face (see e.g. Welbourne and Leeson, 2012), there is consensus that they are a disadvantaged group, which warrants additional support (Holtom et al., 2012).

The evaluation of RAISE funding to support looked-after children's attainment identified that there was limited evidence of an impact upon attainment at a national level. Crucially, improvements observed in attainment were in line with trends before RAISE (which had also seen increases in attainment). However, like RAISE funding for schools, there was stronger evidence of a positive impact upon looked-after children's educational experiences and their social and emotional skills and dispositions; a finding that was consistent with evaluations of comparable initiatives, like Taking Care of Education, in England (Holtom et al., 2012).

Discussion

RAISE illustrates some of the key choices, challenges and compromises facing programmes like the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales and the Pupil Premium in England (there is no equivalent in Scotland (Sosu and Ellis, 2014) or Northern Ireland[2] (Salisbury, 2013). These include:

- choosing which pupils to target, how many, and how best to target them;
- the use of evidence of 'what works';
- the limits of narrowly focused interventions; and
- the difficulties associated with evaluating the impact of programmes.

Targeting pupils

Like RAISE, both the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales and Pupil Premium in England use eligibility for free school meals as a proxy indicator of poverty and rely upon schools to target disadvantaged pupils. Unlike RAISE, they do not restrict funding to schools with a large proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. Eligibility for free school meals remains a crude measure. It identifies many pupils who are economically disadvantaged, as it is based upon family income, and also many who are socially disadvantaged, given the correlation between social and economic disadvantage. However, it misses pupils whose families will not claim free school meals, or who do not claim the benefits that determine eligibility, due, for example, to the stigma attached, and the correlation between economic and social deprivation is imperfect. It has therefore been described as a 'coarse and unreliable indicator' (Kounali et al., 2008: 1). Nevertheless, alternative measures, such as area-based measures of deprivation, are even less precisely targeted at socio-economic disadvantage, with as many as half of all pupils in poverty (in Wales) living outside areas designated as deprived (Bramley and Watkins, 2007).

The choice about concentrating resources upon disadvantaged pupils in the most disadvantaged schools (as RAISE did), or distributing it to all pupils eligible for free school meals (as the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Pupil Premium do) is more finely balanced. There is a case for targeting scarce resources upon those pupils exposed to the 'double whammy' of their own deprivation and the area that they live in (as the RAISE 20 per cent threshold sought to do), but this inevitably excluded many pupils who may live in disadvantaged area and may be equally disadvantaged, but who do not attend school with sufficiently high concentration of disadvantage to be eligible for funding.

All three programmes have relied upon schools to effectively identify and support children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The decisions schools make about who to target are perhaps the most contentious, as evaluations of RAISE, the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Pupil Premium have all identified that schools have been reluctant to use eligibility for free school meals as the only measure for determining who to support, and have instead focused upon educational rather than economic need (Pye et al., 2015; Carpenter et al., 2013; Holtom et al., 2012). This means that more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are perhaps not being supported to fulfil their full potential.

Using evidence of 'what works'

In all three programmes schools have been given autonomy about how the funding is used, but the extent of support and challenge and the accountability demanded for how they exercise this autonomy varies. As outlined above, the long list of eligible activities, differences in the effectiveness of regional consortia and local authorities, and the limited capacity of the central team (due to its small size) meant that RAISE schools have considerable latitude in how to use the funding (Holtom et al., 2012). In contrast, both the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Pupil Premium programme have placed greater emphasis upon encouraging schools to develop 'evidence-based' interventions through, for example, dissemination of the Sutton Trust Toolkit (Higgins et al., 2014).

Accountability is also more developed in both programmes: both Estyn and Ofsted respectively are charged with examining how effectively schools use the funding to support the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals and schools are required to publish outcomes. In Wales, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals is a feature of school categorisation; in England, schools identified by Ofsted as requiring improvement, where disadvantaged pupils perform poorly, are required to work with a partner with a strong track record in closing the gap (Carpenter et al., 2013; Pye et al., 2014).

The impact of the greater emphasis upon advice, support and accountability in the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Pupil Premium programmes upon schools use of funding appears limited when compared with RAISE: in each programme, schools have tended to focus upon their own experience of what works rather than drawing upon robust research evidence (Pye et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2013; Holtom et al., 2012). As a consequence, in all three programmes schools have focused significant resources upon additional staff, and in particular support staff, despite equivocal evidence of the effectiveness of this (Blatchford et al., 2009).

Equally, a simplistic call for evidence-based interventions (and criticism about the choices schools have made about how to use the funding) has been criticised for failing to consider the importance of context and implementation in determining 'what works' (Pawson and Tilly, 1997). Put simply, what works in one school may not work in another, and schools' professional judgement in determining what is appropriate, and in rigorously monitoring and evaluating the cost effectiveness of their chosen interventions, is vital (Carpenter et al., 2013). The increasingly effective

use of data observed in all three programmes (Pye et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2013; Holtom et al., 2012) is therefore encouraging, as it should strengthen schools' professional judgements about how best to use the additional funding.

The limits of narrowly focused interventions

The research is clear that although the effectiveness of different interventions varies (Higgins et al., 2014), there is no 'magic bullet', no single solution or intervention, that can narrow the gap. Instead, schools that have been successful in narrowing the gap have done so because they are effective schools, with for example, strong leadership, effective teaching and learning, and strong partnerships with key stakeholders like parents (Macleod et al., 2015; WAG and WLGA, 2002, 2004). The experience of RAISE illustrates a key challenge here, that disadvantage can hamper the development of the strategic vision and leadership necessary to drive school improvement journeys, as schools can become focused upon 'firefighting' (Lupton, 2006). Additional funding can help schools better meet their pupils' educational and pastoral needs, which can in turn improve behaviour and make it easier to recruit staff, which can in turn make it easier for schools to focus upon school improvement (Lupton, 2005). However, whilst the research evidence suggests that additional funding can have a modest impact upon attainment (DoE, 2014), the school effectiveness literature focuses upon how schools and their partners *use* funding (Hopkins, 2007; Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992).

Adequate funding may be a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition for school improvement, and schools with the same level of funding can have very different levels of effectiveness. Greater integration of programmes like the City Challenge and School Challenge Cymru, which focus upon support and challenge to aid school improvement, with the additional funding offered by grants like the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Pupil Premium, may therefore be required to maximise the impact of additional funding to narrow the gap.

Evaluating impact

The evaluations of RAISE and of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (Pye et al., 2014, 2015; Holtom et al., 2012) illustrate the difficulties of impact

evaluation (an impact evaluation of the Pupil Premium has not yet been undertaken), given: the 'noise' in the system, with multiple factors influencing outcomes like attainment, coupled with often small effect sizes; the length of time it can take for impacts to be realised (and therefore to be measurable); and the lack of data on 'equivalent' comparison groups (HM Treasury, 2011).

'Realistic evaluation' approaches (Pawson and Tilly, 1997) also question the value of empirical impact evaluations, widely considered to be the 'gold standard' in impact evaluation (HM Treasury, 2011), because they can reduce questions of effectiveness to a single judgement: that a programme 'works' – or not. Instead, 'realistic evaluation' approaches place much greater emphasis upon the ways in which context and implementation (including, for example, the responses of schools) contribute to outcomes, and aim to explore 'what works, for whom, under what circumstances?' (HM Treasury, 2011; Pawson and Tilly, 1997).

The evaluation of RAISE also illustrates the opportunities and challenges increasing accountability creates for external evaluators. It can, for example, increase the range and type of secondary data available. However, it can also make it more difficult for external evaluators to collect primary data, as schools and other programme partners may resist additional requests for data.

Conclusions

RAISE illustrates the challenges, choices and inevitable compromises that current programmes like the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales and the Pupil Premium in England face, about how to effectively target 'disadvantaged' pupils, promote and use evidence of what works, maximise the effectiveness of additional funding for schools to narrow the gap and evaluate outcomes. The different choices made by these programmes illustrate some of the trade-offs associated with these choices. For example:

- eligibility for free schools meals has been described as a 'coarse and unreliable indicator' (Kounali et al., 2008: 1), but continues to be used, albeit with some refinements like 'Ever 6' (pupils eligible in the last six years[3]), in the absence of viable alternatives;
- schools with high proportions of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds may face additional costs (Lupton, 2005), but may also struggle to use

additional funding effectively, given the range of challenges many face; and

- the focus upon empirical impact evaluations may represent the 'gold standard' (HM Treasury, 2007) but also risks flattening the impacts of programmes, which can differ markedly from school to school, to a single judgement that a programme has, for example, had a modest impact upon attainment.

RAISE also illustrates a key finding in the research, that there is no 'silver bullet', no single solution to intervention that can close the attainment gap. Additional funding may enable schools to implement new interventions, and the investment in research, evaluation and dissemination of 'what works' means that schools can more easily identify evidence-based interventions. However, choosing the most highly rated interventions on the Education Endowment Foundation toolkit is at best a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for narrowing the gap, as 'what works' is not a single intervention – but being an effective school. This requires: strong and distributed leadership, a high quality curriculum and teaching that has an 'Outcomes focus', 'Engaging pedagogy' and 'High expectations'; a focus upon 'intervention and support' and 'improvement and accountability', underpinned by collaborative work with key stakeholders and 'networks of professional practice' (WAG, 2008: 9).

RAISE and comparable programmes like the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Pupil Premium face the fundamental challenge that, while the school effectiveness search has identified the key features of effective practice, and examples of how individual schools have increased their effectiveness, scaling this up across education systems is very challenging (Egan, 2017, citing Fullan, 1991; Hopkins, 2007). Greater integration of additional funding with the type of support and challenge offered by programmes like School Challenge Cymru may therefore be important here in maximising the potential for additional funding to support school improvement, rather than just additional interventions and support in the classroom.

The research is also clear that while schools can and do make a difference, there are limits on the impact that they can make: for example, evidence from research suggests that schools account for between 8 to 15 per cent of the differences in pupil attainment, with the remainder made up of difference linked to individual, family and area (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Reynolds et al., 1996; Sammons, 1999). The school effectiveness

research emphasises the importance of 'working with others', such as families and services in a school's community, but there are limits on a school's ability to influence its partners. Complementary programmes in the early years like Flying Start and Sure Start, support for families, such as Families First, and place-based programmes, like Communities First, are therefore all also important. The proposed development of Children's Zones in Wales may offer an important opportunity to integrate these different interventions and maximise their effectiveness in narrowing the gap.

Notes

[1] Although the Connexions Service was developed to provide support and careers advice to all young people, it became increasingly focused upon those most at risk of disengagement (Raffo et al., 2007).

[2] In order to oversee the development of RAISE in their regions and report to the consortia, RAISE regional coordinators were appointed. North Wales and Central South Consortia each appointed one regional coordinator, whilst the others split the post, each employing two coordinators (Holtom et al., 2012).

[3] Modest changes to the Common Funding Scheme to increase the weighting in school funding for deprivation were made, in response to the Salisbury Review (DoE, 2014).

[4] This is used to determine eligibility for the Pupil Premium.

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