

People and Work

1. People & Work < <http://peopleandwork.org.uk/en/home/>> is an independent charity, established in 1984 in response to the economic and social impact of deindustrialisation. We seek to make a difference by:
 - promoting the value of education and learning as a tool for tackling inequalities and promoting employment, through a programme of community based action research projects such as the School Focused Communities Project in Glyncoch and Play It Again Sport in Rhondda; and
 - undertaking commissioned research and evaluation work for the public and third sectors in Wales addressing inequalities in areas such as education, health and employment.
2. Our commissioned work for the Welsh Government has included evaluations of Raising Attainment and Individual Standards of Education (RAISE) < <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-first-three-years-raise/?lang=en>> and the School Effectiveness Framework for Wales < <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-welsh-school-based-counselling-strategy/?lang=en>>. We have also, for example, led the programme of action research to inform reform of the statutory framework for Special Educational Needs (SEN) / Additional Educational Needs <

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/programme-action-research-additional-learning-needs-pilot/?lang=en>>.

3. We also recently published an article in the Wales Journal of Education examining the PDG and its precursor, RAISE, , 'Narrowing the Gap: Lessons from RAISE Ten Years On', WJE, Vol 19.2 2017, <http://www.uwp.co.uk/journal/cylchgrawn-addysg-prifysgol-cymru-university-of-wales-journal-of-education/#>. We have adapted text from this article in our response.

Schools' use of the PDG and the extent to which this benefits the pupils it is designed to be targeted at; and

The relationship between PDG-funded support for pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and expenditure on activities designed to improve attainment of all pupils

4. The Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) uses eligibility for free school meals as a proxy indicator of poverty and relies upon schools to identify and target disadvantaged pupils. Eligibility for free school meals remains a crude measure. It identifies many pupils who are disadvantaged. 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 it focuses upon financial poverty 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).
5. The PDG relies upon schools to effectively identify and support children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The evaluations of

RAISE and the PDG have 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; Holtom et al., 2012). This means that more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are often not supported. In effect schools have focused upon equality of outcome, rather than equality of opportunity. This may be one factor that contributes to too few pupils in Wales achieving the highest grades (see Duancey, 2017, on Wales' challenge to stretch potential high achievers). There is also anecdotal evidence of low levels of participation in the Seren Network amongst some schools in disadvantaged areas.

6. The decisions schools make about how to use funding are critical. Schools supported by the PDG have been encouraged to take an evidence based approach, through for example dissemination and encouragement to use the Sutton Trust Toolkit < <https://www.suttontrust.com/about-us/education-endowment-foundation/teaching-learning-toolkit/>>. Despite this, schools have tended to focus upon their own experience of what works rather than drawing upon robust research evidence (Pye et al., 2014). As a consequence, 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). Pressures upon school budgets are likely to be adding to incentives to use additional funding to supplement core budgets and for example, pay for staff, rather than offering genuinely additional support.
7. Equally, a simplistic call for evidence- based interventions risks ignoring 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,

and a 'one size fits all' approach, is unlikely to be appropriate (Carpenter et al., 2013).

How the lessons and legacy of Schools Challenge Cymru can be used to complement subsequent policies and initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes

8. The research is clear that although the effectiveness of different interventions varies, there is no 'magic bullet', no single solution or intervention, that can narrow the gap. 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. Schools that have been successful in narrowing the gap have done so because they are effective schools, with for example, strong and inspirational leadership, effective teaching and learning, and strong partnerships with key stakeholders like parents (Macleod et al., 2015; WAG and WLGA, 2002, 2004).
9. 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 put out 'fires', but is not of itself sufficient, and schools with the same level of funding can have very different levels of effectiveness. Greater integration of programmes like (the now defunct) School Challenge Cymru, which focus upon support and challenge to aid school improvement, with the additional funding offered by grants like the PDG, may therefore be required to maximise the impact of additional funding to narrow the gap.

The case for linking strategies to narrow the educational attainment gap with strategies to identify and support additional educational needs

10. The incidence of additional learning and special educational needs (ALN/SEN) is higher amongst children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and unmet ALN/SEN mean pupils are likely to struggle to attain. However, too often strategies to address additional educational needs are not integrated with strategies to narrow educational attainment gaps linked to socio-economic disadvantage. Cuts and pressures in other areas, such as provision for the early years, is also likely to be increasing pressure upon schools ('cost-shunting').

References

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