

THE CONVERSATION

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Free education for poor mums may help alleviate child poverty

November 7, 2014 6.13am GMT



Helping hands. Mother and child via Nadezhda1906/Shutterstock

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Improve the school results of children from poor backgrounds and they will escape poverty in adulthood. This is the way the UK government believes it can alleviate child poverty, built on a belief in the power of education to create social mobility.

But there is much evidence to suggest that access to education is unequal across the UK. And while the long-term goal to increase social mobility is laudable, it does nothing to lift children out of poverty now. Instead, it shows a lack of consideration for the lives of children currently living in poverty.

Yet if policy priorities were to focus on giving the parents of children living in poverty access to further and higher education, this could bring more immediate benefits. Unfortunately, in England at least, education is becoming increasingly unaffordable for lone parents and part-time students to access.

Ways out of poverty

The latest government figures show that in 2012-13 there were 2.3m children living in relative low income, even before housing costs were taken into account, with another 2.6m in absolute low income.

In 2000, Scotland had higher child poverty rates than England, but this has fallen over the past decade. By 2011-12, child poverty before housing costs was 18% in England compared to 17% in

Scotland, both down from over 30%. One of the principal reasons for the faster decline in Scotland has been attributed to increased employment rates among lone parents after the Scottish government had a policy targeted at this group.

The evidence shows that employment does not always lift families out of poverty: there are more poor children in households with a wage-earner than without. Yet my research with the **Child Poverty Action Group** shows that parents – in this case single mothers – who accessed further and higher education succeeded in finding paid employment and that this had a positive impact on both them and their children.

Gaining confidence and skills

My research studied the lives of 20 families living in poverty, ten in England and ten in Scotland. In Scotland, four of the ten families I studied were led by single mothers who were participating in further or higher education. None in England were. Two of these four Scottish mothers completed further education and obtained their first job after becoming a parent: one is the mother of three boys aged six, ten and 13 and the other the mother of two boys aged ten and 12. The other two mothers, who each have one son, continued on to take degree programmes.

People living in poverty often need a boost in confidence and skills before they start up education again. For three of the women I studied, this came through volunteering opportunities. One explained that volunteering was “really good for me” and that the organisation had: “talked me into doing my degree. It was always something I wanted to do. I was just needing a wee boost.”

Boost to family well-being

Through access to education, these women gained in well-being, confidence, skills and self-esteem. They made friends, widened their social networks and found universities and colleges to be excellent sources of financial support through hardship funds.

By completing their education and obtaining a job, the lives of their children demonstrably improved. With their mothers less burdened by financial worries, the children were happier and were able to enjoy treats such as the cinema and an occasional meal out – all new to them. One mother, who had done a Higher National Diploma, said getting a job meant she was able to pass her driving test, save up to buy a car and take her children on holiday.

Another mother said the knowledge that she had completed a college course and succeeded in getting a job she loved had a positive impact on her children. Her eldest son, aged 13, has told her he is proud of her and feels a positive change.

Access to education has helped to increase social mobility in this cluster of families. It has not only provided the mothers with the skills and confidence to engage with their own education, but also with that of their children, for who they are now role models.

Education has also opened up a world to which neither they nor their children may have aspired. It has provided them with a starting point to bigger and better opportunities. One mother said: “I know

that I've got loads more to offer... hopefully I'll get better jobs and better paid jobs.”

Squeeze on part-time education

Access to education has been possible for these mothers because there are no fees for higher education in Scotland. In England, since fees were raised to £9,000 per annum, there has been a 40% decline in applications to universities from part-time students, amounting to 105,000 fewer applicants, nine out of ten of whom are mature.

Between 2010 and 2013, there has been a 14% reduction in applications from full-time mature students, amounting to 18,500 fewer applicants. Among these potential mature students will be parents and lone parents.

The increase of tuition fees has effectively removed access to further and higher education for many poorer parents, which blocks a viable route out of poverty for them and their children. For social mobility to continue improving, access to education for low-income parents needs to be made cheaper and easier.

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