Closing the Divide
Tackling educational inequality

This issue focuses on research funded by Kusuma Trust UK, including key findings from a report by the Centre for Social Justice on educational inequality in England, an update on research by Pratham to track children's access to secondary education, and a research training programme delivered by the International Institute for Population Sciences.

In September, the Centre for Social Justice launched 'Breakthrough Britain 2015'[1]. The Kusuma Trust UK (the Trust) funded the volume in the report on tackling educational failure.

The report highlights two key reasons for focusing on educational failure. First, underachievement tends to perpetuate an inter-generational cycle of disadvantage. Second, children who leave school with few or no qualifications are less likely to find employment or to progress at work. Last year, 40% of children left school without five grade A*-C GCSEs and children from families on low incomes and children in public care fared particularly poorly.

However, educational underachievement can be reversed. During the London Challenge[2], for example, London moved from being one of the poorest performing regions to one of the highest at Key Stage 4[3]. Progress that has been made in London schools now needs to be extended to the rest of the country.

Students taking part in a math's lesson
Photo: Sam Strickland

The research identified five key policy priorities to address educational failure:

1. Readiness for school
The early years have a major impact on children's cognitive development and their capacity to benefit from formal schooling. The report recommends improvements to the quality of early years provision via:
- a better qualified workforce
- an increase in the number of nursery classes and Children's Centres attached to primary schools
- the wider availability of local birth data so that Children's Centres can target the most disadvantaged families.

These recommendations aim to improve children's educational development, ease their transition from nursery to reception classes, and improve children's literacy, numeracy, communication and social skills.

2. Supporting disadvantaged pupils
The report highlights the need to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers, and recommends:
- extending access to the Pupil Premium for families affected by long-term unemployment, family breakdown, addiction and mental health problems, as well as young carers and looked after children;
- improving access to places at State boarding schools for children at risk of entering the care system, and as a form of early intervention;
- more support for charities to set up Free Schools in socially disadvantaged areas.

Our mission is to facilitate and increase access to education and other life opportunities for children and young people

3. Improving schools, teaching and leadership

The report focuses on the need to enhance school-to-school support, improve standards in primary schools and improve the quality of teaching and leadership by:

- giving Regional Schools Commissioner Boards powers to broker support across all schools in order to link poor schools with high performing schools;
- providing seed funding to encourage primary schools to join a formal federation of primary schools;
- setting up a formal structure for teachers' continuing professional development by a future Royal College of Teaching.

4. Spreading success

There are significant regional variations in educational attainment across England. In 22 local authorities, for example, more than 70% of children on free school meals fail to achieve five A*-C GCSEs. In response, the report identifies the need for effective Academy chains to expand into deprived areas and for a National Teacher Service Scheme to be established to encourage good teachers to work in schools in deprived areas.

5. Further education and transition to work

Further education colleges have a crucial role in improving the qualifications and practical skills needed for young people to enter employment. The report focuses on the need to improve the quality of provision in the further education sector, to establish a fairer funding regime and to improve links between further education colleges and employers. More University Technical Colleges and high-quality apprenticeships targeted at disadvantaged young people are identified as possible solutions.

The full report offers recommendations for reducing educational failure and improving the life chances of disadvantaged children. It is wide-ranging in its scope and underlines the need to improve the quality of provision at every stage in the education system, from early years through to further education. The Centre for Social Justice is using the report to advocate for changes in policy and the future of education in England. Some of the policy recommendations from the report featured in David Cameron's latest education announcement.[4]

Access to Secondary Education

The Trust commissioned Pratham, a leading education research institution in India, to undertake a study on understanding access to secondary education. The first phase, which entailed Global Positioning System mapping of all educational institutions in two blocks in in Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh, and Sambalpur in Odisha has been completed.

The preliminary findings are interesting. Approximately a quarter of the 567 villages surveyed did not have a single educational centre and the number of villages without any education centre is much higher in Odisha than Uttar Pradesh. The absence of a single educational institution in villages raises questions regarding universal access to primary education.

Although government schools account for a majority of schools mapped in the villages, these schools often do not offer continuous schooling. Over two-thirds of all government schools offered schooling in primary grades (1-5), less than 20% offered schooling in upper primary grades (6-8), less than 10% offered continuous schooling in grades 1-8, while the remaining offered secondary or senior secondary education. Private schools on the other hand offer more options for continuous schooling with many more grades, including pre-primary schooling. About 16% of all private schools mapped offer schooling from grades1 to 10.

Researchers from Pratham are developing assessment tools to measure students' learning levels at Grade 8, and to track student trajectories through the secondary school system. This second phase of the study will explore the relationship between educational provision, access and transition to secondary education.

Research training programme

The Kusuma Research Fellowship, in partnership with the International Institute for Population Studies in Mumbai, was set up to develop the research capacity of graduates and promote research on education. Five Fellows received comprehensive mentoring and training in research methodologies over a year, and then completed a research assignment with a focus on education in Odisha and Uttar Pradesh.

This month, Fellows presented their research findings to peers, Faculty members and Kusuma staff. They covered a wide range of research topics, including understanding absenteeism among girls in Grade 9 in Hardoi; access to educational loans; teaching and learning English in a multi-lingual context; and the employability of graduate and post-graduate students.

Students studying at the Girls Government Inter College, Hardoi
Photo: Sam Strickland

4. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-29574125