

Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (ILiAD): A Case Study Approach to Community Differences

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Abstract : This paper presents the findings of a three-year government-funded study (ILiAD) that aimed to understand the reasons for differential educational achievement within and between socially and economically deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Previous international studies have concluded that there is a positive correlation between deprivation and underachievement. Our preliminary secondary data analysis suggested that the factors involved in educational achievement within multiple deprived areas may be more complex than this, with some areas of high multiple deprivation having high levels of student attainment, whereas other less deprived areas demonstrated much lower levels of student attainment, as measured by outcomes on high stakes national tests. The study proposed that no single explanation or disparate set of explanations could easily account for the linkage between levels of deprivation and patterns of educational achievement. Using a social capital perspective that centralizes the connections within and between individuals and social networks in a community as a valuable resource for educational achievement, the ILiAD study involved a multi-level case study analysis of seven community sites in Northern Ireland, selected on the basis of religious composition (housing areas are largely segregated by religious affiliation), measures of multiple deprivation and differentials in educational achievement. The case study approach involved three (interconnecting) levels of qualitative data collection and analysis - what we have termed Micro (or community/grassroots level) understandings, Meso (or school level) explanations and Macro (or policy/structural) factors. The analysis combines a statistical mapping of factors with qualitative, in-depth data interpretation which, together, allow for deeper understandings of the dynamics and contributory factors within and between the case study sites. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data reveals both cross-cutting factors (e.g. demographic shifts and loss of community, place of the school in the community, parental capacity) and analytic case studies of explanatory factors associated with each of the community sites also permit a comparative element. Issues arising from the qualitative analysis are classified either as drivers or inhibitors of educational achievement within and between communities. Key issues that are emerging as inhibitors/drivers to attainment include: the legacy of the community conflict in Northern Ireland, not least in terms of inter-generational stress, related with substance abuse and mental health issues; differing discourses on notions of 'community' and 'achievement' within/between community sites; inter-agency and intra-agency levels of collaboration and joined-up working; relationship between the home/school/community triad and; school leadership and school ethos. At this stage, the balance of these factors can be conceptualized in terms of bonding social capital (or lack of it) within families, within schools, within each community, within agencies and also bridging social capital between the home/school/community, between different communities and between key statutory and voluntary organisations. The presentation will outline the study rationale, its methodology, present some cross-cutting findings and use an illustrative case study of the findings from a community site to underscore the importance of attending to community differences when trying to engage in research to understand and improve educational attainment for all.

Keywords : educational achievement, multiple deprivation, community case studies, social capital

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