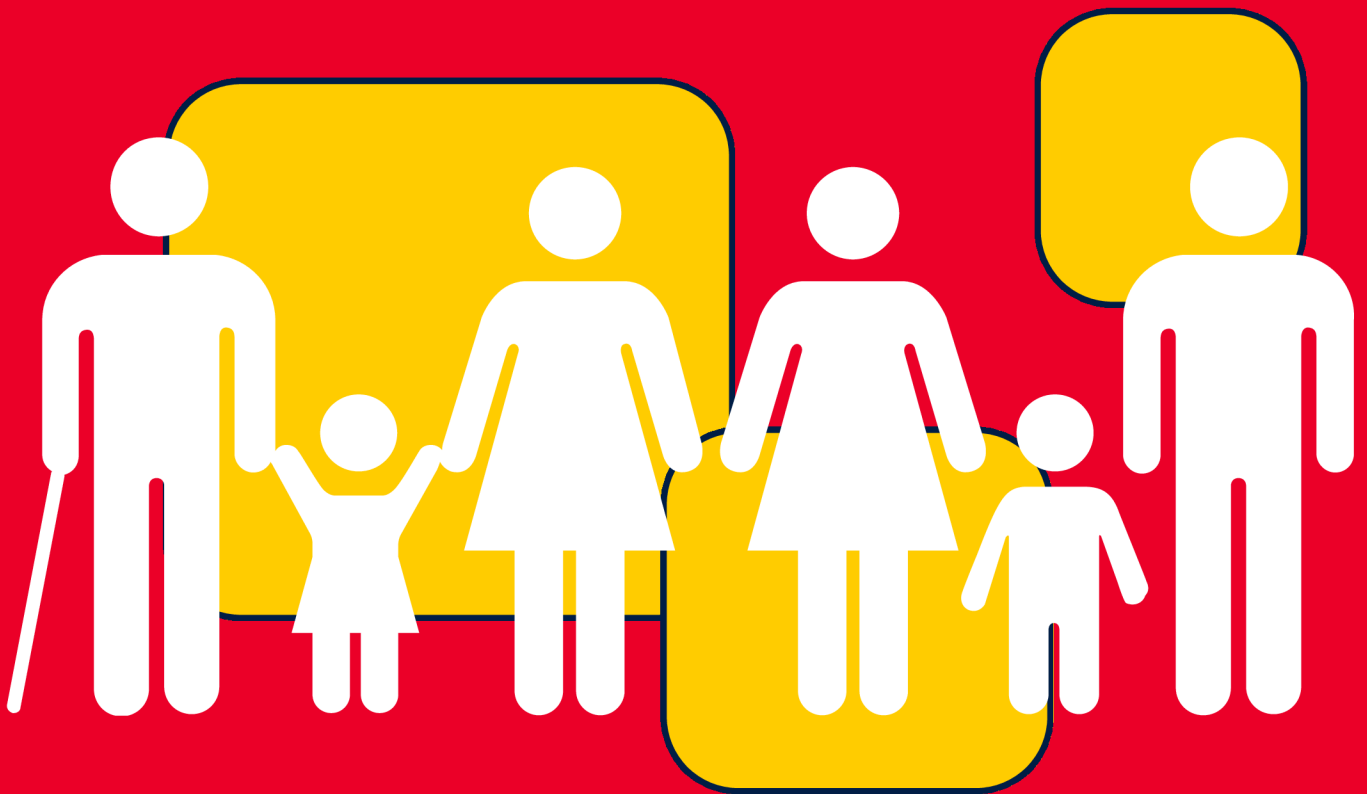




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An updated perspective on child poverty and education in Northern Ireland Executive Summary



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March 2026

Introduction

This report provides an updated overview on the issue of poverty, or resource-based inequality in Northern Ireland (NI). In this updated perspective, we hope to develop the readers' understanding of resource-based inequality and associated implications for wellbeing, opportunity and development.

Poverty

The United Nations defines poverty as “a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity” (1998, para. 3). Currently, 20% of children in Northern Ireland are living in relative poverty and 25% are not having their basic needs met including food, shelter and housing. Despite this, NI does not have an anti-poverty strategy and poverty is absent in the NI Executive's Draft Programme for Government 2024. The annual cost of child poverty in NI is estimated to be between £825 million and £1 billion, accounting for additional spending on health, housing and education (NIAO, 2024). Recent plans for cuts to the NI education system were so dire the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child recommended the budget be withdrawn based on its potential to exacerbate issues of poverty, mental health challenges and widen existing educational achievement gaps. Poverty is a complex topic and can intersect with every aspect of society and an individual's identity. Given the scope of the topic, the present review focuses on the intersection between education and poverty, as educational underachievement is highly impacted by social-economic disadvantage.

Findings

Children

A quarter of parents of school-age children in NI reported struggling to provide enough food for their family in the last year, with many families choosing between heat and food (Cooper & McNulty, 2024). Food insecurity associated with being under-resourced means reduced access to a nutritionally varied diet, impacting cognitive functioning and performance. Children living in poverty are at greater risk for malnutrition, chronic health conditions, and limited healthcare access. Differences associated with housing and environmental impacts are not equally distributed, particularly impacting children in under-resourced communities and vulnerable minority populations in NI.

Findings continued

Families

Economic pressures associated with poverty are a significant source of stress, impacting the family system and thus the child. One in four children under 16 in the UK are estimated to live with a parent experiencing mental health challenges (Abel et al., 2019). This is exacerbated in a post-conflict Northern Irish context, with rates of parental mental ill-health, substance misuse and incarceration contributing to the intergenerational nature of poverty (Austin, 2019). Families in NI are under additional childcare pressures, including insufficient places and rising childcare costs, preventing or reducing service access. This impacts families in terms of employment opportunities and income.

Schools

Poverty is closely linked to lower academic achievement. There is an opportunity gap between children living in under-resourced areas and their peers, impacting on cognitive skills and school performance. This is significant given cognitive skills in childhood are strong predictors of future academic success and employment opportunities.

Children from under-resourced families often lack access to basic resources needed to succeed in school, including educational materials, technology, and study spaces. Digital poverty has other implications for children's sense of inclusion and connection with peers. Economically vulnerable children report a greater dislike of school and lower levels of engagement, including participation in enriching extra-curricular activities (Kennewell et al., 2022). They are also absent from school more often than their peers.

Persistent experiences of poverty are associated with a decline in social emotional wellbeing throughout childhood, including greater emotional difficulties, problems with peers and behavioural concerns. These challenges can create barriers to effective learning and interfere with children's abilities to participate and interact positively with others. Economically vulnerable children requiring additional educational support are at risk of further disadvantage in the current unsustainable Special Educational Needs system, as they may have few resources to seek support outside of this system.

Recommendations

Government Policy

- Governments must prioritise the eradication of child poverty while also putting measures in place to improve the lives of those experiencing poverty. This includes:
- Addressing intersectional factors such as parental mental health, employment and healthcare in a holistic Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Adequately funding schools to meet the needs of children and families experiencing poverty, including wraparound care, early intervention projects, free school meals and after-school activities.
- Further investment in community-based Early Years programmes offers children from under-resourced backgrounds access to quality learning experiences that help mitigate opportunity gaps.

Schools

- Schools should be supported to provide social-emotional learning programmes, school based mental health support, and peer support networks to increase wellbeing.
- School policies and practices should ensure they are inclusive of pupils living in more challenging circumstances.
- We recommend that schools are allocated funding to provide a sense of material security in school and promote participation in extra-curricular activities.



Recommendations continued

Key adults: parents, caregivers and school staff

- Positive, nurturing relationships should be valued as a source of early intervention and support. High quality, caring interactions with children can increase children's self-efficacy, social-emotional competence and feelings of safety.
- Continued teacher training and professional development opportunities, including in trauma-informed interventions, will better equip schools to address the unique challenges faced by children from adverse backgrounds including nurturing safety and regulation amid the persistent stressor of poverty.
- Parental engagement and support: Parental partnerships can be nurtured through strategies such as:
 - flexible meeting times
 - providing translation services
 - hosting community events linking parents with valuable supports
 - parenting programmes
 - resources to help parents support their children's learning at home.

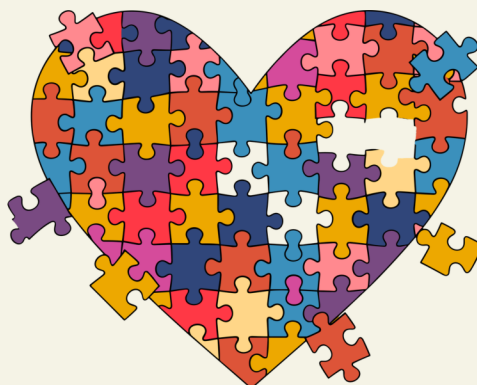


Implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs)

- We recommend EPs adopt a holistic approach when considering assessment methods and tools, many of which may not be reflective of the experiences of economically vulnerable children.
- As reflexive practitioners, EPs should acknowledge and challenge any biases and assumptions operating within their practice (HCPC, 2023).
- Psychological formulations of a child's need should incorporate the intersectional nature and impact of under-resourcing.
- EPs should use the privilege and power afforded to them by virtue of their position to advocate for implementation of key changes to eradicate poverty impacts, especially in education.
- EPs can use their consultation skills with key stakeholders to challenge thinking and inspire collaborative practices, leading to change (BPS, 2023; HCPC, 2023).
- EPs should share examples of research-based evidence outlined in this report and examples of inclusive practices with their schools.

Conclusion

The impact of poverty on children's education is multifaceted and pervasive, affecting academic performance, social development, and overall wellbeing. However, protective factors, such as high-quality early education, supportive school environments, access to healthcare, and community resources, can mitigate these impacts. EPs, by advocating for the implementation of these recommendations at the individual, familial, and institutional levels, can help promote greater educational equity.





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