

Learning through disruption 2: schools serving high poverty communities need funding that fully reflects the work that they do



The pandemic has shown how important primary schools are as networks of support for children and families. Our project, *Learning Through Disruption*¹, also shows that schools have a particularly vital role in addressing the needs of high poverty communities, both directly and indirectly. Yet this work goes largely unrecognised and underfunded. This needs to change.

Findings

1. Schools are a vital source of support for children living in poverty

During lockdown, schools monitored the wellbeing of children intensely, using regular phone calls and visiting the homes of the most vulnerable children not on site. In many ways, schools are at the frontline in dealing with deficiencies in the current welfare system that place children living in poverty at risk.

¹ *Learning through Disruption: Rebuilding primary education using local knowledge*. Funder ESRC/RCUK. Grant number ES/W002086/1 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/learning-through-disruption-rebuilding-primary-education-using-local-knowledge>

there were times when ... we just had to go around to the homes. ... when you've been trying to get in contact with families, and they're not responding [...]and you know they need to have breakfast. ... It's just something you just have to get on and do (Head S2)

Schools were also crucial in providing safe spaces for families affected by domestic violence and inadequate temporary accommodation. Without this active support, many vulnerable children would have been left at considerable risk during lockdowns. In many ways, schools are the place families turn to when there is nowhere else to go.

2. Schools serving high-poverty populations face greater challenges in meeting the depth of their needs

The pandemic made clear that poverty has material impacts on children's lives, whether through basic food insecurity, poor housing, lack of basic necessities such as clothing or digital poverty which limited opportunities to access remote learning. While all schools did what they could to address issues facing individuals, schools serving high poverty areas faced bigger challenges in helping their communities through the crisis. Many had to rely on a patchwork of charitable support to help ensure pupils stayed fed: This highlights deficiencies in the welfare system that require urgent repair.

eventually we found our way into the kind of food share, food bank system and we've been getting free food that I go and collect every week to give out to families from a more centralised thing in [city].... We were paying for it ourselves, at one point for a couple of months we were spending about £1000 a month on food parcels for our 25 most vulnerable families (Head S7)

3. Pupil Premium funding does not adequately match changing levels of need

Although schools were able to help the most vulnerable in their communities during the crisis, this role is not adequately resourced. Pupil Premium funding is based on eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), a relatively crude measure. In the context of the pandemic, changing the date when eligibility for FSM is calculated has compounded these funding issues (Thomson, 2021). Several of our case study schools noted that some of the hardest-hit families were those who had lost jobs due to the Covid crisis. Parents who had been furloughed or had reduced hours of work were suddenly dealing with financial insecurity, and turning to schools to help them through.

What we've noticed over time was that the people who were coming to our food pantry, and we still run it now, weren't the free school meal parents. [...] It was this tier just above, the people who'd been furloughed, the people who had always had a job (Head S3)

The pandemic should act as a prompt for a review of how schools dealing with children living in poverty can be properly resourced to meet their communities' needs.





Recommendations

- Funding should be more clearly weighted towards schools operating in areas of highest disadvantage. This will enable them more easily to address the multiple impacts material poverty has on children's education
- Current metrics to determine funding for schools operating in areas of multiple disadvantage are inadequate. FSM entitlement is not capable of capturing the complexity of local needs that impact on pupils' educational functioning.
- Only a joined-up strategy to end child poverty in England will enable all children to reach their educational potential. Schools' role in picking up the damage poverty causes should be recognised and funded.

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