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Food banks in schools: educational responses to the cost-of-living crisis

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Executive Summary

1. The use of food banks in schools is growing (Walker, 2023), suggesting an increasing role for schools in providing for families in food insecurity.
2. Case studies of schools with food banks show that schools offer a range of different provision, stretching well beyond food to include clothing, uniform, shoes and household products.
3. The impact of the food banks is described by staff as considerable, with improvements in learning and children's wellbeing, participation and dignity.
4. Food banks are seen as having a positive impact on family and community wellbeing and improving home-school relationships.
5. Food banks in schools are seen as less stigmatising, at least by staff, and more convenient for parents.
6. School leaders describe the reasons for having a food bank as based on their impact, convenience for families, and a moral obligation to help families in increasing need. Schools are at the frontline of dealing with family poverty, and see themselves as continuing, after Covid, to prop up the welfare state.
7. Experiences during the Covid period appear to have emboldened school leaders to resolve social problems themselves, in the absence of other support.
8. There is some concern that this work is not recognised, for example in inspections, nor is it funded. Provision is sometimes precariously funded or staffed.
9. This unequal burden on schools serving disadvantaged communities risks exacerbating disparities between schools in different areas.

Introduction

Why research food banks in schools?

The importance of food to children's wellbeing and learning has long been recognised, with Local Education Authorities permitted to "take such steps as they think fit for the provision of meals for children in attendance at any public elemental school in their area" in the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906. This was in response to the Education Act 1870, which made schooling compulsory, but did little to alleviate in the short term the poverty that meant many children were forced to go to school hungry (Keith, 2020). A National School Meals policy was established in 1941, the government's interest piqued by a report stating that the poor physical condition of soldiers fighting the Boer war was due to malnourishment of children, with consideration of the implications of this for World War 2 (Evans & Harper, 2009). The supply of free school meals and milk became compulsory across all schools in the country as part of the 1944 Education Act, in an attempt to improve the health of children following years of food rationing (Evans & Harper, 2009). By the 1970s, there was good provision of free school meals for all children from low-income families, although the nutritional standards and cost for those who paid for school meals was of some concern (Berger, 1989).

Eligibility for free school meals became means tested following the Education Act 1980, which put an end to the requirement for schools to provide a school lunch to any child that wanted one (Berger, 1989). This continued to be the case throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with only families entitled to certain benefits receiving free school meals for their child(ren). In 2014, a government policy entitling all infant aged children (from reception year to year 2) to free school meals was introduced, with improved nutrition and learning and financial savings for parents cited as the aims of the policy (Department for Education, 2014). In February 2023, Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, announced an emergency funding scheme to provide school lunches for children in Key Stage Two (those from school years 3 to 6) for one year, meaning that all children in primary schools in London will receive free school meals in the academic year 2023/4 (London Assembly, 2023). In addition to providing nutritious meals to support learning, the policy seeks to reduce the stigma of receiving means-tested free school meals.

Alongside interest in the impact of school lunches on health and learning is recognition of the effect that breakfast clubs can have. Breakfast clubs began to emerge in the late 1990s in the UK, with the aims to provide children with

food (and parents with childcare) before the start of the school day (Simpson, 2001). Breakfast clubs also seek to improve learning outcomes through alleviating hunger for those children who have not eaten breakfast at home (although the research on whether eating breakfast aids cognition is equivocal, as discussed below). An evaluation of the National School Breakfast Programme, which ensured children in the most deprived areas had access to breakfast in the classroom, in the playground before entering the classroom or as part of a breakfast club, found a range of positive effects (Bogiatzis-Gibbons et al, 2021). 99% of schools participating stated that the scheme had resulted in improved concentration and readiness to learn amongst those children who had been given breakfast, whilst 94% said they had seen improved behaviour and educational outcomes (Bogiatzis-Gibbons et al, 2021). Some of this impact may be due to improved punctuality, with schools who took part reporting a 28% reduction in children arriving late (Bogiatzis-Gibbons et al, 2021). There are also thought to be some benefits to children attending breakfast clubs alongside children of other ages, leading to improved friendships (Defeyter et al, 2015).

More recently, holiday food programmes providing meals during have emerged as a response to food insecurity during the school holidays, when free school lunches and breakfast clubs are not available. Although relatively new in the UK, such provision has been established in the USA for more than 40 years (Feeding America Action, 2023). Prior to 2021, provision was haphazard, with schemes operated mainly by charities and voluntary organisations (Lambie-Mumford & Sims, 2018), and a lack of a co-ordinated policy resulting in patchy and intermittent availability, making the programmes difficult to access for some families (Forsey, 2017). Nonetheless, gains from such holiday food programmes include healthier eating and increased physical activity for children, and a reduction in stress for parents worried about how to pay for more food during the school holidays (McConnon et al, 2017), when they may be working less to care for their children (Forsey, 2017). 2021 saw the rollout of the national, government funded Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme (Department for Education, 2022), with all local authorities now required to provide free holiday clubs with food and activities supplied. An evaluation of the policy suggests that, for children, participation results in greater levels of physical activity and increased socialization and confidence (Cox et al., 2022). For parents, the greatest impact appears to be that HAF allows them to work the same or more hours, preserving family incomes during more expensive school holidays (Cox et al., 2022).

The piecemeal provision of food beyond school lunches - whether through breakfast clubs or holiday feeding programmes- demonstrates an

uncoordinated approach to the problem of food insecurity amongst children and families, with a range of organisations stepping in to fill the gap left by inadequate welfare provision. This research explores another piece of this patchwork provision. However, a criticism of approaches such as breakfast and school holiday clubs is that the focus is on the individual child outside of the family (Dayle et al., 2000). As Lambie-Mumford & Sims (2018, p. 250) state, “work focused solely on feeding projects and their immediate impact on individual children runs the significant danger of rendering the drivers of children’s food insecurity invisible to future research and policy-makers”. Instead, this study aims to centre children firmly within the ecology of the family, considering the impact of provision of food for the whole family. As the project has progressed, it became apparent that despite the name, school ‘food’ banks were providing far more than just food; schools were giving out uniform, toiletries, household goods and many other things, and providing less tangible forms of support such as purchasing bus passes and providing email addresses to apply for benefits. We decided to include all of these forms of response to families living in financial insecurity within our discussion; thus, the term ‘food bank’ here often refers to this wider provision rather than only food.

Why research food banks in schools now?

The Covid-19 pandemic shone a light upon the issue of food insecurity in families, with school closures (for most children) drawing concern not simply because of the impact upon pupils’ education, but also due to the lack of free school meals available for children in families with low incomes (Lalli, 2021). The initial government response to this was for schools to organise their own provision of food, usually through the catering company employed to deliver school lunches, or to opt into a scheme providing supermarket vouchers to families with children eligible for free school meals (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2021). The inadequacy of food provided by some profit-making catering companies, and the government’s preliminary decision to only provide vouchers during term time, saw a high-profile campaign led by the Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford (e.g. Bulman, 2022) and resulted in a government U-turn. Nonetheless, the media headlines and public outcry had brought the issue of food insecurity amongst families with children to the fore (Lalli, 2021).

The supply of food to families also became a priority for school staff. When making phone calls to families to check on their welfare, 72% of school staff said discussing access to food and financial support was a priority, compared to 63% who stated that they wished to share advice on how to help children learn at home (Moss et al., 2021). Furthermore, 35% discussed how supermarket vouchers for those families eligible for free school meals would

be delivered, whilst just 17% wanted to assure parents that there would be continuity in learning (Moss et al., 2021). This focus upon the welfare of families during the pandemic highlighted the way in which school leaders took autonomous decisions which centred children's wellbeing (Bradbury et al., 2022). This report considers how this support from schools is operating following the pandemic.

Since the pandemic, families have been hit by the cost-of-living crisis, with increased energy bills and high inflation meaning that they are faced with higher food costs and increased costs to cook foods. Inflation reached 11.1% in October 2022, its highest point since October 1981, whilst March 2023 saw a year-on-year increase in food prices of 19.1%, a figure not seen since 1977 (Harari et al, 2023). Energy bills increased by around 350% in 2022 (Stewart & Bolton, 2023), meaning that some families had to make the choice between heating and eating (e.g. Partington, 2022). Between April and September 2022, just over 25% of households with children experienced food poverty, the greatest level since tracking began at the beginning of the pandemic (Food Foundation, 2023).

The cost of living crisis has resulted in more families using food banks than at any other period, including the pandemic, with the Trussell Trust (the largest food bank charity in the UK) stating that December 2022 was the busiest month ever seen and 2,986,203 food parcels were distributed between April 2022 and March 2023, a 37% increase on the previous year and a greater number than ever before, even during the pandemic (The Trussell Trust, 2023). Approximately 1.1 million of the emergency food parcels were for children (The Trussell Trust, 2023). Whilst it is difficult to establish the exact number of food banks in the country, the Trussell Trust are thought to account for just over half of food banks (Irvine et al., 2022), so the number of food parcels issued to children could be significantly greater.

Alongside this increase in the use of food banks is concern that 800,000 children living in poverty are not receiving free school meals (Food Foundation, 2022). Whilst all children in reception, year 1 and year 2 classes currently receive free lunches, as discussed above, all other children are only eligible for free school meals if their family is entitled to Universal Credit and has an income of less than £7,400 per year (£617 a month after tax). This figure is consistent regardless of how many children are in the family, resulting in families on very low incomes being required to pay for packed or school lunches.

Overall, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have meant that more children are living in food insecure households, and, increasingly, schools are

responding by establishing food banks. Whereas 8% of school governors reported volunteering in schools with a food bank in 2019, that figure had jumped to 17% in 2020, prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Garrington et al., 2020). By May 2023, a survey of teachers revealed that around 21% of schools operated food banks (Walker, 2023). Despite this growth in the number of food banks in schools, it is an area that has yet to garner much research interest (with the exception of Baker, 2022 & Baker & Bakopoulou, 2023). Therefore, this research seeks to explore what impact food banks in schools have upon children, families, staff and settings.

Research questions

Our research questions were:

1. How do food banks in schools operate?
2. What are the motivations for schools to operate food banks?
3. What are the impacts of schools offering food banks on children, families, and school staff?

We begin with a review of the existing literature on hunger, family stress, impacts on learning, and the wider use of food banks.

Research on children, hunger and family stress

Living in a food insecure family has wide reaching implications for both adults and children. Poorer levels of nutrition (Bruening et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2016; O’Connell et al., 2019b), and reduced physical activity (Bruening et al., 2018; Gulliford et al., 2006) contribute to increased levels of obesity (Food Foundation, 2019; Metallinos-Katsaras et al., 2009). Deficiencies in crucial nutrients such as iron and iodine (United Nations World Food Programme, 2006) result in reduced cognitive functioning. Combined, this leads to poorer health outcomes, including asthma, high cholesterol, diabetes and anaemia (eg Nagata et al., 2019; Pai & Bahadur, 2020). However, the impact of food insecurity upon mental wellbeing and family functioning is also well documented (Brown et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2022; Ward & Lee, 2020), and is discussed in more depth here.

Hunger and parental wellbeing

Unsurprisingly, there is strong evidence to suggest a link between food insecurity and depression, stress (Pourmotabbed et al., 2020) anxiety, and sleep disorders (Arenas et al., 2019). One parent interviewed by researchers at the University of Liverpool and cited in the *Children’s Future Food Inquiry* described the experience of not knowing if they would be able to feed their children:

I was very stressed and panicking that- panic, like panic attacks, things like that. I’m thinking ‘what are my kids going to eat tomorrow and after tomorrow?’ (Food Foundations, 2019, p. 29)

In a qualitative study conducted by Leung et al (2022), parents experiencing food insecurity discussed six common emotions around being unable to feed their child(ren): guilt and shame surrounding being unable to feed their child(ren), stress from constant worry and financial juggling, frustration at the lack of options available when purchasing food, stigma from using food banks and other such resources, and sadness at their overall situation. Some reported sleeping to excess or misusing alcohol to help them cope with and escape from the constant stress. Even in families where parents miss meals

to ensure their child(ren) can eat, *what* food insecure parents are able to provide can exacerbate these feelings. According to Lindow et al (2022), anger and frustration at being forced to feed children less nutritious food due to the price of healthier options amplifies feelings of shame and guilt. With messages about the importance of a balanced diet for lasting health abounding, the inability of food insecure parents to provide adequate nutrition for their children intensifies feelings of guilt and shame, even if their children are not hungry.

O'Connell et al (2019a; 2021) found that in approximately one quarter of families in their study of food insecurity, parents would skip meals to ensure there was adequate food for their child(ren) to eat, meaning that hunger in children is less common than food insecurity in families. Typically, only the more extreme food insecurity results in children missing meals. Parents in families in which children are forced to miss meals are more likely to encounter more severe depression (Becker et al., 2019; King, 2018), suggesting that the experience of being unable to feed their children may exacerbate depression amongst food insecure parents.

The way in which parents attempt to shield children from the worst effects of food insecurity means that although children may not present as hungry at school, there may be an insufficient amount of food available for the household which is causing parental stress. With parental stress and mental ill health associated with poorer family relationships, harsher punishments and less responsiveness (Brown et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2022; Ward & Lee, 2020), food insecurity in the family, even if it is not resulting in children's hunger, could still have significant consequences for children. This is explored in more detail below.

Hunger and children's wellbeing

The relationship between children's mental wellbeing and food insecurity is also well established. Similar to adults, children experiencing food insecurity are more likely to suffer from anxiety (McLaughlin et al, 2012; Weinreb et al,

2002) and mood disorders including depression (McLaughlin et al, 2012). However, as discussed above, children do not typically miss meals unless they live in the most food insecure households. Instead, the explanation for the link between living with food insecurity and mood disorders may be that stress, anxiety and depression from parents 'trickles down' to children (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2003), with negative parent-child interactions that promote anxiety and low mood amongst children more likely due to parent stress, and parental depression resulting in less warm and nurturing parenting (Zaslow et al, 2009). There also appear to be differences in the ways in which girls and boys respond to the stress of food insecurity and poverty, with girls more likely to internalise their distress and develop mental health difficulties, low confidence and self-esteem and so on, whilst boys can react with more externalised, anti-social behaviours which result in school exclusions and police involvement (McNeish et al., 2016). An example of an internalised response is seen with Bryony, one of the participants in O'Connell et al's (2019, p. 45) study on food insecurity, who explained:

Even if it's not that much food for me and [brother], it's enough that we've actually had something, whereas mum hasn't, and it gets a bit to the point where we'll start feeling guilty because mum hasn't had anything and we've had it.

The interaction between food insecurity and wellbeing is thus complex; the impacts go far beyond hunger.

Research on children, hunger and learning

Research surrounding food insecurity and its impact upon children's learning and development focuses upon two key areas: the effect of long-term malnutrition upon children's cognition and development, and how the arousal state of hunger impedes attention and concentration in the short term. A report from the United Nations World Food Programme (2006) delineates this as the impact of hunger upon a child's future capacity to learn as determined by brain development, and their ability to access current opportunities, which is affected more by poor concentration and attention caused by hunger. Both are considered here.

Hunger and access to learning

Access to learning in an immediate sense may be limited by tiredness and an inability to concentrate for children experiencing hunger. In their qualitative study, O'Connell et al (2019a) spoke to food insecure children who discussed how they needed to rest their heads on their school desk as they were so tired from hunger. Six in ten teachers surveyed by the teacher's union NASUWT (2022) regarding the cost-of-living crisis stated that they had seen an increase in the number of children arriving at school hungry, with almost 70% claiming that more pupils were lacking in energy and/or concentration as a result of this. A survey of over 500 schoolteachers in August 2022 found that 88% of teachers who saw children coming to school hungry stated they were fatigued and 84% said they were easily distracted (Chefs in Schools, 2022). A larger survey of almost 18,000 teachers, conducted by the NEU, found that 87% of teachers had seen children too tired to learn or unable to concentrate due to hunger (NEU, 2023).

Hunger and future learning

Interestingly, quantitative studies examining test results of groups of children who had skipped a meal (but ordinarily had access to a nutritious diet) suggest that short-term hunger has little effect on cognitive processes. In a study of secondary school pupils in England, Dickie and Bender (1982) found that children who did not consume breakfast performed no differently on tests of short-term memory, mathematics or attention. Similarly, there was no effect on cognitive functions amongst younger children who omitted breakfast but typically ate a balanced and sufficient diet (Kral et al, 2012). One study even proposed that skipping breakfast could be beneficial to short-term memory for children who were typically adequately fed (Pollitt et al, 1981), although in a replication of the research this finding was not repeated, and those children whom had not consumed breakfast performed poorly on problem solving tasks (Pollitt et al, 1982). However, lack of food over a longer period resulting in malnutrition does appear to have a more significant impact upon children's cognition. Low iron levels resulting in anaemia leads to impaired cognition functioning (Taras, 2005), whilst children with stunted growth due to inadequate nutrition performed poorly on cognitive tests regardless of how

recently they had consumed food (López et al, 1993). This suggests that it is long-term malnutrition that is most damaging to a child's ability to learn.

Research on food banks in England

There is a very limited literature on the use of food banks in schools in England; Baker's and colleagues' work on food charity in schools being the other main source (Baker and Bakopoulou, 2022; Baker, pre-print). Baker's work, using interviews with staff running food banks in schools and early years settings, and with families, provides key insights into the phenomenon of food charity in education. His analysis of the underlying causes focuses on the cost-of-living crisis and a retreating welfare state in England, in a context where charitable food aid is an increasingly socially acceptable response to poverty. Baker concludes that schools are increasingly having to take responsibility in this political context for making sure children's basic needs are met. Beyond this work the existing literature on school food focuses in the main on free school meals and breakfast clubs (e.g. Cohen et al, 2021; Lalli, 2021).

The existing literature on food banks more widely is however a useful source for this project, as food banks have been established for over a decade in England. They have existed for far longer in other nations, but we focus here on the context in England. A key discussion in this food banks literature relates to terminology, particularly the terms food poverty and food insecurity. While some prefer to talk about poverty in general, some scholarship notes the particularities of food insecurity in social as well as health terms (O'Connell et al, 2019a; Knight et al, 2018). Not having enough food is potentially damaging not only to your physical health, this work argues, but also has an impact on your social life, wellbeing and mental health. Reflecting this broader conceptualisation, food insecurity is most frequently defined as:

Whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain (Anderson, 1990 p1560, cited in Lambie-Mumford 2017 p17).

This emphasis on socially acceptability is important in understanding the complexity of food insecurity. Further insights from the work of O'Connell and colleagues on food poverty in families demonstrate the social importance of food in bringing the family together to have a shared experience (2019a). This work, alongside ethnographic work on standard foodbanks and their users (Garthwaite, 2016), emphasises the significance of stigma in preventing and discouraging people from using foodbanks, even when in need. As the food blogger Jack Monroe, in the foreword to Garthwaite's book, comments:

I'll tell you now, even after months of attending, it feels like begging. No matter how kind the volunteers, how discreet the carrier bags, you have to look someone in the face who knows you are desperate and not coping and that your life is falling apart. (p10).

There is a wider literature on family poverty which suggests visits to food banks can be a 'deeply stigmatising experiences that already have harmful effects on self esteem' (Pybus et al, 2021 p23). This means that many food insecure families do not use one, so that food banks use in England is a 'poor proxy' for food insecurity (Pybus et al, 2021); reflecting international findings that families only use food banks in the most extreme circumstances (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; 2015). The extent and importance of feelings of stigmatisation are significant in our work in schools because they offer a different form of food bank, at a place where parents are already attending. One of the key questions for us as researchers therefore related to the ways in which a school could be less stigmatising than a traditional food bank. A further insight from the food banks literature was how powerful the discourses of the deserving and undeserving poor remain, even among food bank volunteers (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Power et al. 2020). These discourses frame some food bank users as engaging in 'faulty behavioural practices' (Garthwaite 2016), such as spending their money on alcohol or cigarettes rather than food, and thus needing a parcel from the food bank. In their study in Bradford, Power et al. (2020) even find these discourses among the users of the food bank, some of whom contrast their own behaviour with those stigmatised as struggling due to their own behaviour. This work points to the complexity of feelings of Otherness, shame and judgement associated

with food banks, and reminds us that even those doing ‘worthy’ volunteer work in food banks might hold some negative views.

Finally, the food banks scholarship also examines the underlying reasons for poverty, which we do not have space to discuss fully here. In these discussions, policy changes dominate, particularly those relating to benefits such as the ‘bedroom tax’ and the bedroom tax (MacLeod et al, 2019) and ‘five week wait’ for benefits (Thompson et al, 2019). This issue of ‘in-work poverty’ is also a growing concern, with low wages and zero-hours contracts leaving families in financial precarity. While the cost-of-living crisis was apparent during our project, the literature reminds us that the problem of increased numbers of families living in poverty has longer roots back into the 2010s (Lambie-Mumford 2017; Treanor, 2020).

The research study

Case study schools

This was an exploratory qualitative research project which involved case studies of six primary schools in England which had a food bank or provided free food for families in some way. These were accessed through the research team's network of contacts, and on social media via a call for participants. The table below provides some basic information on the six schools.

The sample includes some variation in terms of region, though the schools are disproportionately located in London, due to the team's location. The schools are all located in areas of disadvantage, though to varying extents, and are of different sizes. The locality of the schools also varied, as some were in built up urban areas, while others were more suburban. The schools are conceptualised as 'telling cases' (Mitchell 1984) which illustrate the pertinent issues in this area, rather than as a representative sample, however, as this was an exploratory project.

Table 1: Case study schools

School	Description
1	Large community primary in a deprived, multi-ethnic area of East London.
2	Community primary in a very mixed area in North London.
3	Small community primary in a deprived, multi-ethnic area of North London.
4	Community primary on the outskirts of London.
5	Community primary in a deprived areas of Midlands city.
6	Small Church of England primary in a deprived town in the north of England.

Interviews

At each school, the plan was to interview the headteacher, some class teachers, and any staff involved in the food bank. In some schools, we were able to also talk to relevant other staff, such as the school cook, and partners from the relevant food provider or charity. In others, we only spoke to senior

leaders. One unanticipated challenge was the disruption caused by NEU industrial action during the Spring term, which meant that we were not able to speak to class teachers in some cases, as they were on strike. A full list of interviewees is provided in Table 2, where all names are pseudonyms.

For ethical and practical reasons, we did not interview parents who use the food bank, or their children, as they are a hard-to-reach population which we would not wish to burden further.

Table 2: List of participants

School	Name	Role
School 1	Michael	Headteacher
	Matt	Manager of food pantry
	Michelle	Chef
	Mark	Head chef
	Marianne	School support staff involved in food provision
	Martha	Year 6 teacher
School 2	Grace	Headteacher
	Genevieve	Assistant Headteacher
School 3	Sasha	Headteacher
	Sophie	Year 2 Teacher
	Sarah	Support staff leading food bank
School 4	Lorraine	Headteacher
	Lesley	Deputy Headteacher
School 5	Abigail	Headteacher
School 6	Charlotte	Headteacher
	Catherine	Year 6 teacher

The semi-structured interviews for headteacher focused on the perceived impact of the food bank on children, the barriers and challenges involved, and the overall impact. Teacher interviews focused on the impact on children, while the interviews with other staff explored issues such as the practicalities of the foodbank, how families use it, and how the school manages the additional workload.

Some interviews were very short, as staff had to return to other duties, while others lasted over an hour. Interviews were conducted at the school, in locations chosen by the participant. They were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

In addition to the interviews in schools, we decided to also interview a staff member at the Felix Project (a food redistribution organisation) as they emerged as a key component of the structure of food banks in schools in the London schools. This interview lasted an hour and focused on how they work with schools, how demand has changed, and the key purposes of the organisation.

Analysis

The qualitative data were coded thematically, to draw out key issues in relation to the research questions. Codes were drawn from the research questions in the proposal, our additional points of inquiry, and topics in the research literature. New codes emerged as the analysis progressed, with a key theme of eco-consciousness and food waste emerging from the data. Analysis was undertaken individually and then as a team, to allow for a range of viewpoints and alternative perspectives.

Ethical issues

The project was approved by the UCL Institute of Education ethical review system and adhered to the BERA guidelines. Names of schools and participants have been changed, and any details have been adjusted to ensure that they cannot be identified. Given the sensitivity of the topic of family food poverty, particular care was taken to ensure total anonymity of families who use the foodbank. Data are stored safely using the university network and the project adheres to GDPR regulations. After the interviews, each school was given a £50 donation to their foodbank or associated charity, as a thank you. This was only communicated after the interviews, so it was not an incentive.

Findings 1: How do food banks in schools work?

This section explores the complex ways in which schools gathered food (and, in many cases, other items) and distributed it to families. The range of methods used highlighted the importance of knowledge of family's circumstances, the local context and the range of other services available, underlining the position of schools as experts in the needs of local families, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic (Bradbury et al, 2022; Harme & Moss, 2021). Whilst some schools in the study utilised the services of excess food distribution charities such as the Felix Project, others used apps to locate food that would otherwise be thrown away in local supermarkets, and some asked families for donations of food. Similarly, a multitude of systems for the collection of food by families emerged, with some schools operating an overt supermarket-style service in which families could select from what was on offer, whilst others supplied bags of food assembled by staff and available to collect at a time to suit the family. The number of families using the provision, and the circumstances of these families, varied by school, as did the process by which families were identified as needing support, or sought help themselves. Nonetheless, some common themes did emerge amongst schools participating - the snowballing of provision, and one member of staff acting as the driving force behind the provision of food. The latter is explored first.

Importance of one individual as a key driving force

In most schools, there was a member of staff who took responsibility for the food bank at a great cost to their time, and it was typically this person who started the provision. In School 1, an intricate network of food provision was led by the headteacher, Michael, who not only co-ordinated a food bank, a food pantry, a chef dedicated to teaching cookery skills to the children (alongside the school chef) and a range of volunteers and charity partners to enable this, but who would drive any excess food from the school to local foster families. The food bank in School 2 was managed by Genevieve, the assistant headteacher, who has collected food from supermarkets on

Sundays for the food banks and arrives particularly early on a Monday to arrange the food ready for families to collect. Sarah, a long-standing member of support staff, was the driver of the food bank in School 3, organising deliveries of food from charities, collecting household goods for families, and targeting families she felt may be in need of support. Sarah emphasised the importance of local knowledge, stating “I know the area inside out so if they say to me they’re on a certain road...I’ll kind of go “It had laminate flooring in it, didn’t it?” so they’ll be like “Yeah, can you get me some rugs”.’ In School 4, it was Lesley, the deputy headteacher, who took responsibility for the foodbank, alongside a family support lead.

Sourcing food

Whereas there was homogeneity regarding the key actor required to manage the food bank, the way in which schools sourced the food they shared was more varied. Developing a partnership with a supplier of excess food was one of the methods that schools employed to acquire food. Schools 1 and 3 both worked with the Felix Project, a London-based food redistribution charity which aims to simultaneously relieve the impact of hunger whilst reducing food waste from supermarkets, wholesalers, restaurants and so on (The Felix Project, 2023). After collecting food from suppliers, The Felix Project allocates and delivers food to community partners such as School 3, where Sasha, the headteacher, explained “in the last few years, we’ve teamed up with the Felix Trust and they deliver once a week – deliver fresh food... So the fresh food comes and Sarah turns a room – it’s almost like a little supermarket.” Schools 1 and 3 mentioned working with a number of other similar charities, including City Harvest and Food Bank Aid, to source food. School 6 relied on a similar charity, FareShare, who run a similar operation to The Felix Project all over the UK.

Whilst these organisations do not charge for the food per se, there is sometimes a charge to the schools using their services to cover the cost of distribution. School 3 received donations from The Felix Project for free. School 6, which received the largest amount of food each week, spent £290 a week for 680 kg of food, with funding secured from a range of grants and

charities to cover this cost. The food pantry at School 1 was run by an organisation which was funded by Barclays bank. Some of the schools had used the school budget, usually Pupil Premium funding, at some point to purchase food or other goods for children and families. Even where schools had secured grants to pay for the food provision, this had come at a cost with regards to staff time.

School 2 also utilised excess food and other products from supermarkets, but did so through an app called 'Neighbourly' aimed at charities and community groups (Neighbourly, 2023). The Assistant Headteacher, Genevieve, explained:

We're signed up to this thing called 'Neighbourly', which is a social platform thing. It does lots of things like grants, businesses helping...but they also do the surplus food collection, so as soon as supermarkets come up, you can put your name down...So we do Aldi, Lidl, Marks & Spencer, and Getir (Genevieve, Asst Head, Sch2)

The food was then collected from the supermarkets by one of a number of parent volunteers, or by Genevieve herself. School 2 had begun the food bank with donations from parents, and still had boxes close to the school's entrances to facilitate this, generating "a steady little amount" of food according to Genevieve. School 4 relied almost entirely on donations from parents having had partnerships with local supermarkets during the pandemic that had come to an end. Lesley, deputy headteacher at School 4, stated:

The supermarkets have pulled away and they have advised that it was only during lockdown, that they could provide the food, we're very much reliant on our community now. So we're reliant on our dress-down days, we're reliant on looking out and trying to search for things all the time: Who can we go to? (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

Schools 2 and 4 had a very socially mixed cohort, with Grace, headteacher at School 2, describing the half of the families not entitled to free school meals as "very not eligible. So they've got an income of more than £100,000 [each]". Lesley described the mix of families and parents' careers:

We have families that have their own business that are normally local to the area. So we had the vicar [...] we know we've got police officers and we've got paramedics and doctors and we've got a doctor here, as well, who's a parent. So it's a real balance. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

It is this mix of families that enables the system at School 4 to function, as wealthier families were able to donate to the food bank, an arrangement that would have been unthinkable in Schools 1 and 3 due to the absence of middle-class families attending these schools. Michael, headteacher at School 1, explained:

I know that in some areas you may well get, a bit like the harvest festival, where the more affluent families might make donations of food for some of the other families. Now we don't have that here because we don't feel that we've got enough families with the money to be able to make the donations. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

For schools to rely on donations from parents, a socioeconomically diverse mix of families is needed.

Distributing food to families

In addition to the different way that schools collected food, they also distributed food using varying strategies, and with differing levels of transparency regarding the existence of the food bank. School 1 had the most overt approach, with a 'food club' open on Thursday afternoons and available to all parents who have paid the £1 joining fee (although no families would be turned away if they were unable to pay). Once a member, parents could pay £3.50 for a box of food worth £30, with the payment, and the name food club as opposed to food bank, aimed at promoting dignity amongst users. A separate food store existed for those families in need outside of the food club opening hours, and there was some universal provision of food with a company distributing frozen meals outside the school at the beginning of half term holidays to anyone who wanted them. School 2 held a register of around 20 families who would be alerted via an app when food was available, with anyone welcome to sign up to the list. However, at times when there was a surplus of food, it would be promoted to all parents. The food bank in School 3

was the most concealed, as Sarah, the community lead at the school, described:

we have a room that's set up downstairs, ready to go, and the way it's positioned, it keeps confidentiality. Families find that very difficult because staff may see them coming in and out, and they don't necessarily want their child's teacher to know that they're struggling a little bit, for whatever reason. So the way that it's set up, it helps to keep that confidentiality (Sarah, Staff, Sch3)

Whilst the food bank in School 3 was advertised on the school newsletter, Sarah stated that the primary mode of communication regarding the existence of the provision was word of mouth amongst parents. Abigail, headteacher at School 5, discussed a similar system; staff offering support from the food bank when it became apparent that families needed it, and news of its existence travelling via word of mouth, with occasional advertising in the school newsletter. For Abigail, excess advertising was unwanted as a limited amount of food was available and its use had to be restricted to those families whose need was greatest. The headteacher at School 3 explained why a more furtive approach was necessary at her school:

it's like going into a shop. They go round and then they take what they need and it's nice, and it's done very – 'subtle' is the wrong word, but they're not there in front of everybody. Some schools with the Felix, they put it out on tables in the playground. This is very discreet – that was the word I was looking for – this is very discreet, because our parents are quite proud and to ask for help, it's taken a long time for them to develop that trust and get that relationship going. (Sasha, Head, Sch3)

School 6 operated a similar system to that of School 3, with the food presented in a way similar to that of a supermarket and parents invited to help themselves. However, in contrast to School 3, the food stall was held openly in the school community room, having previously been held in the playground during the pandemic, and advertised on the school Facebook page. Any family could use it, and families with children attending other schools had even utilised it, with headteachers at local schools approaching Charlotte, headteacher at School 6, and asking if their families could go.

The system at School 4 was tailored to meet the requirements of each family. Parents could get in touch via a dedicated email address and would then be contacted to establish their exact needs. Bags of food would be distributed to families in accordance with their wishes, with some parents happy for the food to be taken home from school by their child, whilst others would ask to collect food during the school day to avoid being seen by other parents. The different methods adopted by schools to issue food to families highlights again the expert local knowledge that schools have about families, and how this can be utilised to support them. This was recognised by many of the school staff participating:

...there's a vicar who I think oversees the whole of the food share thing...we had a meeting with him and he said it's so interesting that, at that time, your need is almost entirely Romanian families, he said. Because we wouldn't know about that unless we'd had this little talk with you, because that is so specific. And the aspects of families not trusting anybody else apart from the school, he said, you are providing such a bespoke service to a community who absolutely need it. (Abigail, Head, Sch5)

they know us and they trust us. I think, for a lot of our parents, they knew about the local food bank, that they could walk in without a voucher but they said "They don't know me. What if they think I'm lying? What if they think that 'What's she doing here? Why is she here?'" Do I have to explain anything?" Whereas here, we're black and white, we've said to them "You don't need to explain anything to us, you just need to tell us you need help and we're going to do it. You don't need to justify anything." (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

I know, I would say, 98% of the families from Stay and Play. The current Y6 that we've got, I think there's only three of them that didn't come through the community groups...those parents will still come to me and talk to me because they've known me for such a long time. So it's trust...The clothing, that gets brought in, I go through it, put it out. Sometimes I'll know which family is needing what, so it will go straight to that family...they know how I work. So while they're in there, one of them will say to me, "I need some help with my CV. Can you fit me in?" So you're having conversations about 'I heard that Lidl were advertising jobs during the week' and I'll let them know that. (Sarah, Staff, Sch3)

Number of families using the food bank

Alongside this differentiation in the way in which the food bank was advertised and food was distributed was a wide variation in the proportion of families using the food bank. Unsurprisingly, the food banks at schools serving the most deprived areas were most heavily utilised. The headteacher at School 6 explained:

We are in the first decile in the IMD¹. So top 1% highest levels of deprivation in the country. We're just short of 80% of our children being – that qualify for pupil premium... I would argue as well that that other 20% in some cases will have even less money in the house. They're our working poor, like our single mums. Some of those are staff... So, yes, deprivation is the single biggest barrier that we face at this school. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

The food stall at School 6 was used by more than a quarter of the families at the school, with around 50 parents attending each week and a full transit van of food (approximately 680kg) distributed. 30-35 families attended the food banks at schools 1, 3 and 5, although School 1 had around 720 children on roll whilst School 3 had approximately 250 and School 5, 480. All headteachers described the levels of poverty in the areas their schools were situated in:

The local authority is one of the most deprived local authorities in the country and the school sits in one of the most deprived parts of the local authority. I think last time that we looked at some stats we serve the first and the third highest constituents for child poverty in the UK (Michael, Head, Sch1)

...this is an area of high deprivation, and most of that, over the half the school population are on free school meals. Those that aren't on free school meals, it's either because they have their recourse to public funds or they're in very low-paid, low-income jobs. So they probably are in a worse situation because they don't get the free school meals for the children. (Sasha, Head, Sch3)

Whilst Schools 2 and 4 served a more socioeconomically diverse population there were still a significant number of families using the food provision, with

¹ Index of Multiple Deprivation

around 20 families signed up to list alerting them to food deliveries at School 2 and 16 families with 27 children receiving support at School 4.

Snowballing support: the provision of goods other than food

While the schools had all started with providing food for families, in all cases their provision had expanded to include other goods, such as toiletries and sanitaryware, household products, baby goods (nappies and formula primarily) and clothing. School uniform and shoes were particularly common, given the expense of these items and the constant need for new items as children grow. In many cases, this provision had begun in ad hoc ways, but had continued into the long-term. For example, at School 5, the head explained:

Some of our Romanian families have a lot of children – 10, 11, 12. So the need for a clothes bank was massive. So I think that's how it started. I said yes [to a donation], and I must have taken whatever they'd got – bags of clothes – and bought a few rails and hung them up. And almost when the parents came for the food, I think we started to say, "If you want to have a look through, just take anything you want". [...] So we'll pay for school uniform for kids that haven't got it. We'll buy them a water bottle if they haven't got a water bottle. It's all very low key and just – we pay for trips if kids can't afford to go on them. (Abigail, Head, Sch5)

This pattern of beginning with some donations or a one-off event and then finding that there was a need for more and more among families was present in several case study schools. As we discussed later, this ever-expanding role reflected a growing confidence in helping families after Covid as well as increasing need.

Findings 2: What is the impact of having a food bank in a school?

Impact on learning

While it was not the main impact our participants talked about, there was general agreement among the teachers, staff and leaders that having a food bank had a positive impact on children's learning, because it reduced the chances of them being hungry at school. The effect of hunger on concentration was most frequently mentioned:

But they can't learn if they haven't had anything to eat, can they?... So lack of concentration is the main one... It's just not being able to concentrate. You know what it's like when you have nothing to eat and you've got nothing in your belly, you can't concentrate (Sophie, Teacher, Sch3).

I think obviously if they're in school and they're feeling hungry then that impacts upon their work and their concentration. They're going to feel unwell. They're going to feel unmotivated (Martha, Teacher, Sch1).

...we've had some [children] that maybe haven't had much since lunch at school the previous day. And you can't concentrate on your reading comprehension if you can't – if you're hungry. (Catherine, Teacher, Sch6)

These views are consistent with those voiced by teachers in teaching union surveys (NASUWT, 2022; NEU, 2023), and are supported by research demonstrating the impact of hunger upon cognitive functions, including concentration (Bellisle, 2004). They also chime with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), which is frequently taught on initial teacher education programmes, and states that basic needs such as shelter and food need to be met before children can learn. Similar points were made during research during the Covid crisis, where teachers prioritised providing food over home learning (Bradbury et al, 2022).

Beyond the impact upon concentration, participants also made links between the provision of free food and improved behaviour, attendance and punctuality, which all in turn support improved learning outcomes. This

headteacher discussed the positive impact the (extensive) provision of food at his school had upon behaviour and therefore learning:

I think without it we would see more behavioural issues and therefore we would be spending more time on children's behavioural issues and I think that that would lead to poor learning. The worst-case scenario is that if we had poor behaviour, poor learning, then that might lead to poor teacher retention and the whole vicious downward spiral starts where then poor teachers leads to even worse learning, leads to even worse behaviour, leads to even worse outcomes, etcetera, etcetera. (Michael, Head, Sch1).

Another headteacher also discussed how sometimes children who were sent to her with poor behaviour actually had serious concerns about family money or how much food they had at home. In general, clear links were made between children's ability to learn, and their levels of stress and anxiety about food:

[Children] have undoubtedly had things off the food stall for breakfast. And you think, "Well, yes, you wouldn't be able to concentrate on writing an explanation text would you if you hadn't got that bowl of Shreddies in your belly right now?" [...] if you're not eating, and you've not got food in the house, I think that phrase food insecurity is really good because it's unnerving isn't it? I mean, that stress and worry of not knowing where your next meal comes from causes an insecurity (Charlotte, Head, Sch6).

Some participants also discussed the way in which alleviating some of the stress associated with poverty allowed parents to spend more time with their children on activities to support learning. When one staff member at School 4 was asked if the food bank improves learning outcomes, she asserted:

I think, with a lot of our families, it does have an impact and I don't know whether it's because we're helping the parent with their mental health but then, they can spend that time with their child, reading, in the evening; they're not sitting there worrying about "I've got to do this, I've got to do that." Or if you meet the need of the parent, they're then available to meet the need of the child... Whereas before, that parent would be so "I haven't got food, what am I going to do? What am I going to cook? I need to go and ring someone to get some money or I need to go ..." It's taking that away and allowing them to parent. (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

Thus we see the intertwined impact of the food bank on learning in terms of concentration and reducing stress for both parents and children.

In contrast to the responses in relation to impact on learning, none of the interviewees reported an increase in children's participation in physical activity due to the provision of food, though many stated that they could not ascertain an impact if there was one.

Children's wellbeing

As discussed above, well beyond the impact on learning, many participants commented on the positive contribution the provision of free food and other goods made to children's wider wellbeing. Children were happier, many commented, because there was less stress at home and they could participate fully in school life. In one example, a headteacher described an encounter with a child who had come to her office after receiving food from the food bank:

So he came in all full of beans. "I've got all gold. Look at my work. Can I have a sticker?" And I was like, "Someone's had their Weetabix," and they're like, "Yeah, I did. I had that special Weetabix from Genevieve". And then it turned out the dad had been into the food bank [...] that's why, that's why I'm doing this. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

Given the instability of some children's home lives, respondents told us about the impact on children's wellbeing and mental health of having more food security at home:

The last thing a child is going to be able to do is to sit there and concentrate on their work – one, if they're hungry. Two, if they're worried 'Is Dad coming home tonight? Is he going to start arguing with Mum?'. They've got all these other sorts of worries and concerns. The last thing they're going to be able to do is to sit and pay attention to a bit of history about Henry VIII and his six wives. It's just not going to happen. (Sasha, Head, Sch3)

This aligns with wider literature on financial insecurity and family stress (Treanor, 2020) which emphasises the connection between worries about food and increased arguments at home.

Children's participation and dignity

Children's wellbeing was also enhanced the provision of 'extras' alongside the food bank, which allowed them to access 'normal' childhood experiences such as giving a parent a gift at Christmas, and to be fully involved in school life. The dignity of having the same uniform as everyone else was noted, for example by Lesley at School 4, in relation to the emotional impact of 'fitting in':

You see the children, if you've given them – they might be wearing an ill-fitted skirt or trousers – we've had children who couldn't even do up their buttons and parents have just used elastic bands to hold them. We've given them pairs of trousers and they've come in – one little girl, she'll come in and she'll swish about: "Do you like my new skirt?". She doesn't need to know where it's from, just go "You look amazing!". And she goes "Yes, that's my new skirt." And it's that is what you can't really judge on whether that's helping them, academically, but definitely emotionally and mentally, that they're getting what they need. They're getting the same as everybody else: "They've all got skirts that fit; now I've got a skirt that fits." (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

Similarly at School 6, the headteacher commented on how a boy in Year 6 who had outgrown his uniform was bought an entire new set by the school, and at School 4 providing uniform allowed a child to belong:

He's the only one in his class that's not in school uniform [...] I got him in, we had tea and biscuits together and we'd been to Tesco, and we'd bought him two brand new pairs of school trousers and then we'd got a new school T-shirt and a new school jumper. Put his name in everything and then after we'd had tea and biscuits I said, "Right, I've got something for you," and his little face lit up. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

I gave [staff member] a bag, this morning, of uniform with the logo on so that we can make sure that those children have the right uniform. It's really important that it makes them feel part of the school and that they're not on their own. (Lorraine, Head, Sch4)

Again, provisions such as uniform were related to children's wellbeing and dignity, and sense of belonging. There were also links made to reducing family stress and children's ability to learn:

Knowing that the children are being fed is one big thing, and that the families aren't so under stress when they are actually at home [...] wellbeing is so important. So if you've got a child that's happy and secure when they're coming into a learning environment, they're going to be ready to do that. If they're at home and they're feeling they're stressed out, anxiety of parents, they're going to transfer that into themselves as well. And at least the children we know are getting a decent meal and they're coming here and they're being fed and they've got a decent uniform on. So any lost property, I wash it and then the parents have got access to that. So there's not that extra kind of stress. They're just coming into school to learn.
(Sarah, Staff, Sch3)

Children were described as being able to participate in normal school activities, because they had the right clothing and shoes, revealing the widespread and insidious impact poverty can have, if help is not provided. For example, participants described the physical relief felt by pupils who were given shoes that fit them, after months of not being able to run in too-small shoes. Here Lesley refers to a boy who was bought shoes by the school:

it meant so much more than just getting a pair of shoes. That was he wasn't uncomfortable anymore, he could run around, he could play football, he wasn't embarrassed, he just was the same as everybody else, and I think that's what a lot of them want, just to fit in (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

These comments are indicative of the impact poverty can have upon children's sense of integration with peers. As Townsend (1979) stated, a key feature of poverty is being unable to participate fully in society, which these schools are helping to remedy.

There were also examples given by participants of how the 'extras' allowed children to access normal childhood experiences, outside of school, such as being able to celebrate birthdays and religious holidays. At School 6, Charlotte explained how she saw the impact of some large chickens that they had given out on their food stall, which allowed a child to feel excited about her Christmas dinner:

I'd been talking to a little girl, and she was talking about Christmas Day. And I'm always very careful about what I ask about what might happen, but she was looking forward to it. So I said, "Oh, what are you looking forward to the most on

Christmas Day?” and she said, “Oh, mum’s going to cook Christmas dinner.” I was like, “Oh, wow. What are you going to have then?”. She said, “She’s got this massive chicken in the freezer,” and I just thought, “I know where that’s from,” [...] it was just a chicken, but it meant a lot to them. So things little wins like that are lovely. They’re really nice. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6).

Participants also explained how they provided timely extra goods and events so that children could enjoy normal experiences, such as wearing a costume for world book day, and giving their parents presents at Christmas:

I think it’s just allowed them to feel part of the community and it’s allowed ... for example, if we hadn’t have given out World Book Day costumes, would those children have come to school that day? Possibly not because their parents wouldn’t have wanted them to feel left out of things. (Lorraine, Head, Sch4)

When it’s Christmas time, we can go out and give them presents and we watch a child wrap a present and they have no idea to wrap a present because they’ve never done it. Again, it’s those life skills: “Actually, we’re teaching you, this is what you do, this is how good it feels to give a little present,” [...] And they will say about ten times to their class teacher “Don’t let me forget my gift, don’t let me forget my gift.” And then, when they take it out, they’re like “Mummy!” And that is why we do what we do because that child would not have that experience if we didn’t provide that for them. (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

Schools were acutely aware of the challenges of Christmas in particular for families, and several organised additional food distribution events so that families had enough food to celebrate. Overall, the food and other provisions organised by schools were seen as having an important role in allowed all children to participate in normal childhood experiences, both in school and outside.

Family and community wellbeing

While the wellbeing of the child and their wider family are clearly interlinked, there were some specific comments about the impact on children’s parents and siblings, who were seen as also the concern of the school.

I know mums that haven’t eaten, mums that have lost weight, and mums that can’t afford to buy – so they put the children

first. I've had children tell me, "My mum doesn't eat. We have tea, but she doesn't eat. She goes into the other room. She says she eats later, but I know she doesn't." And I've talked to mums, and that's definitely what's happening with some of them. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

This resonates with wider findings on the impact of poverty on children, which demonstrate the multifaceted impact as parents worry about their children, reduce their consumption, and then children worry about their parents (O'Connell et al, 2019a). In these cases, the school's concern was for the impact on the child, but also independently for the parents, suggesting a feeling of responsibility for the entire community. Indeed, at School 1 and School 6 they also opened their food banks up to local people who were unconnected to the school.

Although we don't call it that, it is charity in action. It is thinking about the community, it is thinking about the wider good. So it is good for them to see that, that we don't just think about ourselves. (Catherine, Teacher, Sch6)

They're doing something other than that to help people in the area which might be anyone. It could be someone elderly. It might be somebody that just has fallen on hard times, maybe unemployed or something, so it's nice, it's not just people that have children here. It's everybody. (Michelle, Chef, Sch1)

This sense of moral responsibility for the whole community was striking and brings up the tensions between the school's role as a place of education, and the wider 'duty of care'; we return to this topic in the following section.

Findings 3. Why do schools have food banks?

While the first section of our findings described the impact of food banks, according to our participants, in this second section we analyse in more depth the reasons *why* schools begin to offer free food, and why they continue to do so. As well as the impact described above, there were more subtle reasons why schools specifically have food banks. The aim here is not to explore the reasons why families are faced with food insecurity, as this has been explored elsewhere (Treanor, 2020), but instead to consider why schools offer this provision given the circumstances families find themselves in.

Relationships with parents – awareness of need and benefits

A key theme arising from our data was the intertwinement of free food and other goods with relationships between parents and school. The closeness of the relationship in primary schools was noted and was often the justification for needing to help families.

Primary schools are so different to secondary. We see parents every day. They come and collect their kids. We go, “Hi, how are you?” [...] – an informal chat. Which means they can go, “Miss, can I just have a word with you? I’m really struggling with ...” or, “Any spare uniform anywhere? Because I just can’t afford ...”. Those opportunities for informal chats which lead to us understanding the issues far better, seeking ways to help. That is a very unique position for primary schools to be in. (Abigail, Head, Sch5)

we just know the families really well. We know what’s going on in – not everything, but we know a lot of what’s going on in their lives. They tend to talk to us not just about when they need food. We’re there when they’re experiencing other difficulties. We’re all on the gates every single morning, and every single afternoon. So it’s just a very – we’re just familiar faces to them. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

This opportunity to talk directly to parents on a daily basis meant that primary school teachers were more keenly aware of the issues facing families, and relationships are established in ways which foster communication.

These close relationships were not only a driver of the food bank, but also a result of this provision. There were clear benefits for the school in dedicating

time to the food bank, in terms of getting to know families better, and being able to help them more effectively. Several respondents commented on their improved knowledge of families better since they opened the food bank, as it provided a place to talk and get to know their problems. This is in keeping with wider food banks literature which notes the importance of having somewhere to go where people are kind and will listen (Garthwaite, 2016). This improved knowledge meant that schools were able to support families better as they understood the particularities of the challenges they faced, and in some cases, a key person was the 'expert' in the local families:

Sometimes I'll know which family is needing what, so it will go straight to that family. Otherwise, it's just a generic thing. The same with household goods. Families will say to me, "Sarah, if you get any rugs, can you put them on one side for me?" It's those little things really. (Sarah, Staff, Sch3)

This meant provision could be tailored to each family, for example by providing nappies for a family expecting a new baby, or food that didn't need to be heated for a family with no cooking facilities. Thus provision could be made efficient and effective, based on the expertise of staff.

Access provided by the food bank also allowed school staff to signpost parents to additional sources of support, and to help them with other aspects of their lives, such as job applications and paperwork needed to secure indefinite leave to remain in the UK. The food bank appeared to provide the gateway to these additional forms of support, which also included buying bus tickets for families to get to school and providing an email address for applications. In turn, this help strengthened relationships and feelings of trust, and improved the parents' views of the school:

I think the parents see the school as a safe haven, in a sense, now that we're seen as people that care, people beyond just educators, I think that's broken down quite a lot of barriers with our families. So they will come to us now and share their needs with us and share their financial situation and maybe they wouldn't have done beforehand (Michael, Head, Sch1)

[Staff member] built up a relationship with families over the years and they really trust her and they will go to her with everything. Even if they've got immigration issues. We've had

a couple of parents who have been trafficked into the country. They're very open and honest with her. (Sasha, Head, Sch3)

For some families, the trust built by the food bank, and the time spent talking to the school staff during the food bank opening hours, meant that parents opened up about their problems. The food banks in schools were seen as important as indications that schools and parents were working together. For both parents and children, this was seen as a key message – that the school was 'on their side'. This led to more trust, and in turn to a more open and supportive relationship being built.

I think the biggest impact on the children's wellbeing is the feeling that they get from their mum and dad that school are helping them [...] school and home are on the same side. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

I think having the food bank there it is like saying we're here, we support you. (Martha, Teacher, Sch1)

[On] a Sunday in the holiday – so we still wanted to do the food bank and there was some left over. So I made up a couple of bags and I dropped them off at a couple of families that I knew come, and I pulled up and they were walking down the street, this family. There's one kid in secondary, one here and a baby, and the mum was walking along with the pushchair. I gave them this big bag of stuff, and the boy – he's in Y5 – he goes, "See Mum! I told you that the school's great!" (Genevieve, Asst Head, Sch2)

It has long been established that positive school-parent relationships have the potential to contribute to children's learning outcomes, primarily through improving children's motivation and attitude towards school and learning (e.g. Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). These improved relationships allowed the school to help more, and to understand the child better.

Notably, there were instances of the food bank causing tensions with other parents, so the impact on parent-school relationships was not universally positive. At School 6, for example, there were some parents who felt the food provision was disproportionately beneficial to one community, and others who questioned how the school decided who to support:

It is a constant, as I say, balancing act between keeping people's dignity and helping and trying to avoid, 'Well, how come you paid for her to go on the trip, but you didn't pay for my kids to go on the trip?' (Abigail, Head, Sch6)

For the headteacher in this situation, the food bank and other provision further complicated parent-school relationships, as well as strengthening the relationship with those families in need.

Location in schools means less stigma

The issue of stigma, and how to avoid parents feeling ashamed about needing to use the food bank, varied in importance at different schools. The wider food banks literature suggests the shame of needing food prevents many people from accessing food banks, so this is an important issue in relation to the location of the food bank at a school. We asked all the participants why the location was significant; they responses recognised the convenience of the food bank, but also the fact that it was less stigmatising than a 'traditional' food bank at church or community centre, for example, where you need a voucher to qualify:

I think they can target more families because sometimes communities are not aware of what's going on. If you've got a child at a school and that school has got a foodbank you haven't got to go out in an evening. (Marianne, Volunteer, Sch1)

Lots of our families haven't got the capacity to go somewhere else. So for example, if you don't have a car, public transport is very expensive for an adult. So here, they have to come here to pick up their child or collect their child. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

A lot of them [other food banks] are in churches, and I know they're open to all, but we have Jewish people, we have Muslim people who might not want to step into a church. (Genevieve, Asst Head, Sch2)

It's parents mixing with other parents I think that feels OK to them. When they go to the food bank and there are people that don't feel like they're from their community, in a sense, I think that doesn't feel quite as safe. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

It's a totally different game for our parents and our community to go and actually, physically reach out to someone and hand someone something to say "I'm really struggling, I need help,"

whereas this food bank, you can just turn up and take whatever you need and that's what we operate on. It's that there's no shame, there's no judgement, you don't have to explain anything at all. You just let us know that you need support and we're there. (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

It's around that choice, that dignity, all that that comes with it not getting a ready-made bag. (Felicity, Felix Project)

Thus there were multiple reasons why the school was seen as an ideal location for the food bank, both in practical and social terms. The final quote reveals the importance of reducing the stigma of needing food, and the ability of schools to reduce this problem through good relationships.

At some schools, particularly where there was widespread deprivation, the issue of stigma was not a major concern. Catherine, at School 6, explained how their food stall had come to be an accepted and non-stigmatising part of school life:

I think I feel like our relationships are much stronger with our community, and I think from having called it a food stall we've never had – or if we do have any stigma with it, it's quite quickly overcome when you see that it very much started – it started off and there were a few people saying, "Oh, I don't – give it to somebody who needs it." - but now it's a lot more, you know, people just come and just get what they need kind of thing, and you see the queue. They queue down the road... (Catherine, Teacher, Sch6)

Similarly at School 2, interviewees thought there was no stigma attached at all, and no keeping the process hidden, though this was perhaps related to the environmental justification which was more prominent at this site (discussed further below). Though not all the participants agreed, at School 1, there were also comments that suggested there was no shame attached, because everyone was aware of the cost-of-living crisis; one responded, when asked if there was any stigma:

No, I don't think so. Because I think that – like you listen to the news and you seen the amount of people that are working full time and can't meet their bills at the end of the month, so a foodbank is there to support those families. (Marianne, Volunteer, Sch1).

However, at other schools, even those in deprived areas, significant efforts were made to ensure the food bank was kept separate from the main school, and teachers were not aware of who was using it:

Of course, we can explain everything and it's really confidential and you can pick your food up at any time you want during the day. After school, we can send it home with the child, whatever suits. [...] So there's a lot of people that are really proud and they don't want to reach out to school because what they're worried about is "School's going to think that I'm not looking after my child". (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

They [parents] go round and then they take what they need and it's nice, and it's done very – 'subtle' is the wrong word, but they're not there in front of everybody. [...] This is very discreet – that was the word I was looking for – this is very discreet, because our parents are quite proud and to ask for help, it's taken a long time for them to develop that trust and get that relationship going. [...] They come in a separate entrance to where all the main visitors come in. And then they walk to the room. It's taken us many years to get this system right (Sasha, Head, Sch3)

In these schools, making sure families were not prevented from accessing the food by their concerns was a priority, resulting in particular rooms being dedicated to the food banks and the timing and means of access being carefully planned. Similarly, at School 1, the food bank was set up as a food pantry, with parents paying a nominal fee for their bag of food, to avoid stigma:

Because it is a familiar place for the families, they have to come here so they're not having to go out of their way. And I think I used the word dignity earlier, but I think families going to a food bank I think families sometimes would avoid that just because to the stigma that comes with it. But going into the school, as I say, it seems like a safe place and there isn't the stigma with that and I think that that's quite appealing to our families. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

Indeed, at School 1 the manager of the food pantry emphasised how important reducing stigma was in his role:

I see my job as very much as reducing that [stigma] as much as possible. Magnifying – maximising the dignity involved

and reducing the stigma of negativity around the shame of, you know, being without. (Matt, Manager, Sch1)

This was seen as highly important by the staff at these schools, because they were acutely aware of the impact of this shame on parents, and also children. When asked if children felt the stigma of poverty, another senior leader agreed:

Absolutely, yes. We have children that have come up and go “My toes hurt,” or “My heel’s falling off but Mummy says she can’t repair it. Have you got an elastic band?” And they’re almost coming up with the solution of how they can fix the problem. And we’re talking about children that are six or seven years old but they’re already learning that survival at that age. (Lesley, Deputy Head, Sch4)

The participants’ actions were motivated by a desire to protect children, and their parents, from the circumstances they found themselves in, and a desire not to make the situation worse by identifying children as living in food insecurity. This sometimes involved a great deal of work, but overall it was felt that schools were well placed to provide food and other goods.

As well as the keen awareness felt by staff of the impact of poverty, there were also some comments which suggested that the food bank had exposed the wider school population to the challenges some parents face; Grace at School 2 said that the food bank has resulted in ‘quite a lot of eye-opening on the more privileged side’. When one parent questioned why people needed the food bank, parents were able to explain:

I think that there’s been some teaching of the more well-off families, I think. They’ve learnt from the less well-off families. [...] because there were other people that had been heavily involved with this, and directly supporting what was happening, they were very able and confident to say [to this comment], “Actually, it’s this. Actually, they’re in temporary accommodation. Actually, they haven’t got their own kitchen. Actually, they have got an oven but they can’t afford to put it on. They got pregnant or they’ve got a one-year-old, but when people got pregnant or planned their families, they didn’t know this is going to happen.” (Grace, Head, Sch2)

This broader social awareness, generated by the involvement of parents in the food bank, was not widespread but suggests a role for food provision in terms of social cohesion among the school community. Certainly, free food

events hosted at Christmas were spoken of positively by many respondents, who felt there was real sense of community about such moments.

Environmental reasons

One factor that was not anticipated when the project was designed was the role of environmental reasoning in schools' decisions to operate food banks. The importance of this was the main difference between the research sites, with some schools mentioning 'eco' reasons frequently, and others not mentioning it at all. This connection between reducing food insecurity and reducing food waste is not significant in the literature on food banks and may be a specific feature of school-based food banks.

In particular, School 2 stood out as having a particularly strong message of reducing food waste by having a food bank, although the participants were clear that their main motivation was helping families who couldn't afford food. Their food came from local supermarkets who had surplus food and was collected by a group of parent volunteers after the school was notified by an app and sent out a message. The parents then collected the food from local supermarkets and delivered it to school where there was space and facilities for it to be stored. The demographics of the local community were significant in this case, as the more affluent parents had the transport and time to collect the food and were motivated by the dual purpose of reducing food waste and helping families in need.

Some of those [more middle class] parents will go and pick it up on their motorised bikes. Because for them, it's part of an eco – we have families that are kind of really eco-conscious, which I think there is a little bit of white middle class privilege in that, which I think it's fine to acknowledge. So they've got maybe only one working parent in the family and another one perhaps does volunteer work. And she's also got a bike that is a motorised bike with a big thing on the back. So she's got the time and the resource. Families like that, they're not taking the food, but it's going in the bin and it's quite important that they pick it up by bike. So we're kind of managing to tick all our different parents' boxes, because they might not necessarily need the free food. But they feel like they're

contributing because they're getting the food out of waste and then also using their bike. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

The leaders at this school were able to capitalise on the resources of the more affluent portion of their community to provide the food for the food bank, while also making them feel they were contributing to the school and the 'eco' cause. Their shelving and fridge were bought with an additional grant, one of several that they applied for to support this work, often referred to as 'saving food from the bin'. This also reduced the stigma about using the food bank, which operated in the playground quite openly. While the head commented that 'they all bring their own bags or they bring their trolleys, don't they, and it just looks better for the children', the assistant head responded:

But also, I feel like it's different these days, like people aren't as ashamed. Because we also sell it as though 'come and save the planet'. (Genevieve, Asst Head, Sch2)

Thus the 'green' credentials of the food bank had an important role in reducing the stigma associated with using the food bank. In some other schools, making sure no food was wasted affected what happened to left-over food, but the logic of food waste was not the main factor:

One of the things we also try is to reduce food waste as much as possible here, so if there are things left over at the end of distribution we will look at what we can then use to cook with in the school kitchen, or then it will get redistributed. So I will often end up with either I bring my car here or someone will drop it at my house and from there I distribute from mine to a number of foster families that live near me or some other homeless projects and so on. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

However, in the most of the other schools, reducing food waste was not mentioned, even when the food provided came from FareShare or the Felix Project, whose aims are to reduce food waste. In order to understand this relationship more, we interviewed a staff member at the Felix Project, who are the FareShare operator in London. Felicity, who has responsibility for the charity's work with schools, explained the 'dual purpose' of their mission:

Schools redistribute that in different ways. We don't really use the word 'food bank'. It's sort of more about food redistribution, because people do this in different ways and there's also that stigma associated with the term 'food bank'.

So as I mentioned before, we really focus on the environmental side, that families are saving it from going to waste – rescuing it to reduce that stigma. (Felicity, Felix Project)

The organisation does not advise schools on how to present the food they are given, instead allowed them to use their local knowledge to decide how best to ‘sell’ the food to parents:

The schools know their parents and school bodies best, but we say, if you think it’s going to be a barrier that it’s somewhat a food bank, then sell it as you’re saving that food going to waste and do it like that. And then, with the pay-as-you-feel model, it feels less like a handout. (Felicity, Felix Project)

Schools’ sensitivity to the needs of families, recognised by the Felix Project, are thus a key advantage for the food distribution organisations. They can also ensure that food is getting to families – as Felicity explained, ‘We know it’s families, we know it’s going to people in need, we know teachers in schools know their families and can really target it.’

While this presentation of food banks in schools as motivated by reducing food waste was highly effective in School 2 in bringing the community together and allowing families to access food without stigma, there are also some tensions inherent in this model. Importantly, presenting food banks as a way of saving the environment glosses over the significance and impact of poverty, making something quite shocking more palatable to those unaffected. It also ignores the importance of some of the wider provision offered by schools, beyond food, which we have seen above also makes a difference to children. ‘Saving food from the bin’ is clearly a good thing, but also risks failing to recognise the root cause of the need for a food bank, which is poverty.

‘Somebody has to’ – the lack of other services and moral obligations

This brings us back to the underlying reasoning behind schools operating food banks, which was an overriding sense that families were in need, and so schools had to respond. The sense of moral obligation to help was compounded by the failure of other services to help families, and the policy

environment which increased need, particularly in relation to housing and benefits.

When we asked participants why their school had a food bank, there were a number of different types of 'origin stories', which began to explain the reasoning. For several schools, the Covid crisis had provided an insight into the level of need in their community, often increasing, and motivated them to start providing food.

I don't know that we ever properly recognised lack of food as a barrier before COVID happened. Before COVID we were working a bit with the Felix Project and we were doing some real ad hoc food distribution, a little bit here and there each week. Felix would bring a donation in and we'd distribute it just in the playground but not to any targeted audience and just it was a very small amount so we didn't really recognise that as a great need. And then when COVID came the need became more and more apparent. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

We'd just gone into lockdown and we'd had lots of conversations, hadn't we, about how we could help these families and what we could do? And we knew that we had parents that are struggling, we knew that parents were losing their jobs[...] So we knew that that deprivation was increasing in our school and that was before COVID hit [...] I think we just wanted to do more and none of us knew how to do it. So it was a mixed conversation of "We could do this, we could do this," and initially, we just went to staff with the idea "We're thinking about setting up this food bank [...] and the response from staff was really overwhelming. (Lorraine, Head, Sch4)

Once this had begun, the provision continued because the need was still there in the post-Covid period. In these schools, it appeared that the Covid period had given them the confidence, and justification, to start addressing food insecurity in their community. Beginning as a form of 'crisis policy enactment' (Bradbury et al, 2022), in response to school closures, these actions were quick, and embedded within knowledge of the local circumstances. They were also often ad hoc, dependent on local donations and networks, much like the general responses of schools to the issues posed by Covid (Moss et al, 2021). After the crisis, schools had found ways to make the food banks sustainable and manageable, but felt the continuing need

justified keeping them going. One school tried to cut down to having a fortnightly rather than weekly food bank, but quickly found that was insufficient. Food banks became 'Covid keepers', practices started during the pandemic that continued afterwards, in these schools.

In some other cases, the school had operated a food bank before Covid, and simply continued to do so during the crisis and afterwards. These schools, which were in more deprived areas, made adaptations during closures, but were already emboldened to take action on food insecurity before the pandemic. For these schools, providing food was simply part of 'what we do'.

We've fed them for so long. So before we had the food stall, we were still always giving children breakfast. If any child comes in and says they've not eaten, or if they come in and there's something not right, the staff will go, "What did you have for breakfast today?" and then they're scooped and feed them. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

Despite these different origin stories, there was some commonality in reasons why schools continued to operate food banks, as explanations focused mainly on lack of other sources of support, rising poverty, and the absence of other solutions.

The lack of alternative sources of support was frequently cited as a reason why schools needed to step in. Participants mentioned social services, mental health support and NHS waiting lists as causes of family issues which they had to address.

When I first came here, I didn't realise how lucky we were in terms of the services that were out there that aren't there anymore. You know, things like Home-Start, Sure Start, children's centres, all those sorts of things. Speech and language, CAMHS, child mental health services. We just can't get into – or they're just not there. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

Schools are being asked to hold families more and more and more often. So for example, the child and adolescent mental health unit has got an 18-month waiting list and we could have children that are actually self-harming. And we're having to hold those children because of the waiting list. We've got children and parents that are on waiting lists for treatment at hospitals – and staff as well. And it's not right. We're holding

these families and trying to keep them going and keep them going, and keep them going and keep them going. The food bank is another side to that. (Sarah, Staff, Sch3)

Responses from schools included paying for bus tickets to allow families to travel to school, organising grants for those in temporary accommodation, and providing an email address so families could navigate the bureaucracy of immigration and benefits systems. These complex webs of provision, often changing in response to circumstance, were similar in nature to the responses found in research during the Covid period, particularly in their ad hoc and unsystematic nature.

Wider social policy affecting families was seen as a reason why schools needed to act. Housing problems were often mentioned as a trigger for families requiring support, for example when families were evicted or struggled with poor accommodation.

I'm happy to do it and I enjoy doing it, but it's not acceptable and it makes me really sad that we have to. But we will carry on doing it. Because like we shouldn't have to offer free wraparound. We shouldn't have to write letters about housing. We shouldn't have to worry about being closed because of the strike day, that children aren't going to be warm. It's completely unacceptable. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

This fits with the wider literature on increasing poverty in the early 2020s which has noted the problems caused by benefit systems, housing, and precarious employment, resulting in increased food bank use. Wider social issues such as domestic violence, and particularly the rising cost of energy and rents, were frequently related to food banks use. The escalation of the cost-of-living crisis, particularly through the winter of 2022-23, was apparent even to those working at the Felix Project, who provide food for food banks:

I'm really noticing the difference in the year and a half I've worked here from schools, when I started, going, 'we want healthy, healthy, healthy', to now 'we'll take anything. Our families are desperate. They just need food'. (Felicity, Felix Project)

As Grace notes above, the school supports families because 'we have to', in this context; she also said, 'You can't not see it'. Moral obligations were a

further clear motivation for helping families; facing with hungry children, the instinct of these professionals is to care and help.

As little as they are, they were coming to school without eating. We've had the odd child faint and then teachers come down for an apple, or orange, or whatever I've got in here. (Michelle, Chef, Sch1)

It's like we're humans and our natural instinct is to care. That's why I came into this profession. It's a caring profession. I know we're here to educate, but being a teacher now is far more than just education. (Sasha, Head, Sch3)

This is a key logic to the operation of food banks in schools: these staff are faced every-day with the reality of family food insecurity. It is not an abstract problem happening to someone else, but a real life, obvious issue which cannot be ignored. As the head at School 5 explained, they try to solve the problems families present with, whatever they are; here she describes how they help parents apply for benefits:

We either use the school email address or we try and set them up with an email address, but that only helps if they really understand – because if you can't read and write, an email address is really no good to you. So it's very complex. But I think, because our nature is one of 'Let's see what we can do'. (Abigail, Head, Sch5)

These attempts to solve problems are often taxing and sometimes fruitless, but the staff feel it is necessary to try to help in whatever way they can. Schools, as locally embedded and universal institutions, have thus become the 'first responders' to many crises, and to long-term poverty.

Finally, there were many instances in our data of what we call the 'somebody has to' argument, which was distinct from moral arguments in that it focused on the need to fill a gap, and sometimes was accompanied by some ambivalence about the role of the school in addressing food insecurity.

Lorraine and Grace summed this up:

Someone's got to do it, haven't they? Unfortunately, at the moment, we live in a time where they're needed and if we don't do it, who will? (Lorraine, Head, Sch4)

We know we have to help children read and write, and that's what we signed up for, and we're really good at that, but we are doing other things because we have to. (Grace, Head, Sch2)

This reasoning suggests the lack of choice that many school leaders feel they have, about whether they operate a food bank or not; it is simply a necessary service, in the absence of other provision.

Findings 4: The uneven burden of poverty on schools

As we have seen in our case study schools, the extent of provision and its impact is considerable, and certainly having a positive impact on families coping with food insecurity. But the picture is not an entirely positive one, if we consider some of the negative impacts on the schools of operating a food bank, and the disparities between these and other schools, who do not shoulder the burden of addressing poverty.

Disadvantages

The main negative impacts on the schools related to budgets, time and space, as the head at School 1 summarised when asked about disadvantages:

I guess it is about that time, we're reaching well beyond our core purpose as a school and when resources are stretched to deliver even our core purpose to try and do the over and above is also a challenge. So we do a lot of fundraising to make sure that we can bring the funds in to keep the staffing levels adequate to be able to deliver these over and above things. Also storage space and space is at a premium, so I think it's all budgetary pressures that are the negatives. (Michael, Head, Sch1).

The schools needed space to store food, fridges and freezers, and shelving units, as well as providing the staff time to run the food bank and manage deliveries. In a context of reduced budgets, the cost additional staff was seen as a particular concern. Several heads noted that the funding they received through pupil premium and for free school meals was insufficient:

Paying somebody to do that [help with immigration paperwork] – because without communication and relationships, we have nothing. [...] So I think it is unjust that schools – and the government would say, “Oh, you've got to get pupil premium, you get this and you get that.” It's not additional money. Pupil premium pays for the TA salaries and other salaries. [...] [Food bank is] probably costing nearer £500 a month. And this is in a time where schools do not have cash. So we're in school for 38 weeks a year. It's a lot, but it's also helping to keep our families afloat. (Abigail, Head, Sch6)

In other schools, the food bank was funded entirely by donations, though of course the school contributed the space.

A further disadvantage noted was the sheer amount of work involved, often physical, and the related stress for staff.

Monday morning I have to get here quite early to set it all up so it's all ready. It's traipsing through the snow with the trolley (Genevieve, Asst Head, Sch2)

From my perspective, quite honestly, it's one of the most stressful things I have ever done in my life. [...] I would go home completely stressed out that I didn't have enough food. [...] It's really stressful. There's been quite a few occasions where I literally had run out, and then I've had a massive delivery on Wednesday, but I needed it yesterday. So then I'm kind of pulling parents in the next day to come and get some bits and pieces. But it's really stressful. I don't think people – like the rest of the school community – fully appreciate how stressful it is and the workload that there is involved in setting that up and managing it as well. Because you have got anxious people all in one room and it's being able to keep that calm and keep that going and keep adding the fact that there's hope as well, sometimes. It's very, very stressful. (Sarah, Staff, School 3)

As Sarah hints, there are staff management issues for school leaders relating to the food bank, as some might not recognise the work involved.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, there were sometimes additional issues to manage among the parent population triggered by the food bank, such as concern over the fairness of receiving free food, and concerns over staff safety. All of these affect the headteacher and add to their workloads.

Notably, there were several instances of participants talking quite negatively about some families, for example about parents who were content to be dependent on school for food or made 'bad' choices about where to spend their money. This reflects the wider literature on food bank staff, who similarly made judgements about who deserved free food (Garthwaite, 2016; Power et al. 2020). This is not our main focus here but it is worth noting that these

discourses of resentment are a further complication to be negotiated by schools.

Lack of recognition

The work involved in addressing the needs of disadvantaged families was regarded by many respondents as unrecognised within policy, as was the case during the Covid crisis (Bradbury et al, 2021). Ofsted inspections and Sats results were frequently mentioned as measures which needed to be contextualised by the work staff did in relation to family poverty. The headteachers explained this feeling of an unequal burden:

It's really hard because we're dedicating time to something like this but if Ofsted came in, I mean, I'd like to think that a well-rounded Ofsted inspector would see this as part of our whole community offering and what value it brings. But it doesn't feature anywhere on the Ofsted framework and the wrong Ofsted inspector may say, actually, why are dedicating your time to that you should be dedicating it onto better maths and reading results. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

[Ofsted were] very complimentary about everything we do, but they're not interested in your food bank. And actually, they would be almost critical of it if you talked about that, trying to 'make an excuse' – in their words – for other things. So it's almost like you've got to just do it and not talk about it to the people who are holding you to account. Because they would say 'well, that's distracting you from reading results in Y6'. (Abigail, Head, Sch5)

The fact that inspectors are 'not interested' in the food bank is a problem for these schools because they spend a great deal of time and effort on this provision. This is time and effort that in other schools might go into teaching and learning, but in these contexts is necessary before children can access any learning. This lack of recognition, combined with funding problems, means that schools with food banks, while benefitting their local communities, risk being disadvantaged in measures such as inspections. Furthermore, the difference in terms of workload means that there is potential exacerbation of the disparities between schools serving richer and poorer communities.

Discussion: Schools propping up the welfare state

Among our schools and the Felix Project representative there was a general consensus that poverty was increasing, with the issue of the working poor often mentioned. Poverty was seen as stretching far beyond those families in receipt of free school meals:

[We have] just under 80% [Pupil Premium], yes, but I would argue as well that that other 20% in some cases will have even less money in the house. They're our working poor, like our single mums. Some of those are staff. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

The depth of financial insecurity was such that several schools mentioned providing free food for staff, particularly cleaners and teaching assistants, as well as for parents. This level of need was described by some respondents as shocking and upsetting:

I feel like maybe, as I said, it makes me want to cry sometimes, how much need there is. And it does affect all staff in the school, to be honest, and you kind of compartmentalise it and, 'OK, I'm teacher'. But it does affect you. As an educator, we care about society, we care about the children we teach, we care about the families. And when it just keeps getting worse and worse, where will it end? As you said, what comes next? Are we going to have a heating bank as well? There was talk of that at some point, so children could come in in the weekends and get warm. Summer is coming – thank God. But, as you said, if you take a step back, where will it end and things? I know it's quite sad really. Very sad. (Sophie, Teacher, Sch3)

As mentioned above, the schools were stepping in where they saw the need, in the absence of other sources of support. This might mean providing somewhere warm in winter for children to come at weekend. As suggested by Sophie, there is a debate to be had over the way in which schools are propping up a retreating welfare state, and where the limits are for this expansion. This 'going beyond' education and whether this was a positive or negative was a common theme in responses to the question of whether schools should have food banks:

The school is going beyond just teaching children. It's looking after their welfare. (Michelle, Chef, Sch1)

I think they ought to be there, but no I don't think it ought to be down to schools to provide them. We do it because there's a need, but it's not our job to feed the children in the community. Our job is to look after them and educate them and care for them while they're at school, not to feed them at the weekends or holidays, but we can't help but be concerned about that. (Catherine, Teacher, Sch6)

In some cases respondents had a positive vision of the school as centre of community services, based on a recognition of the unique place of the school as embedded within the community:

I think they should [have a food bank]. I think that schools should sit as the centre of communities that offer a whole range of services. I mean, I would advocate GPs being based in schools, I would advocate all sorts of things being based here because this is the centre where ... We have 700 people come here every single day, 700 parents come here every day so if they can access all of those Job Centre Plus type activities, child care, children's centre type activities, if they can access it all here it's going to be more readily accessible and going to be used by more people than going elsewhere. And I think food bank type activities sit very centrally to that and I think as schools we can do it in a dignified way, we can also identify the families. (Michael, Head, Sch1)

While this is a wider debate than we have space for here, it is worth noting that the issue of schools' role remains unresolved, and there are competing arguments over what schools should do. In the absence of an answer to the question of whether schools should be responsible for children's overall welfare, and in a context where there is rising need, school leaders are resigned to filling the gap:

I've certainly heard head teachers and governors (not mine), but governors say it's just not our role, you know, we're not here to feed children. I don't believe it is in my job description. We're not social workers, but those lines got blurred years ago, and things have definitely exacerbated since COVID. (Charlotte, Head, Sch6)

As discussed above, it is perhaps the Covid experience that has resolved this dilemma for some headteachers; the crisis taught them that it was better to solve problems themselves than wait for government to find a solution.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study contributes to the research literature on food banks in schools and educational responses to the cost-of-living crisis in the post-Covid era, by providing examples of how schools organise the provision of free food and other goods for families in need. In these schools, food banks have an impact on learning, wellbeing, participation and dignity, and help improve home-school relationships. Many were begun during Covid, and this period appear to have empowered schools to resolve problems themselves and step beyond their traditional educational role.

In many ways, this is a positive story of schools finding ways to provide for families, which they know to be effective, and making a huge difference to children's lives. The dedication to helping these children in multiple different ways, and the responsiveness of the staff to complex and ever-changing social problems, is impressive. Yet, it remains an appalling fact that so many children in England are living in poverty, and that this is becoming normalised. The feeling of resignation among many school leaders to having to fill the gap left by other services and caused by rising need, was striking. Children are affected by a complex web of policy (housing, benefits, employment law) and economic decisions, and the school is at the frontline in dealing with the consequences. Importantly, this additional work is not funded sufficiently, or recognised in judgements of the school, leading to potential increases in the disparities between schools in richer and poorer areas.

Our findings lead us to the following recommendations:

1. There should be greater acknowledgement of the role of schools in providing food and other essential goods for families. This might be through a reformed inspection system, but also more widely recognised in policy.
2. Schools should be supported to continue to deliver free food provision for families, based on their knowledge of the local community's

needs. This would mean additional funding provided to allow schools to use their unique position to help more families.

3. Wider policy decisions should take into account both the additional burden on schools serving areas of deprivation, and the scale of the problems caused by social and economic policy and its knock-on effects.

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