

Tackling child poverty in London primary schools

Introduction

Practitioners working in frontline services do not need statisticians to tell them that child poverty is rising in the UK. A harmful combination of cuts to the social security system and poor wage growth has hit families with children the hardest. At the same time, other services relied on by families have seen significant cut-backs as local authority funding from the government has more than halved in recent years.¹ The Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that child poverty will rise from the current level of 4.1 million to 5.2 million by 2020/21.² This is a particular concern in London, which has the highest child poverty rate in the country. Cuts in welfare benefits together with the high cost of living can make London unaffordable for families, particularly those families who are in low-paid or insecure work or who are not working.

Increasing child poverty is a worrying trend for all public services, but it is particularly concerning for schools. Poverty at home is the strongest statistical predictor of how well a child will achieve at school.³ On average, poorer children have worse cognitive and socio-behavioural skills, and worse physical and mental health than their better-off peers.⁴ They are less likely to do well at school: in 2015, only 33 per cent of students eligible for free school meals got five 'good' passes at GCSE (A*-C) compared with 61 per cent of those not eligible.⁵ Poorer children are more likely to be persistently absent and four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school.⁶ Evidence suggests that these outcomes are both a result of direct deprivation (for example, inadequate housing, difficulties providing healthy food, and less ability to afford books, computers and extracurricular activities) and the effect that coping with poverty has on parents' mental health.⁷

Policy context

Faced with the evidence, it seems obvious that tackling child poverty in schools should be a priority for government, given the implications for

The impact of poverty on children's education is well documented and many schools are now developing initiatives to support children and families who are living on a low income.

Here, Sophie Howes describes CPAG's new project, which explores the role schools can play in alleviating child poverty.

children's education and life chances. However, the policy landscape has changed significantly in this area over the last decade. We have seen a shift away from statutory rights-based provision driven by central government as part of a wider policy agenda to tackle child poverty, to more piecemeal localised provision often with the involvement of charitable organisations.

In 2003, the Every Child Matters agenda was launched, and 'extended schools' was a central pillar of the programme. Extended schools refers to schools which deliver a range of services beyond their core function of the classroom education of children within the normal school day. Services include before- and after-school childcare and holiday childcare, support services for children, homework clubs and extra tuition, sporting and cultural enrichment activities, and services for parents and the wider community.

Evaluation of extended schools programmes in England has found that these programmes have a number of benefits for children and families living in poverty.⁸ Extended schools programmes can engage pupils more positively

Case study: monitoring the attainment of children who attended a holiday club

Charlton Manor Primary School in Greenwich offers a summer holiday club on its premises, which includes breakfast, lunch and a range of activities. It is free to attend for any child, but the school particularly encourages children who it thinks will benefit most from the additional enrichment and a safe place to spend time over the holiday period.

In 2016, the school began monitoring the effect of attending the holiday club on children's attainment, through an initial assessment taken by all children at the start of each school year. The assessment is designed to be non-pressuring; it is not a formal test, but a series of exercises in a non-classroom environment. Previously, the school saw many disadvantaged children slipping back academically after each summer holiday, but since the introduction of the summer holiday club, those children who take part now usually maintain, or even improve, their scores.

with school⁹ and narrow the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.¹⁰ They can also help improve children's health and wellbeing by providing access to sports and cultural facilities,¹¹ as well as having a positive impact on relationships with peers¹² and pupil/teacher relationships.¹³ There are also benefits for parents and families. Breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs can provide convenient and often low-cost childcare for parents.¹⁴ This can support parents to work, which can provide a route out of poverty and prevent families falling into poverty. Research has also shown that extended schools programmes can positively engage parents with their child's education and school more widely.¹⁵

In 2011, ring-fenced funding for extended schools in England ended. Continuing to fund these types of activities has become difficult for schools with increasingly tight budgets. The current policy landscape is highly localised, often under-funded, and there is little strategic direction from central government. Despite this, some schools are continuing to develop and deliver initiatives to support children and families living in poverty.

Tackling child poverty in London schools

It is with this backdrop in mind that CPAG embarked on a research project to explore the role of London schools in tackling child poverty. The project has only been possible with the support of the Greater London Authority, demonstrating that while central government may have neglected this work, in some areas local government agencies are providing leadership and looking at how they can support schools to develop initiatives to support children and families on low incomes.

The first stages of the research project involved conducting a literature review and interviewing

a number of practitioners and academics with expertise in the area to try to understand the key factors for success when developing school-based initiatives to tackle child poverty. The second stage of the project involved conducting some action research in a small number of London primary schools. The schools we worked with already had a number of activities in place to support children and families on low incomes, such as school-based childcare (breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs) and support services for both children and parents on the school site. By conducting surveys with pupils in the schools, and through speaking to parents and school staff, we explored how these activities were used by pupils and their families, what they valued (or did not value) about the activities they attended, and any barriers to accessing them.

We also tested a number of new initiatives in the schools that were a direct response to some of the issues and barriers pupils, parents and school staff had identified. In one school, a barrier that was identified was a lack of awareness among parents about childcare entitlements, which for some families would provide the financial support to allow their children to attend school-based childcare, such as an after-school club and holiday club. In response, a number of school-based information sessions were provided for parents to increase their awareness of what they could claim, and how. In another school, the family worker and a number of parents highlighted the difficulties in accessing welfare benefits, particularly for those families who had moved onto universal credit. In response, a welfare rights worker provided a number of one-to-one advice sessions at the school. (This model was borrowed from a successful pilot project in Edinburgh, which provided welfare rights advice to families across six primary schools. As part of this project, 176 advice sessions were provided to 97 families over a nine-month period (via one full-time welfare rights worker), and the overall financial gain to families was £356,333.¹⁶)

One key learning from testing these initiatives was the value of schools providing support that addresses the *causes* of poverty, rather than just providing sticking plasters. For example, some schools have begun to provide food banks or emergency support, such as clothing, bedding and furniture, to families who are facing financial hardship. While this addresses an immediate need, investing resources in more sustainable solutions, such as increasing a family's income through the provision of welfare rights advice, will assist families in the long term.

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Key lessons for schools

There were a number of other key lessons to emerge from our research. Taking time to understand the needs and experiences of families within a school was identified as an important first step when thinking about the design and delivery of activities to support children and families on a low income. One of the key lessons from the evaluation of the government's extended schools programme was that schools did not always sufficiently involve children and parents in the development and delivery of programmes.¹⁷ This can lead to assumptions being made, which may result in the development of initiatives that are not helpful or appropriate.

Another key factor that influenced success was having clear outcomes in mind from the start. Having clear, realistic outcomes helps with developing an action plan, establishing methods for monitoring activities and supports evaluation further down the track.¹⁸

The causes of child poverty are complex and, in some places, the need for support may be great. This should not deter schools – having clear outcomes that are not so ambitious or vague that they are unachievable was found to help by providing a focus and ensuring the activity provided is meeting an identified need. Small initiatives can, and do, make a difference to children living in poverty, and they can often support families in multiple ways.

Strong leadership at both a strategic and an operational level was also identified as important for the schools that participated in our research. Establishing clear lines of responsibility at different levels and sharing responsibility across different staff members (for example, via a pastoral care team that involves senior leadership) helps underpin the delivery of successful initiatives. Placing an anti-poverty strategy at the heart of the school's vision was also seen as important and the schools that participated in our research had done this successfully. There was a shared understanding among the staff teams we worked with that children's personal lives and wellbeing was as important as their educational attainment and the two cannot be separated.

One of the most important findings from our research is that stigma is a powerful deterrent in the school environment, and initiatives that are clearly targeted at disadvantaged families (for example, by restricting provision to children eligible for free school meals) were found to be less successful in terms of take-up. A 'universal targeted approach' was identified as one way of

ensuring that the most disadvantaged children access initiatives, without giving the impression that the initiative is solely for disadvantaged children. The schools we worked with had a number of activities that were universal. For example, one school had a free-to-attend breakfast club, open to all pupils and their family members, but it had invested resources in strategies to encourage those families who would benefit the most to attend.

Another key theme in our research was the role of partnerships. Schools that are delivering successful initiatives to support families on a low income often have strong partnerships with local organisations in the private, public and voluntary sector. Local organisations can provide a wealth of resources to schools to develop initiatives. This can help schools – knowing they are not doing this work alone and that they do not have to be experts on the various issues families may present with. Some schools provide co-located services to families, including counselling and therapeutic services, adult education classes and expert advice services – all through partnerships with local services in their area.

Unsurprisingly, funding was another major theme in the research. School budgets have been cut in recent years and schools are struggling with fewer resources, which can make the prospect of providing additional support to children and families outside the core task of teaching daunting. However, the schools we worked with had been creative about generating additional income and resources to develop initiatives for families living in poverty. Applying for charitable funding, attracting resources from the private sector and renting out the school premises were some of the ways used by schools to fund this work. Pooling resources with other schools or organisations can also reduce costs.

Developing these types of initiatives in schools is not without its challenges. Activities designed to support children and families on a low income require ongoing promotion to ensure children and families are aware of them and know how to access them. Schools that took part in our research reported that promoting activities was an ongoing task, particularly as the school population changes throughout the school year. It is important to ensure that there are many opportunities for families to find out about activities – for example, via information provided at the start of the school year, at parents' evenings and school events, through school newsletters and on the school website. In addition, publicising support that is available

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for families on low incomes to access activities (for example subsidised places) is important.

Engaging children and families was another barrier highlighted by schools. Research shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to engage with, and therefore benefit from, activities such as extended schools.¹⁹ This presents a challenge for schools that have activities such as breakfast clubs and after-school clubs in place, but find that those children and families who may benefit the most are not using the provision. Schools involved in our research reported that engaging children and families takes time. While the first step is to ensure that children and families are aware of provision, engagement often relies on building relationships. Strategies employed by schools included using non-teaching staff to build relationships with families, such as family workers, support workers, and lunchtime staff who may be perceived differently by parents. Using other parents to promote activities was also identified as another key strategy. Being mindful about how communication was worded was also seen as important. As outlined above, stigma can be a major barrier in terms of engagement and, in response, schools promoted initiatives as enrichment opportunities open to all, rather than initiatives to support families living in poverty.

Another challenge is evaluation. Research shows that evaluating activities to see whether they are achieving their aims is crucial, but in practice evaluating initiatives such as extended schools programmes has been patchy.²⁰ Evaluation does not need to be large scale; simple steps, such as surveying children or asking for feedback from parents, can help identify successes and areas where schools may be able to make improvements. CPAG supported schools to conduct small-scale evaluations of existing activities as part of this research and the process was illuminating for schools. For some, it was the first time they had directly consulted with pupils or families to ask for their views about some of the activities they provided within their school.

Conclusion

These lessons are included in a guide for schools on tackling child poverty, currently being developed by CPAG and due to be published later this year. The next stage of this work will involve working with a larger number of London primary schools to support them to establish and develop initiatives to support children and families living in poverty. By working with schools, our aim is to further explore and test the lessons identified so far, as well as to

develop a practical set of resources for schools. On a policy level, CPAG and others continue to make the case for central government funding for extended schools programmes, so that schools are adequately resourced to deliver this work effectively. Until then, it is hoped that our guide will provide some guidance to schools who do not want to wait for direction from central government to take action in this area. ■

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More information about the project is at www.cpag.org.uk/extendedschools

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