Poverty Proofing
the School Day:
Evaluation and Development Report

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Summary

Aims

The aim of *Poverty Proofing the School Day* is to remove barriers to learning which exist because of the impacts of living in poverty. The *Poverty Proofing* audit consists of a whole-school evaluation, a written report and action plan and training for staff and governors. It is aimed at uncovering institutional and cultural practices which stigmatise pupils who live in poverty.

Action plans

Most of the issues raised in the action plans were generic across the schools. These included extensive issues around ability/behaviour and setting, bullying, uniform, exams, extra-curricular activities, support for parents and families, food, homework, resources, transport, tutor groups/support for pupils, and school leadership and governance.

Immediate benefits of the *Poverty Proofing* process

Going through the process afforded schools an opportunity to reflect on the fact that *children living in poverty were being unwittingly stigmatised multiple times during the school day.* Benefits also included schools getting access to student and parent voice, having an external viewpoint of the school, a better understanding of issues around poverty, and support on pupil premium spending.

Changes made

Schools could make some changes quickly and relatively easily in relation to the action plans, such as reorganising the administration of free school meals, or setting up breakfast clubs and providing more access to IT facilities for instance. Children North East were available to provide ongoing support with respect to making changes.

Impacts of *Poverty Proofing*

There is evidence of impacts in relation to the programme aims in many of the schools, including improved attendance and attainment, greater take up of free school meals, more effective use of pupil premium funding, a less costly school day, and an increase in the uptake of school trips and music tuition by the most disadvantaged pupils.

Barriers and Recommendations

The programme was thought of very highly by most of the schools that have completed it so far. Not all schools remained engaged with the programme however and it was found to be very challenging at times even for those that did. This highlights both the difficulty in meeting the challenges of reducing stigmatization around poverty but also the fact that schools are part of a wider society in which the impacts of living in poverty on everyday life are profound. Ways in which the programme can be adapted to ensure greater buy-in, but also the wider societal context are considered.

Evaluation

This report is the result of an evaluation of the *Poverty Proofing the School Day* audit process run by Children North East. This evaluation was carried out by Laura Mazzoli Smith and Liz Todd and

was funded by Newcastle University Institute for Social Renewal. It was based on analysis of poverty proofing actions plans, observations of the process, and interviews with a range of practitioners.

Critical Issues

Whilst the programme has shown that it can be successful in meeting its aims and in highlighting the extent of the stigmatization that occurs during the school day for pupils living in poverty, as well as the increasing costs of the school day, it also raises a number of larger issues. The action plans provide schools with recommendations to reduce stigma and cost within their school, however a number of the issues covered are arguably issues that local authorities, government and also society must address. They are issues which go beyond the school gate and which schools cannot therefore be expected to address alone. This report includes an examination of these broader challenges and considers the issues arising in school action plans in wider societal context.

Key Findings of the evaluation of *Poverty Proofing the School Day*

- There is evidence of and real concern in schools about the rising costs of the school day.
- This is a high impact programme, which has revealed a huge array of generic issues that are routinely, if unintentionally, stigmatising children living in poverty and contributing to the increasing cost of the school day.
- The audit is challenging but highly effective, delivering to the school a rare opportunity to give voice to its most disadvantaged pupils and their families and see their practices through the eyes of all pupils, parents and staff.
- There are numerous benefits for the school as a result of going through this process, including a shift in whole school ethos and culture and the opportunity to make changes in response to the action plan, with maximum impact on pupils.
- There is early evidence of increased attendance and attainment of disadvantaged pupils as a result of removing barriers to learning.
- The audit provides a constructive opportunity to review pupil premium spending and through this and other actions, reduce the cost of the school day for pupils in real terms.
- These impacts are dependent on the third party nature of the audit. Whilst it is very important to share good practice in this area, it is unlikely that the same benefits will be derived if a school reviews these issues in isolation through a self-evaluation process.
- Whole school buy in, including senior leadership and Academy Trust or LA as appropriate, is crucial.
- The fee is good value for money given the array of benefits the school derives from this programme, the whole school learning and shift in school culture which result, and the likely long-term impacts.

Background

Poverty Proofing the School Day developed from a project run by Children North East in 2011, in which children living in poverty said what they most wanted was an end to discrimination at school. This is within a wider context of concern about the rising cost of the school day, such as from The Teachers' Union NASUWT report *The Cost of Education* and a recent analysis by the Children's Society which has shown that education-related costs make up a large proportion of the family budget (Holloway et al 2014). It is also within a context where the Institute for Fiscal Studies has predicted that child poverty will increase in the years to come (Joyce 2014) and that the impact of the cost of the school day on poorer students will get worse (Bragg et al 2015).

Poverty Proofing the School Day is an audit for schools, developed by the charity Children North East with the North East Child Poverty Commission. The aim of the programme is to remove barriers to learning which exist because of the impacts of living in poverty:

> **Poverty Proofing Website**
> **www.povertyproofing.co.uk**
>
> *Poverty Proofing the School Day will support schools to identify and overcome the barriers to learning that children and young people from families with less financial resources face. It will enable schools to develop an action plan to reduce the stigma and discrimination pupils experience.*

There was a pilot in four North East schools (both primary and secondary schools) in 2013-14 and from this the kinds of questions now asked in the audit were developed. Peer researchers were used in the pilot secondary schools, a team of young people in each year group trained to carry out the audit and support the school in implementing actions.

In 2014-15 13 schools signed up for the audit at a developmental fee. The process consists of:

- an external evaluator speaking to all pupils in the school in small groups;

- an online questionnaire available for all parents, staff and governors;
- face to face interviews with parents, staff and governors in situations where they request this and/or this is beneficial;
- a written report and action plan based on responses to the questions posed;
- a training session for staff and a training session for governors;
- ongoing support from Children North East to implement the action plan.

Going forward Children North East hopes to develop a sustainable national model with regional delivery partners and they are developing accreditation for those schools that have completed the audit through a quality mark. They would then join an online community of good practice in which they will continue to receive support and be able to share best practice with other schools.

This evaluation was carried out by Laura Mazzoli Smith and Liz Todd within the Centre for Learning and Teaching of Newcastle University and funded by Newcastle Institute for Social Renewal. It is based on the following:

- observations of the process of working with young people in two schools;
- interviews with two Head teachers and two Deputy Head teachers in three schools;
- interview with a Chair of Governors;
- interview with Children North East staff;
- interview with the Local Authority Advisor in North Lincolnshire;
- observation of a staff training session;
- attendance at a Schools North East dissemination event;
- analysis of all parental, staff and governor questionnaire data;
- analysis of all school action plans.

This allowed the evaluation team direct access to the process and/or the views of staff in six of the 13 schools that have participated so far and indirect access to data from all. Of the six schools where primary data was gathered, the proportion of pupils eligible for pupil premium ranged from 27% to 80%.

What is distinctive about the *Poverty Proofing* approach?

Most distinctive about this approach is that *all* pupils in a school are interviewed in focus group sessions, which do not shy away from dealing with the difficult issues around poverty. All parents, staff and governors are invited to fill out questionnaires, paper and/or online and all the staff and governors receive a training session run by Children North East on poverty. The audit is therefore based on a whole-school consultation and as is explored further below, hearing directly from children living in poverty about their experiences is unusual.

Whilst this may sound onerous, particularly for a large school, the process is managed well, with pupils being taken out of lessons in small groups for a short focus group, over a number of days, so that at any one point there is little impact on school life. Schools did not state that they found the process onerous or disruptive, rather the opposite, stating that they valued this rare opportunity to hear from the whole school community.

The audit is explicitly values-led and unflinching in its exploration of all aspects of poverty, based on a well evidenced and strongly articulated set of arguments around the negative impacts of poverty on learning (see the Critical Issues section at the end of this report). It is aimed not at finding individuals who discriminate against pupils living in poverty, but at the institutional and cultural practices which do this and as such the focus is on whole-school impact at the level of practices and behaviours, but also beliefs and ethos.

The process is also distinctive in that in some schools, particularly in the pilot phase, it has trained and supported pupils to go into partner schools and carry out part of the audit as peer researchers.

What has the *Poverty Proofing* initiative revealed?

The action plans available from participating schools have detailed a range of areas in which action points emerged. Each action plan detailed on average in excess of 30 issues/barriers to learning and whilst some issues were pertinent to particular schools, most were generic across all the schools. Many are school processes and practices which appear to be minor and which could therefore be easy to change, but the negative impact on pupils was shown to be great. Most of the changes advised in the action plan can be carried out with no, or little, financial implications for the school. The areas raised in the action plans covered elements of much of school life, including:

- setting
- bullying
- uniform
- examinations
- extra-curricular activities
- school support for parents and families
- staff relationships with/ support for pupils
- food
- homework
- resources
- transport
- school leadership/governors.

Particularly significant issues and therefore areas of greatest concern, as detailed in the case studies below, involved uniform, the administration of free school meals (FSM) and the cost of extra-curricular trips and activities. Table 1 below contains some case studies of the kinds of issues raised in these areas, along with examples of what schools are doing to address them.

The list of issues that were picked up in the action plans can appear to be daunting, as so many areas of school life are implicated, but as this report will highlight, many issues can be easily addressed. It is important to note that the range of areas addressed in the school action plans highlights how many ways there are for a child living in poverty to feel further marginalised at school and how easy it clearly is for schools to overlook some of the practices and processes which can lead to stigmatization. It was notable that schools regularly commented on the fact that they had not been aware of the impact of some school practices on pupils living in poverty and they were often surprised to find out that pupils and parents had a different perspective on these. This disparity between school perceptions and pupil/parent perceptions is clearly very significant.

It was notable that in many of the schools actions could be taken quickly and relatively easily to address some of the key areas of concern arising in the action

plans. It could be argued therefore that there is an inverse relationship between the level of stigma a child feels as a result of some school practices and the relative ease with which these practices can be changed. It must also be said that many of the items in the action plans were areas that staff had already given consideration to. An example of this was the administration of FSM. Yet in some of these areas staff were also unaware that stigma continued to be experienced and taking action would involve a degree of problem solving on the part of the staff. Later in this report some of these issues are also contextualized in the light of what wider society can do, as not everything picked up in the *Poverty Proofing* action plans can - or should - necessarily be dealt with solely by schools.

Table 1: Case studies demonstrating impacts of *Poverty Proofing the School Day*

Uniform

One of the schools using young people as peer researchers heard from pupils at a neighbouring school that the cost of their school uniform was too high. As a result it was brought down. The school has also become more proactive about discretely giving pupils uniform when they clearly do not possess it, rather than resorting to punishment. They even take their pupils to the local shoe shop to replace their shoes and have an account at the school uniform supplier to buy items for pupils whenever these are needed.

One of the schools noticed for the first time, as a result of Poverty Proofing, that some of their pupils had never attended school on charity dress-up days, so the number of these has been cut and

other ways to raise money for charity found. This school has also started a second-hand uniform shop at school.

However attempts to change uniform policy are not easy. In one of the participating schools for instance, the action plan highlighted the fact that pupils were routinely spending £100 on trainers and those who could not afford this felt stigmatized. The Head teacher therefore decided to buy standard school trainers for all pupils, but this was very unpopular, even with the pupils and their families who could least afford expensive trainers. The school has now moved to a policy that all pupils must wear black shoes, avoiding trainers altogether.

Extra-curricular activities

Concern was felt in one school about the fact that parents were often worried about a letter potentially coming home any day asking for money for a trip. This was exacerbated with siblings in school and challenging as these costs could not be planned for. As a result this school has instigated an audit of all the trips for which money is being requested, as they realised there was no central information held. They are responding by reconsidering the value of all their trips and looking into a way of notifying parents at the start of a school year about what trips are due to take place, giving them a longer timeframe in which to pay.

It was highlighted to another school that they had been charging pupils for a fieldtrip which is a compulsory part of coursework and this is illegal.

Pupils in another school had also talked about how lists of those still owing money for trips was routinely read out in class, stating that the trips could not happen without payment, yet this does not accord with the voluntary nature of the contribution. This school will no longer publically discuss payment for trips and is looking at more proactive ways of supporting parents who find these payments difficult and also of subsidising trips.

Food

In one school the administration of school lunches clearly marked out the children on FSM through a list of highlighted names in the dinner hall and classrooms. These children, when paying for their

lunch, also lost any change that they were owed, as they were unable to carry this forward like children not on FSM. The audit pointed out that this was discriminatory and changing this could enable children to purchase extra snacks at break-time or breakfast at the low cost breakfast club.

Another school reorganised the administration of their lunches, moving to a cashless, anonymous system. They immediately stopped selling bottled water at break-times and are more proactive about encouraging eligible children to claim FSM, recognising that family circumstances can frequently change.

A further school has collected a range of different lunch boxes which they now put FSM in for taking on trips, to replace the stigmatizing paper bags which had been the norm. Lunch-time has been lengthened to ensure pupils have adequate time to eat a hot meal and the school council has been involved in improving the dining experience and tackling some of the myths that were held about the school meals, which deterred children eligible for FSM from claiming them.
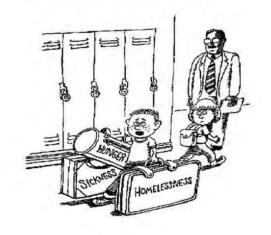
What are the benefits of the process for schools?

Negative impacts on children living in poverty were felt in almost all areas of school life. Many schools are aware of the effects of poverty on children and all had taken action within their schools already. However, the schools we spoke to were not aware of the extent of the effects of poverty on the school day. Therefore the greatest single benefit of going through the process was the opportunity to reflect on the fact that *children living in poverty were being stigmatised multiple times during the school day.* Far from schools deliberately maintaining stigmatising practices, they were often unaware of the impact of some of their practices on pupils living in poverty and were only too pleased to have these issues brought to the fore, even if it was a challenging process. Schools also reported significant additional benefits as a result of the process itself:

- ➢ gaining extensive student, staff and parental voice;
- ➢ an external viewpoint of the school not from Ofsted;
- ➢ a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of poverty which they believed would continue beyond the action plan i.e. there was a shift in the school's ethos;
- ➢ the opportunity to discuss issues around poverty, which some staff had rarely had before;
- ➢ support with spending of pupil premium funds e.g. information about the Sutton Trust – Education Endowment Fund (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit;
- ➢ changes in staff attitudes to parents in poverty (including reception staff, administrators, cleaners, dinner staff);
- ➢ focus on 'in-work poverty' as well as pupils on FSM;
- ➢ improved attendance and attainment in some schools as a result of this cultural shift (these impacts are explored further below);
- ➢ time and support to make changes which were not previously seen as priorities.

Particularly successful was the peer researcher aspect employed in some of the schools. One of the schools involved in this exchange of young people highlighted that it was only because of the expertise of Children North East that this was possible and that they would have struggled to manage anything like this on their own. It was the impact of hearing about their school from neighbouring pupils which they found particularly powerful, stating that what this gave to the school was 'invaluable' and could not have been learnt any other way.

"Could someone help me with these? I'm late for math class."

Headteacher/Chair of governor/LA Adviser quotes about *Poverty Proofing*

This has been one of the most impactful programmes we have ever been involved with.

The strengths of the audit are that every child, parent, teacher and governor gets spoken to and that views come primarily from pupils, not Ofsted. A positive is that you have help from Children North East to implement the action plan, including online resources.

It was worth every penny and good value compared to other things that have been paid for in the past.

It is not a package, it is a process leading to a shift of ethos.

This is the best thing I've heard in 40 years!

What are schools doing in response to the action plans?

There were many 'quick wins' in response to the action plans, with other issues being harder to tackle. In fact some of the changes to school processes and practices which were instigated happened before the schools even received their action plans. The conversations and external focus were themselves a significant spur to change some things and the speed with which some of the schools made changes reflects how importantly they viewed the evidence of stigmatization, but also how relatively easy it was to effect change in some areas.

Actions which schools were able to implement relatively quickly included:

➢ instigating a self-audit of all trips being run in school to find out how much money was being asked for in each year;
➢ reorganising the administration of FSM;
➢ implementing free breakfast clubs/setting up homework clubs using pupil premium funds to subsidise places;
➢ providing a free snack and drink to all pupils before examinations;
➢ reviewing the numbers of non-uniform days being held and replacing some of these with alternative fund-raising activities in school;
➢ reviewing what resources were needed from home to complete projects or homework and ensuring that homework largely did not rely on the acquisition of other resources;
➢ improving IT access in and after school and removing rewards for completing tasks online;
➢ distributing free uniform and PE kits/ changing the manner of distribution of uniform and other resources;
➢ not discussing any costs or debts with pupils publically or sending debt letters home with pupils;
➢ challenging staff over whether asking pupils to write about their holidays or presents was appropriate and fair to all.

There are also more challenging, long-term issues which schools are grappling with, as follows.

➢ A perceived increase in the number and cost of school trips. Several schools are considering an annual statement to parents who can then budget and/or pay in advance and are also re-examining the educational rationale for some of their trips.
➢ Changes to uniform. Schools have not always found it easy to reduce the burden of school uniform costs. Some changes to uniform have been controversial, even with parents who are most likely to benefit from cheaper uniform. There are also questions about uniform changes which are arguably wider than just single-school decisions. If some individual schools decide to 'level-down' the costs of their uniforms so these are all available from a supermarket, whilst others do not, what does this mean in terms of between-school equality for pupils if some

school uniforms are obviously far cheaper that others?

➢ A reduction in internet-based homework/ access to phones or other technology in school. Again if some schools 'level-down' their expectation of pupils to use the internet for instance, does this disadvantage these pupils in comparison with pupils from other schools that are not doing this or who are actively increasing expectations on pupils to access technology and the internet in their work?

The influence of *Poverty Proofing* outside of the North East

In **North Lincolnshire** the challenge for many schools is the small number of pupils on FSM and despite good results overall, the lower attainment of these children. The view from the Local Authority Advisor was that 'on paper North Lincolnshire doesn't need Poverty Proofing, but morally it does,' as conversations about poverty were not part of conversations about closing the attainment gap. *Poverty Proofing* has therefore made these pupils visible, as well as those living in in-work poverty.

In North Lincolnshire there is now a licensed delivery partner for the Children North East poverty proofing audit process. The audit is carried out by two adults, with the aim of preventing bias or misinterpretation. To date, six schools have taken part in the pilot. Eighteen staff at the LA have been trained to do the audit and there is a waiting list of 30 schools, but since LA staff fit this in alongside their roles, there is a lack of capacity at the moment to meet demand. As a result, generic aspects of good practice and top tips are available on the LA website and schools are being given an hour's 'taster' to keep them interested and also to give them ideas about things they can start to do while they are on the waiting list.

The impact of *Poverty Proofing* in North Lincolnshire has been considerable, with schools keen to take part and excellent feedback from those who have. In order to secure senior leadership buy-in, schools sign a contract agreeing to complete and act on the audit. The impact in North Lincolnshire shows that the

programme is just as effective and important with schools that have fewer numbers of children living in poverty.

Poverty Proofing is mentioned in Sunderland's Child and Family Poverty Joint Strategic Needs Assessment as something that should be promoted more widely. *Cost of the School Day* is a Glasgow Poverty Leadership Panel project which ran during 2014-15, inspired by the success of *Poverty Proofing the School Day*. It has so far been run in eight Glasgow schools with 339 young people and 111 staff.

> **Head Teacher, Glasgow, involved in *Cost of the School Day***
>
> *The main impact of the project in our school is a change of mind-set. Rather than going ahead and doing things, we're really thinking carefully about costs and financial impact on our children and families - the phrase 'cost of the school day' comes up constantly now in our planning and discussions. It's not just an initiative or project where we go back to normal after it's finished, there's been a real shift in our thinking.*

Impacts of *Poverty Proofing*

The programme is still in its early stages so there are no longitudinal data about the longer term impacts and cumulative evidence over a number of years will be important to collect. However as noted above, there are already significant benefits for schools, which come purely from taking part in the programme, even before they have made significant changes as a result of the action plan.

In carrying out this evaluation it is clear that for many of the schools that have taken part, this has been a transformative experience which they cannot praise highly enough, whilst also being a very challenging process as well. One school told the evaluators that they had previously 'put things out without necessarily being aware of what the impact on

disadvantaged pupils would be' but after the programme, they 'now consider the impact first.'

There is some evidence of specific impacts in line with the programme aims as set out in Table 2 below. Much of this is hard to evidence causally. However, for some of the actions a theory of change from actions to attainment can be argued in those situations where actions lead to a noticeable increase in school attendance. For example, in one school a child's lack of money for the bus fare meant she was attending only 2 days a week. The school bought her a bus pass and attendance is now almost 100% and she is able to attend many after school activities.

A causal theory of change is less easy to demonstrate when the impacts are seen in response to a cultural shift in the school and as a result of numerous actions. The point here is that the process itself initiates a culture in which these actions are taken. So whilst it is difficult to argue as yet that there is a causal link between *Poverty Proofing the School Day* and increased attainment for the most disadvantaged pupils for instance (not least because of all the other initiatives going on in school), there is good evidence to demonstrate that the programme makes possible a culture in which the right actions can be taken to enable this to happen.

Several of the schools that have taken part state that they have seen improved attendance and attainment of their most disadvantaged pupils in response to this cultural shift and the multiple actions that have been taken. As one Head teacher said about the school culture in relation to poverty 'the attainment gap shrinks when we get it right'.

In one of the pilot schools the impact of changes made in response to the action plan could also be seen at departmental level as a result of a very strong infrastructure, with each faculty and department having someone responsible for pupil premium and the *Poverty Proofing* action plan linked to this, as well as overall at senior management level. The staff said that the impact was being felt at departmental level because they could clearly see the structure and they knew who they were answerable to.

Table 2: Evidence of the impacts of *Poverty Proofing the School Day*

Impact on pupils and families living in poverty	Evidence to date
Improved pupil attendance	In one school, a 5% rise in attendance overall and a 7% rise for pupils on FSM (almost 50% of the school cohort). In the 6 North Lincolnshire schools absence of pupils on FSM fell in every school but one after the initiative, whilst the absence of the other pupils rose in every school but one.
Improved attainment	Evidence from 7 North Lincolnshire schools of greater increases in the attainment levels of pupils on FSM at KS1, KS2 and KS4 than all other pupils overall.
Improved take up of FSM	In one school take up of FSM is now almost 100% since changes were made to its administration, far in excess of anything the school has known previously.
More effective use of pupil premium spending	Staff training sessions were opportunities for schools to learn about and scrutinise their pupil premium spending. Some schools changed their priorities for these funds as a result. Some schools were introduced to useful tools such as the EEF Toolkit for the first time.
Improved knowledge of pupil/parent issues	The difference between what pupils/parents said and what staff said revealed areas of 'blindness' where schools were not aware of issues, directly leading to changes being made for the most disadvantaged learners.
Less costly school day	Some schools have provided evidence of where they have written to parents saying that they do not need to buy resources, PE kit or pay for activities that they would

	previously have had to pay for, as these will now be subsidised or removed, having a direct impact on the cost of the school day.
Increase in pupils on FSM attending school trips and extra-curricular activities	In one school, as a result of changing the payment process, there has been an increase in the number of pupils on FSM attending the Y5 and Y6 residential trips. Several schools have set up free/50p breakfast clubs and/or homework clubs with increases in pupils on FSM attending.
Increased access to musical instrument tuition	One school is funding 3 terms of free musical instrument tuition for all pupils (most of which are on FSM) as this is one of the activities pupils from poorer families are least likely to benefit from.
Removing the ceiling on attainment in the curriculum	In several schools better resources were enabling pupils to score more highly in coursework (e.g. DT). On removing the requirement to bring in resources from home, all pupils have the same possibility of achieving.

proofing process but we did find evidence that spending efforts were more appropriately and effectively directed.

Many schools already subsidise trips and after school activities although others would like to do so but lack an adequate budget. For some the poverty proofing process was able to inform ways that subsidies were operated and provide a further opportunity to discuss the extent of subsidy needed.

There are examples of pupil premium funding being used to pay for a breakfast club for the year in one school for instance and clothing in another. Before *Poverty Proofing* some schools stated that it was harder to argue that these kinds of support were needed to close the attainment gap as there was little evidence of a direct link to learning, but since the initiative, they are being justified by schools on the grounds of 'removing barriers to learning', with the specific aim of improving the attendance and therefore attainment of their most disadvantaged pupils.

In some cases changes are beneficial in terms of cost. One school in North Lincolnshire has made changes to a charity fund-raising day, which led to double the funds usually raised by this event. By not specifying how much money children should bring in, those with little or nothing were not under pressure, whilst those willing and able to bring in more clearly did. Another school set up a second hand uniform shop in response to their action plan, from which some pupils get to take free uniforms and others donate money and/or their uniform on leaving the school.

Cost of *Poverty Proofing* to schools

Other than the initial spending on the initiative, costs to schools to implement changes as a result of the action plan have been low or negligible. Where activities or clubs are being subsidised or fully funded, this is often due to reprioritising pupil premium funding and pupil premium funds have been used in response to the action plans in all the schools.

Many schools already spend funding, in some cases of significant amounts, on school uniform including shoes and sports ware. We found no evidence that such spending increased as a result of the poverty

Barriers to engaging with *Poverty Proofing*

Although most of the schools that signed up for the *Poverty Proofing* process were fully engaged one school did not complete it and another did but did not follow up on the action plan. A range of stakeholders were asked about the barriers to engaging with this programme and the following issues and suggestions about possible changes to the programme as it develops arose.

> ➢ The lack of personal experience of poverty of many staff/governors in the school was said

to have made the audit process harder in several schools.

➤ Having worked hard to do well against Ofsted criteria, several schools were not receptive to yet more scrutiny. One Chair of Governors said about *Poverty Proofing* in relation to Ofsted: 'This process and the demands on the school for self-evaluation and reflection were quite different'.

➤ Some staff felt the questions posed to pupils and parents during the audit were leading and they disengaged as a result. However, Children North East state that the impacts of poverty are often difficult to speak about and therefore explicit opportunities have to be provided for pupils to speak up which may make people feel uncomfortable. The delivery method in North Lincolnshire uses two adults to run the focus groups in order to avoid this.

➤ Some staff found it difficult to accept the conclusion of unwitting stigmatization as it felt judgemental and they disengaged as a result. Yet there is no doubt that it is and largely has to be a challenging process in order to reveal problematic practices.

➤ Some staff could not see a connection to learning and felt they were being asked to do yet more to support areas that were not directly connected with learning (although this tended not to be the case with senior leaders and Headteachers who were receptive to the benefits to learning in the main).

➤ In the case of Academies, one issue identified was the fact that some decisions needed to be taken at Academy level and as such, were out of the hands of the senior leadership team or Principal.

➤ Lack of senior leadership buy in and support was a real problem, as staff needed to be supported throughout the process - where this was not led by the Head teacher in one school, the programme was not completed.

➤ Some schools feel they are highly aware of the poverty experienced by their pupils and that they already take all the action that is possible given the demands on their time and their available budget. This was stated particularly by a school for which the majority of pupils were eligible for FSM.

Arguably schools engaging with and paying for the audit are already fairly forward thinking with regards to wanting to tackle discrimination around poverty. Even for some of these schools however the process was demanding. There is therefore a significant challenge in getting schools which are not open to the idea of exploring the impact they have on pupils living in poverty to get involved.

Schools that have been through *Poverty Proofing* appear to be the best advocates, as was seen at an event organised by Schools North East, which attracted around 100 schools in the region to hear from those who had been 'poverty proofed' and get ideas about what they could do to improve their own practice.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall the programme is clearly very impactful. There is evidence of significant impacts on school culture and ethos and some evidence of direct impacts on pupils and their families. The *Poverty Proofing* initiative suggests that small but widespread changes, viewing all practices through the lens of poverty, does play an important part in eradicating barriers to learning for pupils that are economically poor.

There now needs to be longitudinal analysis of the impact of the initiative over time, as this evaluation is carried out at an early stage, where schools are still implementing aspects of the action plan, so it is too

early to argue for long-term, sustained benefits. However it is clear that the process itself is central to the benefits and impacts discussed here and a number of schools talked explicitly about how it was the fact that it was third party led that made the difference (see quote in box below).

> **Assistant Head Teacher and Head of Department, participating school**
>
> *Even now, although we obviously have more expertise, I think we would value someone coming in who could work with students and who wasn't one of us because they* [pupils] *could say things to her* [Poverty Proofing auditor] *which they couldn't say to us. They're more open with someone from outside and that's what we wanted…and it wasn't a problem for us because we wanted to engage with that.*
>
> *They* [pupils] *do speak the most amazing amount of common sense and that's what we need to hear.*

A key conclusion of this evaluation is therefore that it is not necessarily enough for a school to adopt a self-audit of these issues. Whilst this may be an important step towards preparing for the *Poverty Proofing* audit, in order to begin to raise an awareness of the impacts of a school's practices on pupils living in poverty, the defining feature of this programme is the third party collating of whole school voice.

Given the evidence already accruing of benefits to schools and impacts on pupils, their families and school staff, it therefore seems desirable for schools to be encouraged to take part in the programme. Children North East plans to make this programme available nationally through regional delivery partners. At the same time it is important to develop the programme in such a way as to increase uptake by schools, particularly those least likely to bring the challenges of poverty and learning to the fore and ensure their likely completion of the programme.

Messages for other delivery partners

As it stands the programme has had impact and was well received by most of the schools that have participated so far. However as stated several schools did not fully complete the programme and/or expressed some concerns about it. During the course of the evaluation, suggestions therefore arose for ways in which the programme could be made easier to engage with without loss of impact. These suggestions are outlined here, but it should be noted that they are possible ways to expand the programme based on feedback from some schools only.

- Use of a team of two people to carry out the audit to avoid concerns raised in several schools about leading questions or other bias.
- Delivery of the action plan through a familiar member of staff alongside the delivery partner and through a focus on areas of good practice alongside areas of concern, so as not to alienate staff or governors.
- Our observations of the programme led us to believe that conversations about poverty were sensitive to the likelihood that children and indeed adults living in poverty would be part of the discussions. Many children spoke openly of their experiences of poverty and this was handled well. One school however felt that the process should avoid discussing some of the harsh realities of living in poverty with primary aged pupils in particular, such as reduced life expectancy.
- Ensuring Local Authority and/or Multi-Academy Trust and/or Head teacher/senior management buy-in e.g. through a signed contract at the outset (in North Lincolnshire the programme had greater credibility because it was linked to pupil premium funding and so it was viewed more as a school improvement initiative than a social/pastoral one, but this was in the context of a proactive and supportive LA).
- Continued use of student peer researchers working between schools, as in the North East pilot, as this was particularly well received by the schools who took part in it.
- Involvement of the school council in the implementation of the action plan, particularly where widespread myths are being picked up about particular school practices or school meals for instance.

- Immediate access to other schools who have taken part to share good practice as soon as the school action plan is received, for instance through an online forum, so that schools do not feel overwhelmed by how much there is to change or isolated without readily accessible examples of good practice to draw on.
- Greater access by all schools to the generic issues raised, which should act as a lever to encourage greater numbers of schools to buy into the programme and to prepare them for taking part.
- Acknowledgement of where issues may be more appropriate to address at local or national level and therefore where schools could work with other schools or local authority/regional networks/government to implement changes (e.g. in regards to school uniform policy and school trips, as discussed below).

What can schools do now?

Poverty Proofing the School Day Top Tips
www.povertyproofing.co.uk

Ensure all activity and planned activity in schools does not identify, exclude, treat differently or make assumptions about those children whose household income or resources are lower than others.

Given that so many of the issues raised were generic to all the schools, sharing good practice is not only important for the schools who engage, but also for other schools to begin to consider. This evaluation highlights how going through the process conferred added benefits however, particularly in engaging the whole school staff in a cultural shift. There are good reasons therefore to continue to expand the programme as a whole school audit across the country so that schools can buy into it.

Meanwhile it is important for schools to begin to consider some of the generic issues emerging. As discussed, an issue frequently raised was the number of school trips for which parents need to contribute. There was a perception in some schools that trips

were becoming more common and/or destinations more expensive and that overall schools were unclear when and how much parents were being asked for. In addition there were examples of children being singled out in class to pay their contribution, yet this is and should be voluntary.

There was also evidence from the children interviewed in several of the schools that they would sometimes not pass their parent/s a letter about a school trip requesting a financial contribution in the knowledge that this would cause stress and anxiety. This has been documented elsewhere (Ridge, 2002) and is important for schools to be cognisant of with respect to the way in which funding for trips is requested.

This is part of a wider awareness of children's coping strategies to manage and negate the impacts of poverty on their lives that schools should be aware of (Hooper et al 2007). This is particularly the case where these strategies can be misconstrued and punished as something else e.g. forgetfulness, truancy, poor academic performance. It is therefore not only the practices of schools in relation to lessening the stigma of poverty which should be widely shared, but also those of pupils too, as highlighted by the *Poverty Proofing* audit. Children are necessarily active and resourceful in mediating the effects of poverty (Ridge 2011).

Another area of concern was the increased number of non-uniform days, either for charity fund-raising, or for specific events such as World Book Day. Pupils are routinely asked to dress up on World Book Day for instance, but the fact that supermarkets now sell costumes of popular children's characters points to the commercialization of this and other events. In this instance it is somewhat ironic given that World Book Day is ostensibly about literacy and literature, but dominant in the minds of some families is the commercialization of the event and the pressure to spend money. Schools can remain cognisant of this by asking whether these more costly activities genuinely contribute to learning, or whether, as in this example, commercialization might even detract from the central focus of the event.

A further key area of concern is the increasing cost of uniform in some schools and the requirement to use a particular supplier for instance. The recommendations in the *Poverty Proofing* action plans that schools reduce uniform costs and enable parents to purchase uniform at a supermarket mirror those made elsewhere, such as in the Children's

Commission on Poverty report *At What Cost? Exposing the Impact of Poverty on School Life* as well as the Department for Education guidance on cost effective uniform. Schools do indeed need to reflect on uniform costs, but this is arguably a wider issue than one just for a single school to grapple with. If some schools, particularly those with large numbers of pupils living in poverty, 'level down' uniform costs, this may improve equal access to the same uniform within these schools, whilst creating more inequality between schools, if other schools continue to require their pupils to wear bespoke blazers and logoed uniform. Is this then an issue which is important to tackle nationally so that guidance to schools effects a levelling across schools and not only within them?

There may be a consensus amongst school leaders and other stakeholders that it is important for schools to expect their pupils to wear high quality uniform, arguably particularly for the most disadvantaged children, but if this is the case, then there must also be appropriate subsidy. A pupil has to eat during the school day and a subsidised meal for the poorest is the appropriate policy response. If a child is also expected to wear a high quality, expensive uniform with no choice in the matter, or the risk of bullying or punishment for incorrect uniform, then a subsidised uniform for the most disadvantaged children is arguably also the appropriate policy response here.

This is another reason why issues such as these must be taken up on a larger platform than just individual school level, or well-meaning actions taken by individual schools, such as these in relation to school uniform, could create additional inequalities.

Critical Issues

The discussion above points to the fact that poverty cannot be tackled by schools alone. There has been a long-running debate in education about how far schools can compensate for society, in the sometimes misrepresented words of Basil Bernstein (1970) and the issues raised by *Poverty Proofing the School Day* are at the sharp end of this debate.

Poverty clearly needs to be tackled by structural changes that lead to improvements for example in skills, jobs, incomes and housing. Most people would agree that schools are only part of such a structural solution (Cummings et al 2011; Raffo et al 2007), but

this evaluation has highlighted that teachers have differing perspectives on how far schools are or can be part of this. Yet given the wider context, it is vital that this remains a priority area for schools.

The wider context is that child poverty in the UK is increasing as a result of such policies as the 'bedroom tax' (Moffatt et al 2015) and because of higher inflation rates faced by poorer households (Joyce 2014) within a post-recession era. This is also in a context where children living in disadvantaged households are more likely to have additional household responsibilities (Wikely et al 2007) and where there is a growing prominence of in-work poverty.

Given that publicly funded education is supposed to be free, it appears that we are witnessing the impact of the creeping increase in the cost of state education. In 2012-13 the proportion of children in poverty living with a working parent in the UK was 61% (Joyce 2014). Poverty is not an easy subject to talk about anyway as it exists in an atmosphere of denial and moral condemnation (Shildrek and MacDonald 2013). Add to this the perceptions of some working families, highlighted by the *Poverty Proofing* audit, who feel invisible as a result of being in in-work poverty with little associated support and it is clear that the question of what schools can to do support pupils living in poverty is particularly pressing.

Yet this question has not been investigated in detail and the fact that most of the negative impacts of the school day on pupils living in poverty were as a result of stigmatization which schools were largely unaware of, highlights further the way in which these problems can too easily remain hidden. This is not easy to do something about yet this evaluation demonstrates that it is possible, though not easy, to create a programme which brings these issues to light and finds out what schools can do in terms of the costs of the school day.

This report demonstrates, crucially, that in tackling the impact of poverty there are very real effects on pupils' ability to learn. It highlights that the tendency to create a divide between schools working towards educational ends and social/pastoral ends is a false one. Of key importance therefore is how *Poverty Proofing the School Day* demonstrates that what schools can sometimes designate as social or pastoral support *directly impacts on ability to learn*. The issues raised here are very real barriers to learning and should be dealt with by schools as such, but in

addition, they should be seen as impacts of living in poverty that are also widely stigmatized at a societal and cultural level.

Of key significance about *Poverty Proofing the School Day* is that children are asked to talk about their experiences of living in poverty directly. This is very unusual, yet as stated in a review of research exploring the lives of children living in poverty (2011):

Professor Tess Ridge, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath

Without a good understanding of how poverty and disadvantage are experienced, interpreted and mediated by disadvantaged children, there is the possibility that policies will falter or fail to constructively address the social, material and personal impacts of poverty in childhood. It is therefore vital to engage with low-income children and take account of their views in the development of policies and the commissioning of services.

The pervasive effects of poverty within school meant that children's secure social integration within school was threatened, and children's narratives of school life were often infused with anxiety, uncertainty and a sense of unfairness.

Schools cannot be viewed in isolation of course and attempts to reduce the cost of the school day should be considered in wider context. A difficult balancing act for schools is therefore to situate any actions they take in the wider context of other schools and this will inevitably mean difficult conversations about what pupils should fund and what schools should subsidise.

Yet there is ample evidence about the comprehensive ways in which poverty can structure and restrict everyday childhood experiences leading to anxiety, unhappiness and insecurity (Ridge, 2011). Inevitably therefore this will include children's experiences of being in school as is evidenced in this report. It is to be hoped that *Poverty Proofing the School Day*, in-depth and child-oriented in its processes and practical and applied in its recommendations, signals a sea-change in how schools understand and engage with

the reality of how a child living in poverty experiences the school day in twenty-first century Britain.

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