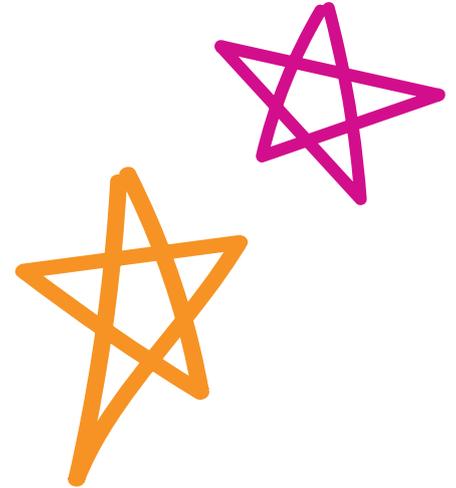


Local Matters

Case studies of a university/school poverty research programme



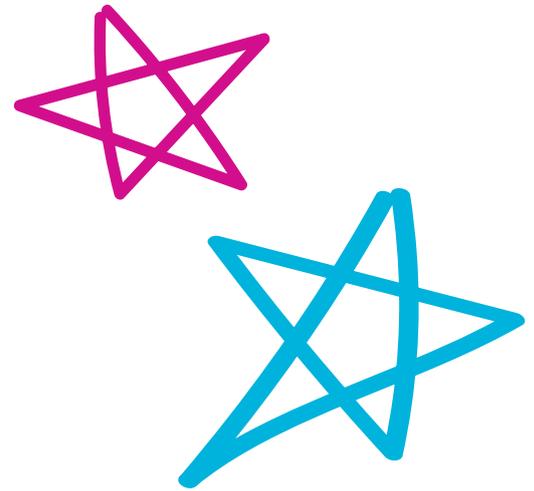
**Tackling poverty and disadvantage in
schools through the empowerment of
teachers and illuminating the local.**

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Research report, March 2021

Case studies



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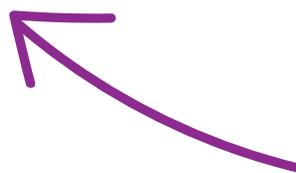
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This research is concerned with tackling child poverty by bringing local context (place), staff professionalisation/empowerment and research skills and knowledge together, through a collaborative programme called Local Matters. Local Matters is based at the University of Manchester and led by Dr Carl Emery and Louisa Dawes. It advocates a different response to addressing the needs of children and families living in poverty. This research report, part funded by the National Education Union, is intended to raise awareness of the research programme and present evidence for its impact. We encourage educators across the spectrum to explore the Local Matters approach and to use research-based alternatives to the current 'one-size-fits-all' model that dominates work on poverty and disadvantage and schooling.

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1. Introduction

The issue

Child poverty is a significant problem in the UK. Before the Covid-19 pandemic there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2018-19. That is 30 per cent of children, or nine in a classroom of 30 (DWP, 2020). In England this translates to 31 per cent of children living in poverty, compared with 28 per cent in Wales, 25 per cent in Northern Ireland and 24 per cent in Scotland (Hirsch and Stone, 2020). Yet, this is only the average, based on data we have, and in many areas across the country it is not uncommon for around 40 per cent of children in a class to be living in poverty.

The attainment gap, that is the difference in education performance between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children, has been well-documented over the past decade. Pupils from disadvantaged communities experience educational failure and this position seriously impacts on children, families and society in manifold ways. Firstly, in regard to Progress 8 - which measures students' progress between key stage 2 and Key Stage 4 across eight subjects - the attainment gap is set to increase from 14.8 percentage points in 2017 to 15.6 in 2021. Secondly, this impacts on children's life opportunities in adulthood. Data shows that children leaving school with few or no meaningful qualifications are less likely to enter into and progress in employment, to be able to support the learning of their own children or to achieve social mobility goals. Thirdly, negative education experiences alongside examination failure do not just impact on children and families. They also have a detrimental effect on communities, shaping attitudes, environment and social, economic and democratic engagement. Finally, disadvantage impacts on children's non-attainment attributes and characteristics such as social and emotional skills, mental health, behaviour and wider wellbeing.

On top of years of austerity, we now have the Covid-19 pandemic, which has placed further excessive budget and resource demands on schools, local authorities, communities and families attempting to mitigate the impact of child poverty. For families with already complex circumstances, the pandemic and its associated social control measures have had a heavy social, emotional and economic impact on already difficult circumstances and compounded vulnerability.

The policy response

In England, the response to the attainment gap advocates that schools can 'do it alone' and overcome the deep structural inequalities in our communities. This approach is predicated on a school improvement agenda of developing strong school leaders, highly effective teachers and directing resources, through the Pupil Premium (PP) initiative to short-term 'gap-filling' interventions in the classroom. This position is commonly known as the 'what works' approach. We are critical of this approach because it positions the child as an atomised individual whom schools can fix through paid for, generalised, interventions. This approach bleaches out the school, pupil and community context (local history, resources, geography etc), as well as limiting the autonomy and professionalisation of teachers, school leaders and the broader district policy actors.

The 'what works' approach, promoted by, for example, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), is taking place within disadvantaged communities starved of resources and still reeling from austerity measures. Over the past decade the withdrawal of area-based initiatives such as Sure Start, the Government's emphasis on austerity, and an increasing demand for diminished public services have all had important implications for poverty. Local authorities and schools have borne the brunt of many of these reforms; from having to directly implement poverty producing policies (such as council tax benefit reforms) to picking up the pieces where

things go wrong (food parcels/hygiene products). Schools and local authorities are critical in supporting families through hardship. At the same time, however, shrinking settlements and decreasing tax revenues are placing extra pressure on schools and local authorities' capacity to help families. Too many support agencies are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to meeting the needs of families in their community. We believe that schools, local authorities and other agencies need to adopt new approaches to addressing poverty. Instead of targeted funding, these approaches should use mechanisms that stakeholders already have at their disposal with a focus on locally informed responses and co-production.

The Local Matters approach

There is a growing body of place-based research that clearly indicates schools cannot simply fix or compensate for social ills. In the present 'doing it alone' model schools are expected to buy in research-prescribed interventions that alleviate poverty, while the school effectiveness literature indicates that such interventions are not guaranteed to work – eg, the 'scaling up problem'. Our interest in a place-based, relational, socio-economic approach is supported by many professionals and agencies who acknowledge that schools and teachers need to draw on locally contextualised knowledge alongside 'place-based' evidence to enhance and enrich their practice and positioning. This champions a need to understand the local and the stories, histories, values, power and positions of all parties (pupils, teachers, leaders, parents and local policy actors). Practitioners across the education spectrum need to collaborate on building research-driven, sophisticated accounts of poverty and disadvantage (not be handed data summaries from central agencies) that are located in and drawn from locally lived experiences, show structural inequalities (housing, transport, health, resources) and support teachers in building a 'place-based' critical response to poverty and disadvantage.

Our aim is to support schools, teachers and local authority leaders in employing high-quality research skills alongside contextualised poverty and disadvantage knowledge to inform schools and local authorities' practice and policies. Specifically, we support and encourage you to understand disadvantage in the local contexts and populations; respond to these in practice with locally gathered and owned

knowledge; and create changes in schools that impact directly on children and families in poverty.

What is Local Matters?

Local Matters - winner of the Highly Commended University of Manchester's Research Impact Award 2020 - is a research and training programme that works alongside school staff to investigate and explore what we know about poverty (locally and nationally), train participants in social research methods, explore the local poverty context and then apply this knowledge and research skills, through action research, to make changes to school practice and policy. Essentially, we train school staff and the school community to be locally embedded social justice researchers.

The existing programme has been running across networks of schools in the north of England since 2017, including Merseyside, North East England, Cheshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire. We have worked closely with charity Children North East and Stockport local authority in developing the programme and have drawn on their experiences as a poverty focused charity and a local authority responding to poverty.



“ You need to understand how poverty looks in your area and how certain actions and school decisions can put pressure on parents and children to live up to the expectations of others. By having a deeper understanding, through Local Matters, of the impact of the choices we make, about the financial decisions that require parents to participate, (eg, dressing up on World Book Day) we will help to eliminate further barriers to learning.”

Blackburn head teacher 1

The methodology, built on the Manchester method and contact theory, explores attitudes towards social justice and poverty and facilitates progressive and inclusive discourses to challenge and interrupt the common prejudiced and deficit narratives we see and hear regularly. The sessions develop a strong understanding of local context through exploration of community and effective core practices within schools' curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to meet the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Through a discussion-based process, teachers and leaders build knowledge of social justice in education and examine how the multiple factors of deprivation impact on schooling, attainment, and social, mental and emotional wellbeing. They examine, through research and professional practices, how inequality in terms of poverty, race, and gender shape educational achievement and gain a rich understanding of how teachers successfully overcome the challenges encountered in disadvantaged contexts and promote equitable learning outcomes for their pupils. Local Matters also saves schools and parents money as we interrogate the cost of the school day.

“

“ Please take part. Even if you have sympathy, and feel that you cater for children and families living in poverty, you will be moved by the stories of the lived experiences of children and families in our country, and then following the poverty audit in your own school locality and community. It has been a privilege to put time aside to face out from my school. It has also been wonderful to sit in a classroom and learn. Carl and Louisa are inspirational.”

Stockport head teacher 3

“

“ As a result of Local Matters, staff are more likely to find out and start where children and families ‘are’ and begin from there, appreciating that ‘where they are’ has much to commend it.”

Blackburn head teacher 2

Professionalisation

A central aspect of Local Matters is the empowerment of educators, through giving them the knowledge and research skills to feel confident and able to directly make changes to school practice and policies. We support school staff in investigating their school, building deep, long-term relationships with the community they serve. Local Matters is not a quick hit but rather a long-term, relational, process, whereby we work alongside, listen to and explore the realities of working in a school with high levels of disadvantage. The programme doesn't just investigate the research but also explores the emotional and social demands that are made on staff. We believe that Local Matters gives educators the tools and the space to be heard, to think deeply about the problem and build local solutions to local issues. The findings of our research have been incorporated into the Independent SAGE (schools, children and young people Covid-19 advisory group) briefing papers, as well as helping to shape the methodology of the Child Poverty Action Group Early Years programme operating in the north east of England.



“ The project is raising professional esteem at all levels in the project schools. Teachers are regaining their professional pride; the action research projects are informed by their experience and knowledge; they are regaining a sense of self-determination after being ‘told’ what to think for too long. Teachers are looking at research they wouldn’t have before and asking questions of policy. Directly and indirectly, this project is responsible for a new sense of purpose in our schools.”

Chester Diocese –
School Improvement Disadvantage Group.

2. Case studies

We believe Local Matters offers a credible, skills-driven, relational alternative to the dominant one-size-fits-all approach. To illustrate this, we present a series of place-based case studies reflecting the experiences of some of the schools participating in the research project. We have focused on place, as we believe this is one of the key factors, which is often overlooked, in addressing poverty. Understanding the community within which the school is located will ensure that any practice and policy changes are shaped by the local and rooted in an understanding of their impact. Alongside place, we also focus on the three action research themes that the schools chose to address: curriculum, pedagogy and community. The data presented was gathered from surveys, focus group discussions, face-to-face interviews and research posters. Through the following case studies we present a series of situations to be analysed, compared, contrasted, studied and discussed by those who are interested in adopting a new approach to tackling poverty and disadvantage in schools.

Case study 1 - Blackburn

Blackburn is a large industrial town, formerly a mill town, situated in Lancashire, with a population of just under 150,000. It is to the north of Manchester, which is around 40 minutes away by car. The 2011 census shows that within Blackburn with Darwen 66 per cent of people identified themselves as White British, 28 per cent as Asian/Asian British and 0.6 per cent Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. The area has one of the highest Asian/Asian British populations in England. Somewhat controversially, Blackburn was named in a report on community cohesion as one of the most segregated towns in Britain, although this has been challenged in many quarters. Blackburn has 20 per cent fewer higher and intermediate managerial, administrative or professional households than the national average and an unemployment rate of four per cent and growing. Child poverty in Blackburn is particularly high, with a rate of 40 per cent (CPAG) across the authority and even higher rates in central areas.

Schools A and B are located in urban areas of high deprivation with large Asian/British Asian populations. Both schools have above average Free School Meals (FSM) and higher than average rates of SEND. At School A, more than 70 per cent of pupils have English as an additional language, while School B has over 40 per cent. Housing stock in both school districts is a mixture of social housing and private rented, with a small percentage of owner occupier.

School A

The school is in the town centre district and the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is very high (96.5 per cent). The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged and eligible for support through the Pupil Premium is above the national average and is rising. The last Ofsted inspection rated the school as Good. The school has worked

hard to build trusting relationships with parents and has reshaped activities to support greater parental involvement. However, considering the PP interventions and support the school has put in place, it was still evident that while many PP pupils were achieving, a significant number were not engaging with learning. As part of its Local Matters action research project the school wanted to identify the home/school factors that facilitate some disadvantaged pupils achieving success, with the aim of better understanding this in order to, where possible, emulate this for those who struggle to close the gap. The research focus was on community relationships and the school gathering a better understanding of lived experiences of families in poverty. This focus was matched by an interest in understanding how school staff, pupils and parents could work together to provide greater support for PP families.

““““

“It is important to recognise that not all disadvantaged pupils struggle to meet expected or greater depth standard and not all fall behind with their progress. By gaining a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that allow some children to achieve success, we would hope to gain a better insight into the proven strategies that support disadvantaged pupils within our school.”

School B

This school is located just outside the town centre in a highly deprived community. Approximately one third of the pupils are White British. Other pupils come from a variety of minority ethnic groups, with the majority being of Pakistani heritage. The last Ofsted inspection rated the school as Good. Through participation in Local Matters, the SLT had reflected on the curriculum and decided they wanted to improve the offer, personalising it and making sure children had a better understanding of the history of their local area. In essence, the school wanted to ensure the local was reflected in the teaching and learning practices.

Research focus – community understanding

At school A the staff and university worked together to build an online home and school diary for a sample of academically successful PP pupils to self-complete each day for a week. The diary was based on the themes, drawn from the literature explored in this area – parental engagement, routines, social activity, resources, social and emotional factors. Using a simple smiley face Likert scale, pupils were asked to identify their feelings and success with school tasks during the day, and to support their scoring with personal comments at the bottom of the screen. Through the Local Matters process the school was aware of the limitations of this approach and therefore put in a second strand of research, which involved in-depth interviews with parents to explore and enhance the pupils’ findings. These interviews were undertaken by the university. It is important to note that trust and confidentiality were critical to the success this research method. Parents and pupils were fully involved in the development of the project, with school meetings held as well as home visits.

School B worked with the university to map out its local community, physically and through data. As part of this process, staff initially undertook learning walks around the local area to identify places of interest, and asked the wider staff, including teaching assistants, welfare staff and kitchen staff (many of the latter live in the local area) if there were any sites, buildings etc. that would link with the children’s learning. This was supported by conversations with parents and the wider school community. Through this process of investigation, it was found that the history close to school

was rich and fascinating, with a series of features, buildings and public spaces that drew in knowledge of geography, history, science and English

Research findings and impact

For School A the pupil survey findings highlighted a series of key themes:

- lesson 1 is a sensitive point in the day
- the day gets better as it moves on
- homework is not popular
- children don't perceive themselves as getting strong staff support during the school day
- friends are important during breaks
- computer time/arts activities/friends and family are important out of school activities.

These findings were then used as prompts for the parent interviews. Through an in-depth semi-structured interview process, the themes were essentially coloured in and populated by the parents. This additional process added greater criticality, trust and depth to the data gathered and revealed a range of important knowledge and understanding of parents and pupils' lived experiences. With the support of the university, the school brought together the pupil and parent data to reveal that the families:

- valued structure, including consistent meal times and bed/waking times
- had shared meal times
- were involved in local community activities
- made use of local resources such as parks and sports clubs
- expected their children to undertake duties in the house, such as cleaning/washing/cooking
- asked their children questions about school and learning

- shared their own experiences and were truthful and authentic about their lived experiences
- encouraged children to be independent and problem solve
- promoted strong moral values rather than economic success.

This data led to the school developing a series of regular pupil-focused meetings with parents of PP pupils, now rolled-out to all pupils, as well as using personalised invitations to attend school events. The school has a much stronger understanding of how poverty looks and is experienced in the community, and, based on this, have developed more local experiences for pupils, thereby reducing travel costs for parents. A range of community skills have been identified, which are now being looked at to support home learning and curriculum activities. Teachers were supported to offer more informal daily support and the homework policy was changed.

At School B, through the learning walk and school/community conversations, a series of interlinked features and buildings were identified as offering opportunity to enrich the curriculum through local knowledge and actions. Based on these findings, the school mapped out a series of curriculum walks around the local area from Year 1 to Year 4. These walks built progressively on local knowledge and fed directly into the school curriculum. Additionally, these locality walks were free and accessible to all, thereby creating a wider school/community 'no cost' activity. In Year 1, there was a class visit a local garden park to observe the changes in the seasons. In Year 2, children visit the same park, but focus on the grade II listed lodge and stables that belonged to a Victorian textiles magnate and past Mayor of Blackburn. They then visit the town's main Victorian park, which was built under the mayorship of the owner of the lodge. Year 3 children focus on the textiles industry in Blackburn and complete the 'Town Trail,' looking at the Victorian buildings linked to the industry, taking in the small exhibition in the town museum. They also walk along the Leeds-Liverpool canal to support their understanding of how textiles were transported.



“ We found access to a small part of the river running through Blackburn close to school, for Year 4 to make observations and look at how the river would have been used to support the cotton industry.”

School leaders' comments on the research process

School A

“Through the research we were involved in we ended up reflecting on and thinking about what we had planned and previously done with disadvantaged families and realised this is not the best approach. We understood this was not the way in which we wanted to support our families. For example, we had so many school trips as learning experiences, going here there and everywhere, filled with essential learning experiences. These had become something parents had to pay for, we were constantly asking parents for money. This programme has changed that approach. We now look local, asking what experiences, skills and resources we can draw on in the community. We do far more local trips. We don't need coaches and equipment, and we don't constantly seek funding from parents anymore. We recognise that all the demands we had placed on parents for money for trips and experiences were wrong. The leaders have a stronger understanding of how poverty can impact on education and will deliberate over certain decisions to ensure we don't exclude families for any reason.”

School B

“Through participation in Local Matters, we have gained a greater understanding of how poverty and disadvantage impact our school and community. We know that some of our parents and families are isolated in the community for a variety of reasons - cultural differences, language barriers, because they are new to the area, lack of friends/

family support or have financial constraints. The data we have gathered and the relationships that have been built will help us to support these families through school and build a network of support coming from the families themselves.”

Case study 2 - Merseyside

Merseyside is a metropolitan county in north west England, with a population of 1.38 million. It encompasses five metropolitan boroughs: Knowsley, St Helens, Sefton, Wirral and the city of Liverpool. The 2011 census shows that 94.5 per cent of the population identified as White British, with the remaining 5.5 per cent consisting of Asian/Asian British, Black and Arabic. The region is economically diverse with pockets of wealth, particularly in east Wirral, alongside districts with high deprivation in West Wirral and central Liverpool. Child poverty levels are higher than the English average and in some districts, such as Knowsley, with 34 per cent and localities, such as Birkenhead with 34 per cent, one in three children are living in poverty. Birkenhead East is the most employment deprived Lower Super Output Area in England in 2015.

Schools A and B were both located in West Wirral. The schools are in post-industrial, predominantly white working class, urban communities, although the localities have changed dramatically over the past decade. The local town centre has experienced a severe hollowing out, with one of the highest rates of empty shops in England. Both schools have seen an increase in East European families and have very high rates of Pupil Premium, nearly 80 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.

School A

The school is in the town centre district, nestled among dense terraced housing, predominantly social or private rented. The last Ofsted inspection rated the school as Good. The school has a very high Pupil Premium rate and has worked hard to limit the cost of the school day and understand the lived realities of parents. Through informal conversations with parents, the school became aware that events such as World Book Day were causing anxiety among pupils and parents and resulting in lower attendance on these days. The World Book Day event was based on children dressing up as their favourite character

from a book. The school identified that this was problematic on many levels, not simply the cost but the process, cultural positioning and pedagogic issues. Working with the university the school wanted to examine how ‘event’ days are understood and responded to by parents as part of a wider research question that explored with parents and teachers the formal and informal spaces for parents and teachers to meet and get to know each other that wasn’t centred on attainment, attendance or behaviour. The school decided to embark upon a research project that would help them gain greater knowledge of the community, understand current conversational spaces with parents and build new ones. Ultimately, the school believed this process and data would help shape classroom practice, particularly on event days.

“““

“ We were looking to strengthen links and relationships between school and home. We still felt that some staff did not fully appreciate the impact of poverty on families and learning.”

School B

School B is located in a large social housing estate, although many properties are now owned or rented, on the outskirts of the town centre. The school has far higher than average percentage of SEND pupils. The last Ofsted inspection rated the school as Good. The school had recognised that emotional regulation was an important life skill and one which appeared to be lacking among pupils, particularly those in Year 6. Multiple barriers to learning were identified across the Year 6 cohort. In discussion with the university, it was agreed that the school would undertake a research project to test the impact on children’s wellbeing of teaching an emotional self-regulation programme to a group of disadvantaged Year 6 pupils. It was hoped that this programme, and the accompanying research evaluation, would support pupils both academically and socially and give them a greater range of social and emotional skills, thereby reducing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage.

Research focus – pedagogic practice

School A used a focused mixed methods approach in order to gather teachers and parents’ views on where, if any, the spaces were to talk and get to know each other better, thereby building stronger teaching and learning relationships. Essentially, the school wanted to identify if a space for parents and teachers to talk existed that wasn’t driven by attainment, attendance or behaviour conversations. For the teachers, the research required them to complete a survey of when they met parents, where this took place and the reason for the meeting. To capture the parents’ perspective, the university held a series of focus group meetings, bringing parents together to talk about a) how they felt the school understood their daily lives, b) where and when meetings with teachers took place and c) whether arrangements supported communication and teaching and learning. The data gathered from the teachers and parents were analysed with the support of the university. The analysis focused on understanding current arrangements and identifying gaps, needs and opportunities. The parent focus groups were recorded and the conversations transcribed and member checked with the participants.

School B explored teaching and learning through trialling a specific social and emotional skills intervention - the GL Assessment ‘The Emotion Expression Scale’. This is a series of 16 questions that measure the children’s emotional expressive reluctance and poor awareness.

The school created a baseline to assess pupils’ progress at the beginning and end of the wellbeing project and supplemented this with written and verbal feedback from participating pupils, as well as teacher observations. A series of ten behaviours (book chapters) were taught explicitly to children, with lessons built on the chimp framework but adapted to reflect the learning styles and experiences of the pupils. A typical lesson involved a recap on past learning, an introduction to the behaviour, including visuals, role play involving a chimp puppet, video clips, partner talking activities, questioning and the use of emotion scales. The data gathered was analysed by the school research team with the support of the university.

Research findings and impact

School A staff directly linked to the project gained a more realistic and knowledge-based picture of parents and pupils' daily lives. The research clearly indicated that for teachers and parents there were very few informal meeting spaces or opportunities to talk, which were not based on attendance, behaviour or attainment. The parent focus groups indicated a strong desire for parents to get to know teachers better

“““

“ Some teachers judge me. There is a massive difference between teachers. Some are down to earth, others aren't. It's about attitude”

Parent 1

“““

“ It's where the teachers come from and how they've been brought up. If they are snotty, it doesn't work. Most teachers we get on better with have been around longer.”

Parent 3

The ideas and perceptions of the teachers and parents were explored with myths challenged and new understandings being made along with a shared agreement to create a new informal parent/teacher meeting space. Other staff around school that worked directly with the families also saw the impact through greater willingness of all parties to communicate openly. The school leaders still feel that some staff do not fully appreciate the impact of poverty on families and learning and are continuing to work on this programme.

“““

“ Parents workshops have now started where we invite parents into school on a more informal basis to find out about their child's learning. Teachers plan and hold workshops for parents to take part in some of the activities that the children will engage in during the first few weeks of the new school year. Parents can talk to the teacher informally and teachers get a broader understanding about children and their families.”

School B found that the research process helped raise awareness of poverty and stigma across the whole school's staff. The research intervention identified that through a targeted social and emotional skills programme the class became more settled and a common language was developed to discuss and resolve disputes. The children internalised and used elements of the programme, which in turn empowered them to have new choices and experiences. The children gave positive feedback about the sessions and how they had helped.

“I also found out that trying new things could be the most amazing thing that's ever happened to you. I tried out a swimming club which was completely new and I got in and have made lots of friends.” Pupil A

The evaluation indicated that the Expressive Reluctance construct from the baseline recording showed an improvement in 16 out of 26 children (61 per cent). Similarly, the Poor Awareness construct baseline showed an improvement in 15 out of 26 pupils (57 per cent).

School leaders' comments on the research process

School A

“It was interesting to see the research that people have done regarding deprivation and its impact on school learning. It was heartening to speak and meet with different schools to discuss these issues and the impact they have on us individually. It has helped us to develop our decision making and practice in school in terms of attempting to “poverty proof” aspects of the school year. Staff working directly with the project definitely have more awareness of the impact of poverty on school and we now want to roll this out further to the whole school community.”

Head teacher

School B

“Due to the research we have been involved in, we have reconsidered (and learnt) about the financial impact, we have sought to reduce barriers and stigma. We now carefully examine the academic, resourcing and social impact of lessons, activities and wider opportunities. The research project gave the school time to reflect on and better understand the experiences of the children and their families, and to place this in a wider national context. We have now changed elements of school practice to minimise the negative impacts of poverty. The research has focused us as a school community upon the needs of our local community. It has given us context and ideas, as well as challenging some of our existing practice.” Head teacher

Case study 3 - Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) comprises ten metropolitan boroughs: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan and the cities of Manchester and Salford.

According to the 2011 census, 66.6 per cent of the proportion of GMCA residents are identified as White British. The remaining 33.4 per cent, a diverse cultural and linguistic group of 18 identified ethnicities, includes large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities alongside significant African, Caribbean and Arabic populations. The region is economically diverse with certain boroughs, for example Trafford, enjoying significant wealth, while bordering Salford, which has high deprivation and pockets of poverty. Boroughs such as Stockport, are relatively affluent. Around 200,000 children live in poverty in Greater Manchester, which has 187 of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England..

Schools A and B are located in two bordering boroughs to the east of Manchester, in Stockport and Tameside. The schools are in post-industrial, traditionally white working class, urban communities, although the school population for School A in particular, which is in Tameside, has changed significantly over the past decade. Both schools have high rates of Pupil Premium, 44.5 per cent and 52.2 per cent respectively. Housing stock in both school districts is a mixture of social housing and private rented, with a small percentage of owner occupier.

School A

This is a small Church of England primary school with 240 pupils on roll, located in a highly deprived, former mill town in a borough of Greater Manchester. The last Ofsted inspection, in 2017, rated the school as Good. Although the school has traditionally served a White British community, in recent years, the school population has changed considerably - 70 per cent of pupils now have English as an Additional Language (EAL). Teachers recognised that the school community had changed but knew little about the skills, expertise, traditions and cultural assets that are integral to the school community. As such, they recognised that the curriculum did not reflect the experiences of many of their pupils, particularly those from

the diverse cultures and backgrounds found within the school community.

School B

The school is located just outside the centre of Stockport in an area of high urban density social housing, with 93 per cent of the population identified as White British. The last Ofsted inspection, in 2020, rated the school as Good. As a result of discussions about the unique work of practitioners in areas of high deprivation during the Local Matters process, the school's SLT decided it wanted to explicitly articulate the distinctive nature of the school and its community. The aim was to provide a resource for governors and new staff that offers an insight into the lives of those who work at the school.

Research focus- curriculum

School A wanted to explore how it could develop curriculum and pedagogy around notions of social justice and inclusive classrooms that are organised around the needs of the least advantaged pupils in their community and engage parents and carers into the learning process. Based on research explored through Local Matters, the school wanted to adopt a Funds of Knowledge approach that draws on the assets, skills and expertise within a community. Data, although interlinked, was collected in two discrete ways.

Firstly, the school met with families over the course of several weeks to explore the skills and traditions found within the immediate community and asked them to help shape the school's foundation curriculum based on these experiences and knowledge. The meetings took the form of workshops that could be attended by any family member (including the extended family and older siblings no longer at the school) and also had several volunteer interpreters to help keep the conversation flowing. The meetings started with some refreshments and an opportunity for parents to network and discuss their children's progress informally with class teachers, followed by some group activities in classrooms with teachers, bilingual teaching assistants and interpreters. Groups of families were provided with key words drawn from the themes used in research to find out the 'Funds of Knowledge'. Example themes

included home and heritage languages; family activities (eg, holiday celebrations); leisure activities; stories and traditions (eg, written and oral narratives); friends and family; occupations; food and cooking and geographical and industrial heritages. Families were encouraged to discuss and note down their experiences on large posters that were circulated around the room. Their contributions were collated and analysed with university and school colleagues for commonalities among families and contrasting experience, cultures and traditions within the community.

The second data collection method involved training Year 5 pupils to become 'community detectives'. University staff met with pupils for two classroom sessions. These hands-on sessions provided them with the information and skills to investigate their own community and particularly to find out from the parents who are harder to reach for the school some of their traditions, cultures and experiences. Pupils interviewed their parents and family members. The interviews were recorded and the conversations transcribed and member checked with the participants before being analysed for corresponding themes drawn from the family workshops. These insights into the community's 'Funds of Knowledge', drawn from the two data collection methods, were then integrated into project-based schemes of learning. The resulting curriculum offered child-led, project-based schemes of learning that provide historical, cultural and work-related activities anchored in the lived experiences of families in the school community and enabled children to develop skills in all aspects of learning through connecting to their life-worlds. Every half-term, a whole-school thematic project is adopted for the foundation subjects with each year teacher taking a specific area of focus or question to consider. Themes have included investigating the local area that include a.) the cotton industry in Asia and Manchester b.) inventions to help older members of our community c.) why does our area have a canal? d.) why is Manchester so special? e.) who are the heroes of our area? f.) Then and now, what are our local traditions and festivals?

Importantly, and integral to the approach, the school involves parents in children's learning at each stage of the process to share experiences, insights and community knowledge, as well as developing parents' ability to support their children's learning. This includes inviting them to school-based and out of school activities as well as local school visits.

For school B the research focused on school leaders gaining a better understanding of the work of teaching and non-teaching staff in the school, as well as the beliefs and qualities needed to equip them to best support disadvantaged children and their learning. Through Local Matters research discussions, the school drew on the key themes from a published large-scale project on effective teaching in high poverty contexts as a guide.

As part of this process, university and school staff worked together to create a questionnaire designed to gather school staff opinions on the qualities they felt were needed to be an effective teacher at their school. The questionnaire, built on previous research models, also explored staff views on the skills and qualities needed to effectively meet the needs of their pupils. This data gathering was followed up by several focus group activities led by university staff: first, among teaching and non-teaching staff to explore the day-to-day activities associated with their role in school and their beliefs associated with successful teaching in their context, and second, by focus group discussions with parents/carers and pupils about the skills and qualities they felt staff in school possessed or needed.

Research findings and impact

For school A, teachers reported impact on several levels: firstly, on attainment and engagement, including more willingness to engage in problem-based and discussion-based activities that gave pupils the opportunity to draw from their own cultural or community knowledge. For example, when local heroes were explored in class in Year 6, they included famous Manchester celebrities but also discussed the qualities of role models in society and drew upon significant heroes within their geographical and religious communities. They have also identified far more positive interactions and relationships with parents who were willing to come into lessons, support the school as volunteers for trips and visits, and have more confident conversations about out of school learning with teachers. The children also gave positive feedback about the process:

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“ I really enjoyed having my family decide what we do in lessons. It meant we were all able to talk about the projects at home and my mum was proud that we were helping the old people in our community.”

Pupil A

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“ I learned a lot about my family and it was fun being able to interview my grandparents about some of the things they liked to do back in Bangladesh and putting pictures and stories up in the classroom about their lives.”

Pupil B

For School B, the questionnaire and focus group activities highlighted several common themes, listed below, that the staff, parents and teachers identified as integral to the effectiveness of the school both in terms of the skills associated with teaching and learning and broader beliefs associated with teaching pupils in their school:

- empathy, compassion and love
- genuine belief in every child, no matter their background
- building accurate knowledge of children's backgrounds (eg, family/community)
- a passion for teaching
- patience
- ability to adapt and respond to the complex needs of children

- ability to build positive relationships with children and parents
- using positive language with children
- being a team player and sharing the emotional aspects of teaching with colleagues
- communicating clearly with colleagues, pupils and parents
- excellent knowledge of how to provide individualised support for learning and encourage positive behaviour.

The data generated has been adapted so it can be used as supporting material for an induction pack for new staff. The induction materials, consisting of short narratives and quotes from pupils, teachers and parents, offer distinct ‘voices’ from all of the school community that articulate the skills and ethos that can be found in the school. Local Matters research has added a far greater depth to the staff knowledge of the school community and built stronger school/home relationships.

School leaders’ comments on the research process

School A

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“ Staff now have a good understanding of how to identify starting points that include children’s experiences. Once they know what the starting points are, then curriculum plans can reflect them. They have a far more positive outlook and now feel equipped to support children and their learning. Adults and families are also supported in a positive way in other aspects of family life – staff understand that this is an integral part of educating children in families with poverty.”

Deputy head teacher

School B

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“Local Matters has made me see things differently as a school leader. I started the programme thinking I was a lone voice in championing the community, the parents and children in our school. The process of exploring attitudes and beliefs showed me what a strong and committed staff I have, and how our school’s unique culture or ‘way’ is successful. We give our children really positive school experiences and have a strong sense of family. I wanted to capture the skills, qualities and commitment to our children and their families that my team demonstrate every day and the induction pack has been a really helpful way of expressing their strengths for anyone visiting or applying to work in our school.”

Head teacher

3. The voices of teachers, school staff and regional leaders

As part of the university's strategic research development, the Local Matters programme was supported by a research assistant who undertook a series of in-depth interviews with the teachers, head teachers and regional policy makers taking part in the programme. The interviews took place at the school or regional offices and were digitally recorded, with the transcriptions being member checked. The aim of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the research processes and identify the impact of the programme on the staff, school communities and policy makers taking part. The research questions were developed by the academic programme team in conjunction with the participating schools and regional education leaders. The key findings from these interviews are presented in the following thematic basis.

Research skills

“ Being part of Local Matters has enhanced our teachers’ understanding of what school-based action research really means. The network meetings have allowed them to explore established UK and international research findings in this area of work and has exposed them to a range of research tools/instruments. This has helped them to scope their school questionnaires. Teachers now have a clear appreciation of the cycle of inquiry and recognise that the process, if it is to be truly valuable, takes time. As a result, they have improved their investigative, evaluative and analytical skills.”

Stockport Local Authority School Improvement Leader

“ The opportunity and space to engage with the research literature about poverty and attitudes to poverty was clearly highly valued by the practitioners. They were developing confidence in research skills and how to generate research questions to allow them to evaluate their practice. The opportunity to consider how practitioners were viewing and relating to pupils, and the influence of preconceptions and stereotypes seemed to enable fresh thinking on multiple layers.”

Assistant General Secretary NEU

“ We knew of the University of Manchester Institute of Education’s reputation in the field. We looked to the university to support our critical thinking about the evidence for poverty and disadvantage, and as a way into the rigorous testing of strategies and hypotheses to ameliorate the negative effects. We have not been disappointed. Momentum is growing. Within the diocese, more schools are thinking about and using research skills from this programme to understand the lived experience of children and families. Schools are listening more, and, having heard, considering how things might change in their schools. Other diocese groups, such as our SEND/ Inclusion group now want to know more, challenge orthodoxies, find local solutions. Directly and indirectly, this project is responsible for a new sense of purpose in our schools.”

Head of Disadvantage and Poverty Group, Chester Diocesan Board of Education

School/community relations

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“The research we are doing as part of ‘Local Matters’ is impacting on our most vulnerable children. Positive relationships have been built on trust and mutual respect, and it has been encouraging to witness how this has impacted on parent and pupils’ self-esteem.”

Blackburn - Head of School Effectiveness

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“Schools are rediscovering the importance of the ‘local’, which they can influence, as opposed to the ‘national’, where they feel powerless. Carl and Louisa have challenged us to think about our children, our staff, our parents and our communities. The classroom has become a new focus of social interaction and pedagogy. Colleagues are sensitive to the perceptions of others as never before and have rediscovered their sense of ‘service’ to the community and what this might mean in the curriculum schools offer

Chester - Policy Leader

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“We know that families living in poverty have been severely affected by this pandemic, and given that we face an uncertain future, I believe that the research skills and the findings developed through this programme will be even more vital going forward.”

Stockport head teacher

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“This research has enabled me to see the extent to which some teachers at school ‘...really do not know the community they are serving’. This awareness has encouraged me to ‘think deeply’ about poverty and school’s role in alleviating associated pressures.”

Chester head teacher

Pedagogic practice and curriculum

This research has also influenced school practices, for example bringing local knowledge and history into the curriculum, teachers better understanding the benefits system and reducing the cost of the school day. Stockport head teacher

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“This research has also influenced school practices, for example bringing local knowledge and history into the curriculum, teachers better understanding the benefits system and reducing the cost of the school day.”

Chester head teacher

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“The research has had a profound impact on our awareness of poverty. Access to resources from Carl and Louisa has transformed our fundamental knowledge about the impact of poverty, both nationally, and in our locality. As a result, almost all decisions made in school are run through the ‘lens’ of poverty proofing. We now, as a matter of course, consider the impact of our decisions on the disadvantaged children in our school.”

Stockport head teacher

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“Research based discussions, amongst SLT particularly, have unearthed realities ie, that members of school-staff are among those living in financial difficulty, which have encouraged staff to be ‘mindful’ when speaking about the conditions and circumstances through which families end up living in poverty. Furthermore, teachers believe this ‘mindfulness’ needs to be built into the curriculum and have consequently shaped PSHE lessons in a way that incorporates discussion around poverty and disadvantage.”

Chester head teacher

Financial impact

School A used to charge parents £1 per child to come into school in non-uniform. It has since changed this to a family contribution, to alleviate pressures on families which have more than one child in school. It is difficult to calculate the exact savings for this change without knowing family-specific details. An additional strategy has been to purchase PE kits for PP students. The average cost of a basic PE kit for a primary aged child is £10. There are approximately 49 students in receipt of PP funding at S1. Thus, this strategy has saved families of S1 approximately £490 per year.

School B made breakfast club free for PP students. There are approximately 101 students in receipt of PP funding and the cost of breakfast club at S2 is £3 per day. Should all PP students access this provision, each family would save £585 (£59,085 collectively) per 195-day school year. The school is now providing PP students with one after-school enrichment activity per week, which usually costs £6 per weekly session. This has resulted in each family saving £234 (£23,634 collectively) per 39-week academic year. In addition, they have spent £220 on PE kits, to be used by children whose families cannot afford them. Finally, the school has made the cost of a £150 school trip free for PP students. This will amount to a total saving of £15,150 for their families.

School C has developed existing strategies, which will increase the financial saving for families living in poverty. Food and fuel vouchers were already offered to families, but now a food stall has been placed discreetly at the school, where parents/carers can 'help themselves' as and when they choose. The school now provides every child with a PE kit, which they wash and dry termly. This has resulted in an approximate saving of £1,700 (using the UK average of £10 per primary school PE kit) across all families.

School D has removed costs for school trips. The average voluntary contribution asked of parents for general field trips is £14. There are approximately 409 pupils enrolled at this school, resulting in a £5,726 total home-community saving (£420 per 30 pupil year group).

School E no longer asks parents to resource specific clothing required for field trips. The school was once asking families to provide wellingtons and raincoats for the Year

5 river study. The average cost of a pair of wellingtons and raincoat is £10 and £8 respectively. This equates to a total saving of £540 per 30 pupil year group. Teachers now look to buy these items at a reduced price from charity shops and keep them on the school premises, to be used by children during the wetter months.

School F recognised that not all children come to school with money to buy books when the 'Book Bus' visits the school each year. They are now going to arrange the visit to coincide with the school summer fun day, whereby any profit raised during the event will be used to buy each pupil a book. This practice will not only save paying families the cost of a book (minimum price listed as £3 on the website = minimum £90 per 30 pupil class) but will also afford all children the opportunity to take home a new book. The school also runs a breakfast club for children, who can eat as much as they like for just 50p per day. This cost is significantly cheaper than the average £4.20 per student attending breakfast club. Furthermore, not all students pay for this service, but they are nonetheless welcome to eat the food.

Professionalisation

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“The project is raising professional esteem at all levels in the project schools. Teachers are regaining their professional pride; the action research projects are informed by their experience and knowledge; they are regaining a sense of self-determination after being told what to think for too long.”

Blackburn - Policy Leader

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“Teachers are looking at research they wouldn't have done before and asking questions of policy.”

Chester Policy Leader



“The head teachers were able to reflect in a rich and meaningful way about a range of practical and conceptual issues relating to their schools. It struck me that this is such a very rare opportunity for head teachers- to work collaboratively on the challenges in their local area because of poverty and class prejudices, and to connect it to the pressing reality of teaching and curriculum in their schools. It was apparent that this had been a journey of re-professionalisation for the heads and other staff involved; that it had reinvigorated their sense of professional purpose and motivated them to continue in difficult roles. Participation in planning and conceiving the action research projects has evidently reminded them of the huge potential to change lives and support the families in their areas in ways that were transformational.”

NEU Assistant General Secretary



“Discussions around the research findings has resulted in a dramatic shift in the way benefit recipients are perceived by staff across the school. Leaders have conducted a series of meetings whereby common misconceptions highlighted in the questionnaires (ie, those on benefits live better than I do’) are unpacked. Teaching staff are now more aware of who benefit recipients are (ie, ‘...that 70 per cent of children living in poverty are actually from working families’).”

Blackburn head teacher



“The research process has changed their (teachers) perceptions of poverty and that means they are looking at the school from a different point of view and looking at it through the eyes of the poorest children in the school. It has changed the staff’s perceptions of what we offer the children in that sort of way.”

Stockport head teacher



“The research process is already having a huge effect on the mentality and behaviours of school staff, children and parents, particularly where Carl and Louisa have been involved in conducting focus groups in programme schools.”

Blackburn head teacher



“Based on the Local Matters research I’ve done staff training and I went through lots of statistics about children living in poverty and the impact. I then linked it with some of the recommendations from the research and audit. You could see staff, and you could hear them. There was like a visible ‘ohhh I hadn’t thought about that’. So, it was really good actually, straight away staff started sharing ideas on what they could do to improve things, and we know that it’s about changing attitudes and changing the way that we deal with things as a school. It doesn’t cost any more money it’s just how we deal with things.”

Stockport head teacher

4. Conclusion

We believe Local Matters has had a significant impact on the schools and people taking part. It has changed how schools think about and address issues of poverty and resulted in changes in classroom practices, curriculum activities, school policies, costs of the school day and access to learning experiences for all pupils. Moreover, the research programme has given schools knowledge they did not have before, and has shaped attitudes towards poverty across the school community. Finally, the programme has empowered teachers, school leaders, parents and pupils by equipping them with an understanding and application of research skills that ultimately the participants will carry and use in future.

Through Local Matters, schools, teachers and the local community can make and apply changes in their school that are based on rigorous local knowledge and are inclusive and critical in their approach.

Practice lessons

In terms of educators' practice there have been a number of key findings that are applicable to schools and teaching across England.

In the classroom, we have seen and heard from teachers as to how taking part in Local Matters has resulted in changes to the curriculum, greater cultural inclusiveness, incorporation of community knowledge and assets into the school and greater access to learning experiences.

We have seen schools develop a creative curriculum – exploring local knowledge and assets to both extend and rethink the curriculum, particularly in history, geography, English, maths and science.

Many of the schools have, with pupils and parents, undertaken subject research projects that have informed their learning and classroom activity, whether this be about local employment, local geographies, local economic situations or shared histories.

We have seen parents come into school and share their working experiences or family histories. This has also led to participating schools exploring and better understanding cultural capital.

Local Matters schools have gathered a broad and deep range of local knowledge and linked this into the curriculum and school policies.

Data on community history, values and memories has been used to directly shape what happens in the classroom. Through taking part in the research programme, schools have reshaped how they understand cultural capital, developing a much more 'community' grounded model that fulfils the Ofsted requirements to provide an ambitious curriculum, while talking to and drawing on the local.

This supports Professor Diane Reay's thinking that

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“key elements of cultural capital are entwined with privileged lifestyles rather than qualities you can separate off and then teach the poor and working classes.”

All learners need to be provided with intellectually challenging classrooms, but this is particularly true for students from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to try to overcome social injustice. If pedagogic disadvantage is combined with deficit thinking eg, the teacher blames pupils, their families and their communities for their lack of academic success, schooling can strengthen the sense of isolation and impact on learners' self-esteem: inequality is reproduced in school if the cultural values implicit in schooling remain unspeakable.

Classroom learning (and the curriculum) should connect to the real world so that it can be a bridge that engages the learner with the learning process and motivates pupils.

It is worth sharing here some of the questions and research projects we have undertaken through Local Matters, in order that other schools may explore their curriculum and ask:

- What is the purpose of the current curriculum in your school?
- For whom do you think it is written? How do you know?
- How central is assessment to the curriculum?
- How do you promote engagement?
- How does the curriculum promote inclusive practice?
- How does the curriculum connect to the lived experiences of children in the school?
- Does the curriculum value the differences in children, including their heritage, home contexts and traditions?

The practice lessons illuminated here speak to many of the national teaching agendas.

Research and Professionalisation

The reprofessionalisation and upskilling, through research, of teachers has been an important element of Local Matters. For many years, teachers and school leaders have too often been the implementors of policy made at a central level, rather than shaping and creating policy that is locally reflective. As educators operate in a standardised system where all schools are seen as being the same and the 'what works' agenda advocates standardised responses to school issues, local knowledge and context have become undervalued and sometimes lost. This process has, we believe, resulted in educators often losing confidence in their own knowledge and skills and forgetting how vital these are to teaching, particularly in a disadvantaged community.

We have over the last couple of years seen the call for teachers to become research literate, yet this initiative is again very centralised and often understood only as teachers being able to read measurement data. Too often teachers' work is informed by research evidence given to them; it is very rare for teachers or school leaders to actually initiate and undertake critical research that is shaped by what they see daily.

Throughout the Local Matters programme, one of the most powerful outcomes to witness has been the engagement of the teachers with the research process. Educators have become active in the research process both in interrogating what they have been told previously and in directing their own research agenda. This process has not only equipped the participants with a strong and deep understanding of research skills and critical thinking but has increased their confidence in being an educator with a voice and an important set of skills.

Teachers have developed a whole series of research skills including undertaking critical literature searches, building research rationales, understanding epistemological approaches, applying research methods and undertaking analysis of data. They have explored where and how poverty and disadvantage policy has been developed and explored the links between this and the measurement and standards agenda.

We have through the programme heard many times how educators have ‘discovered’ through research both data and responses to poverty and disadvantage that have changed how they think and respond to disadvantage. A number of schools have reflected on this professionalisation and incorporated it into their school CPD programme and recruitment procedures.

One school has reshaped its whole ‘teacher’ model to reflect a more inclusive and critical approach to education, while another local authority district is drawing Local Matters research into its wider area strategy and linking it with health and social services. Teachers and school leaders have also taken back control in the classroom through participation in the programme.

We have seen Local Matters data and research being used to inform Ofsted inspections, and used by governing bodies to shape school policy as well as teachers reshaping classroom practice based on evidence they have collected. This upskilling is now widening with a new one-day CPD programme ‘Responding to Poverty and the Disadvantage Gap based on Local Matters research being rolled out across participating areas.

We believe that the Local Matters research approach has helped educators and communities recover, and unshackle themselves from, the constraints of unproductive, unjust and often unsatisfying education and community structures that limit their self-development and self-determination. Local Matters through its critical stance aims to support educators in releasing themselves from centrally driven professional constraints. We believe teachers can only truly shape reality when they are at the heart of investigating it.

Local Matters offers a critical, thick and authentic research experience for teachers beyond simply becoming research literate.

Recommendations

Our research demonstrates that being a teacher in a school with high levels of poverty demands both a broad and specialist range of skills, with knowledge of research and research methods being at the heart of these. By research, we mean a fully-formed and critical approach to both gathering data and understanding what data does and does not tell us.

Moreover, we strongly encourage teachers, schools and communities to ask hard critical questions of who the school, curriculum and associated actions is serving and benefitting.

As part of this process, we hope to see a greater take-up of alternative ‘partnership’ research between universities and schools to develop research-informed practice when working with schools facing issues of poverty.

If we are to tackle poverty and disadvantage then it is vital that we acknowledge research is an investigation to discover new knowledge and interrogate what we know, not simply to enact what one is told to do.

Research is inherently situated in complex questions regarding power, knowledge and control. If the approach to poverty and disadvantage is already centrally decided and prescribed for teachers when working to research poverty and education then it is already ideologically positioned and not recognising the power of place, people and history. We must remember, Bradford is not Brighton and being a teacher in an area of high disadvantage demands a different set of skills that can work with and understand the local.

Across education, too often there is an assumption that ‘the problem’ is identified as the need for teachers to ‘improve their practice’ and therefore be given standardised answers that allegedly serve to overcome the problem, from a more knowledgeable ‘other’ rather than encouraging and investing in teachers and schools to build on their own expertise.

The creative, progressive and research rich pedagogies of the teachers we worked with and observed illustrated complex designs and high levels of professional competency. This illuminated their intention to keep learning about how to improve their work and meet the needs of their local communities.

We highly commend this approach.
