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What might the Covid Pandemic mean for the SERA Poverty and Education Network?

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Introduction.

The Poverty and Education Network of SERA was launched in 2015. Since that date the Network has highlighted new and relevant research on the complex inter-relationships between poverty and education for children and young people, mainly focussed on how poverty impacts on school education. One of our aims has been to showcase new research at the SERA annual conference and contribute to contemporary debates that are at the interfaces between research, policy and practice. Here we present an agenda of the key areas that need to be addressed in order to continue to tackle poverty in education in the Covid-19 context and, crucially, in the post Covid-19 reality. We propose this agenda under four main headings: Health and Wellbeing; Organisation of Daily School Life; Learning and Teaching; and Government and Local Authority Issues.

1. Health and Wellbeing

The role of schools in supporting Health and Wellbeing.

Schools are reporting challenges regarding the impact on health and wellbeing of pupils. This is caused by a number of factors: reduced social contact with friends and extended family; experience of loss where someone they know has died or has been hospitalised with COVID-19; and changes in routine. In Scotland 96% of young people are worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their future and 77% are worried about their mental health and wellbeing (YouthLink 2020). It is likely that the pandemic will intensify the adverse effect of poverty on the mental health of children and young people. The increase in financial and social insecurity for low-income groups and associated stress is likely to impact negatively on child and parental mental health. As reported in other parts of Europe, many support services have experienced disruption due to social distancing measures and the redeployment of staff to tackle COVID-19 activities (Chevance et al., 2020, 91). Educators and partner workers have had to adapt their practice and operate in this stressful environment, often facing health risks themselves. Questions arise regarding:

- How will families cope with the changes resulting from the pandemic? How effectively can children be supported to maintain mental health and wellbeing within their families by their schools, and by wider support partners?
- How will schools and partner services support those pupils who require more assistance in coping with these changes, particularly when there are current restrictions on partner agencies visiting schools?
- How will demands for rapid change to adapt learning and support approaches impact on the mental health of educators and compound the pandemic's effect on the education system?

Food insecurity.

During the lockdown, there was a marked increase in the uptake in foodbanks and growth in food insecurity in Scotland as recorded by the food-based charities (Food Foundation, 2020) and anti-poverty organisations (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2020). At the same time, serious efforts were made to continue provision for children who were eligible for free school

meals. A variety of approaches were used in Scotland, including providing hot meals, providing cold packed lunches (home delivery and collection from centralised hubs) providing money for families to buy food, and providing food vouchers. Children on means tested free school meals continued to receive the meals during the summer holiday (Scottish Government, 2020a). The number of children eligible for free school meals increased as more families faced financial hardship. The demands for school-based and community-based food provision highlights that food insecurity is a reality for many children and young people in Scotland. There is a pressing need for a greater understanding of the dangers that not providing food support would present – which include, but are not limited to, undernourishment and malnutrition.

Making in-school food provision fit for purpose.

Attention has been placed on making school food nutritious (through adherence to strict guidelines) and ensuring that more children have access to this food (for example, universal provision of free school meals in P1-P3, and its extension in some authorities) (McKendrick et al., 2019). Current conditions have meant that some schools have introduced split sittings at lunchtime and new arrangements for where food can be consumed, whereas others have withdrawn or adapted breakfast club provision. There is a need to appraise how these changes on how school food is currently being accessed are impacting on the uptake of free school meals in Scotland. Taking the specific example of split sittings, it either allows school meal presentation to be maintained at pre-Covid levels while adhering to new social distancing constraints, or it increases the capacity for school meal presentation, which has been steadily reduced with less space given over to dining hall arrangements in contemporary school estates (McKendrick et al., 2019).

2. Organisation of Daily School Life

Poverty Proofing the School Day.

The Child Poverty Action Group's (CPAG) Cost of the School Day work has highlighted the many ways in which school education is not entirely free for all children (CPAG, 2020). There are unintended adverse consequences when schools ask families to contribute to the core and incidental costs of a Scottish education. It is likely that many of the activities that drain family budgets (for example, parties, school trips) will not take place in 2020 and 2021. We need to use this moment in time to identify sustainable ways to enrich education that do not place strain on low income families and then to promote actions to implement these changes.

Teachers as the catalyst for change.

Many teachers in many schools have been tackling poverty in their schools in important ways for many years. Teachers contributing to the EIS and PACT project (EIS, 2020) often comment on feeding hungry children and being sensitive to the particular needs of the most vulnerable. In this time of flux, there is a need to facilitate more dialogue among teachers and other educational professionals, through the PACT project, and through closer engagement with those in academia concerned to tackle poverty in education. Such dialogue is a precursor to action. The PACT project, for example, aims not only to raise awareness of the issues, but also to energise teachers to take action, raise awareness of good and best practice, and encourage participants to cascade this knowledge among their peers.

3. Learning and Teaching

Learning loss.

The issue of learning loss - and the differential degree of learning loss by family socioeconomic background – has been of interest to educational practitioners for some time. Given the evidence that not all families were successful in managing home schooling, there is a pressing demand to evaluate the extent to which learning loss is compromising learning in schools (CONNECT, 2020). There is a need to ensure that the extended break from classroom teaching in 2020 does not have long-term consequences for some children.

Tackling digital exclusion.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in lockdowns across the world and, for many, an enforced move to online learning and teaching. This was fraught with challenges as teachers and children struggled to adapt to this new way of engaging in the learning process. However, this also drew attention to the digital divide and digital exclusion (Office for National Statistics (2019). Not all children have access, or consistent access to a device, that would allow them to interact with the online learning environment. Not all families can afford to pay for the internet (Holmes and Burgess, 2020). While steps have been taken to narrow this digital divide in Scotland, this does raise serious questions about equal access to digital equipment and digital skills that are increasingly required to support school education, employment and an active role in society.

Paucity of pedagogy.

Recent discussions with teacher colleagues have raised a number of important questions including:

- How will the current COVID teacher/pupil distancing recommendations affect pedagogical approaches?
- Are teachers more likely to adopt a more traditional teacher role in front of the class with pupils sitting behind individual desks to facilitate the current distancing recommendations?
- To what extent will the current social distancing situation and related disruption to teacher learning impact on teacher Career-Long Professional Learning (CLPL)? (United Nations (2020)
- Will the existence of COVID and distancing measures encourage teachers to adopt alternative pedagogies?
- Will outdoor education be used creatively or merely as a strategy to facilitate social distancing?

In understanding the impact of COVID on pedagogy, research is required to address these and other related questions.

4. Government and Local Authority Issues

Ensure education is at the heart of Scotland's Local Child Poverty Action Reports (LCPARs). Scotland is committed to eradicating child poverty by 2030. Each of Scotland's 32 local authorities has a statutory obligation to prepare an annual Local Child Poverty Action Report and to use its local resources to have the biggest impact on child poverty (Scottish Government, 2020b). As might be expected, education features in these reports. However, there is a need to strengthen the potential role of education as a strategy in tackling child poverty in many of these reports and to continue to raise awareness of the wider importance of this work.

Rethinking PEF.

The Pupil Equity Fund has the potential to rebalance resources and create more equitable opportunity in Scottish education (Education Scotland, 2020). Despite some success stories, the extent to which this was being achieved prior to lockdown is not clear (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020). However, much PEF is invested in activity that cannot be sustained under current conditions (for example, after school enrichment activities). There is an urgent need to ensure that PEF funds are being used to address the challenges that pupils face if the attainment gap is to be narrowed.

Revisiting assessment.

The recent debacle surrounding the SQA and assessment moderation has not been resolved and raises serious questions about future practices (Priestley, 2020-forthcoming). While it is evident that the adoption of the adjustment algorithm was too simple for moderation, it is also clear that relying exclusively on teachers' predicted grades comes with additional challenges as well. Discussions with teacher colleagues have indicated that this situation presents an opportunity for revisiting the whole topic of centralised assessment, its underpinning concepts and suitability for the 21st century.

Concluding Remarks

School education is a partnership. Children can only thrive when school education is well placed to work in tandem with the wider worlds that children inhabit. Evidence is clear that poverty will extend its reach as the consequences of COVID-19 unravel. It is also clear that poverty will intensify for those who have endured it for some time. Scottish Government, Local Authorities, schools and the research community must be more focussed than ever on the challenges that are experienced by children from families on a low income who are struggling to balance resources. As stated throughout this agenda, there are many areas for research that require urgent attention from the Scottish educational research community.

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