



Child poverty and the challenges for Catholic schools in the post-pandemic era

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Accepted: 26 May 2022 / Published online: 2 July 2022
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1 Introduction

In a previous article for the *Journal of Religious Education* I discussed the very serious challenges of food insecurity and digital poverty or digital exclusion that have affected many children in Catholic schools during the Covid-19 pandemic (McKinney, 2020). This article revisits these two themes and explores two other themes. The first is another form of poverty that has been brought to public attention through recent research and interventionist practices in schools, uniform poverty. The second theme is focused on a group of children and young people whose challenging circumstances have been highlighted during the period of the pandemic, young carers. The article frames the discussion through two lenses that I have adopted and used to critically examine the effects of child poverty in education in Catholic schools: the hidden costs of the school day (a lens that can be applied to all forms of state funded schooling) and the preferential option for the poor (a lens that is more distinctive to the Catholic schools). All references to Catholic schools in the UK refer to state funded Catholic schools.

2 The preferential option for the poor

The recent document on Catholic schools, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (Congregation for Catholic Education (for Educational Institutions), 2022) aims to provide ‘a more in-depth and up-to-date reflection and guidelines on the value of the Catholic identity of educational institutions in the Church’. *The Identity of the Catholic School* presents a set of criteria that responds to the challenges of our times (section 2). The document revisits many important themes of previous Vatican documents on education, including the mission of the Catholic school for all, and especially the poor (see sections 22, 25 and 83). This was first articulated in the Vatican II era in section nine of *Gravissimum Educationis* and is highlighted in many later documents such as *The Catholic School* (Pope Paul VI, 1965; The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Fittingly, *The Identity of the Catholic School* draws explicitly on the two documents that include

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a fuller development on the thinking on this mission to the poor. The first, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997), examines the contemporary challenges of poverty. The second is the theologically reflective *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools. Reflections and Guidelines* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2002). Section 22 of *The Identity of the Catholic School* provides a detailed discussion of Catholic schools and poverty and incorporates a lengthy quote from section 15 of *The Catholic School on the Threshold*:

...the establishment of the majority of Catholic educational institutions has responded to the needs of the socially and economically disadvantaged. It is no novelty to affirm that Catholic schools have their origin in a deep concern for the education of children and young people left to their own devices and deprived of any form of schooling. In many parts of the world even today material poverty prevents many youths and children from having access to formal education and adequate human and Christian formation. In other areas new forms of poverty challenge the Catholic school.

The quote is a very timely reminder of the historical work of Catholic schools for the poor (in its different forms) and the continuation of this service in Catholic schools engaging with new forms of poverty. This historical mission for the poor in Catholic schools reflects the concern for the poor which is an integral part of Catholic Social Teaching and, in contemporary terminology, is often referred to as ‘the preferential option for the poor’. This is a term adopted and adapted from the Liberation Theology of Latin America; a term and theology that have deep roots in the scriptures. In the Hebrew scriptures, the roots can be discerned in the dignity of the human person, the holiness code and the teachings on social justice. In the New Testament the roots are evident in the poverty of Jesus and the mission of Jesus to the poor and the marginalised in the gospels, and in the comments on poverty in the Acts of the Apostles (Friedman et al., 2020; Green, 2014; McKinney et al., 2013). This focus on the mission to the poor is expressed in different ways in Luke’s gospel (especially through the early part of the gospel) in features of the infancy narrative, the poverty of the birth of Jesus, the reading and teaching in the synagogue and the beatitudes and woes and the parables (Bovon, 2002; Byrne, 2013; Green, 2014). Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that the preferential option for the poor is ‘the contemporary form of discipleship’ (Gutiérrez, 2009). Pope Francis who seeks a ‘poor Church for the poor’ has repeatedly referred to the preferential option for the poor in his speeches, homilies and writings (Schlag, 2019). It is worth noting that preferential option for the poor is the term used in *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools. Reflections and Guidelines* in sections 69–73 (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2002).

3 The hidden costs of Catholic schools

It is important to understand the effects of Covid-19 on child poverty and Catholic schools within a longer-term context. The poverty rates in the UK had increased to alarmingly high rates prior to the pandemic. The most up-to-date child poverty figures indicate that 3.9 million children in the UK were living in poverty in 2020–2021 which equalled 27% of all children (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). Pre-pandemic, there was a great concern in the UK to address the hidden costs of the school day. The aim was to remove barriers to learning, reduce ‘income stigma and exclusion’ and ameliorate the financial demands

on families in state funded schooling (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). There are two notable campaigns. In some parts of North East England an audit was produced to 'poverty proof' the school day (Mazzoli-Smith & Todd, 2016). On a wider scale the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland launched a campaign to uncover the hidden costs of the school day in state funded schools (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). These hidden costs can include costs for travel to school, school trips and events, sports equipment, school clubs, home learning resources (including devices required for online learning) and school uniforms. These financial demands place families with limited resources under enormous pressure. Catholic schools, like other schools, respond in practical ways to the daily effects of child poverty in schools. They also have the 'mission to the poor' or the 'preferential option for the poor' that has been identified above and is understood as a theological mandate. The word mandate indicates that this is not choice but a fundamental Christian commitment. It is clear from the research evidence that Catholic schools have had to be very attentive to this preferential option for the poor during the period of restrictions and lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic (Wodon, 2020, 2021).

The pandemic served to exacerbate pre-existing forms of poverty that had an impact on Catholic schools. As schools attempted to function in different modes during the pandemic, whether online or hybrid forms of learning and teaching, new forms or hidden forms of poverty emerged or were highlighted. All of this is compounded by the new financial hardships in the UK and many parts of Europe. These financial hardships are a result of the economic downturn during Covid-19, the energy crisis and the conflict in Ukraine. This has resulted in inflation of food and fuel prices that will affect the most vulnerable families. Families on low incomes are being forced into making choices about essentials such as food or heating. The next section will discuss three forms of poverty that affect children and young people in Catholic schools: digital poverty; food; uniform poverty and a group of children and young people who care for others and are more likely to be living in poverty, young carers.

4 Highlighting different forms of poverty

4.1 Digital poverty

One of the greatest challenges during the pandemic was the move to online or hybrid learning and teaching. This exposed many of the inequalities that existed in the digital inclusion of children and young people. As part of ongoing research into digital poverty, McKinney et al. (2022) have identified a number of key aspects of digital exclusion. These are: (1) access to devices; (2) an adequate learning space; (3) connectivity; (4) digital literacy and (5) parental engagement. A sixth key aspect can be added to this list: (6) access to pastoral support and, in the case of Catholic schools: (6) access to religious, spiritual and pastoral support. Access to devices means having the capacity to access a suitable device when it is required. An adequate learning space entails a designated physical space (or spaces) and appropriate furniture that will enable effective digital engagement. Connectivity is a necessary component for digital learning and has to be in constant operation when required. It is often assumed that children and young people possess digital literacy, but this is not always the case (Kirschner & Bruyckere, 2017; Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Sometimes, parents may not possess the digital skills to support their children in the online learning process. The sixth key aspect identifies a serious way in which digital exclusion can have a serious

effect on support mechanisms for children in Catholic schools. While great efforts were made to support those who were digitally excluded, children who experience digital poverty in Catholic schools were not always able to access online religious education, online religious services and, at times, pastoral support.

4.2 Food poverty

Food insecurity was a major issue before the pandemic, increased in many contexts during the pandemic, and will continue to be a major challenge in the post pandemic era. In the previous article I explained that Catholic charities, churches and schools were trying to help feed families of children attending Catholic schools (McKinney, 2020). This can now be updated. As a result of factors such as families on low incomes, insufficient Social Security benefits and delays in payments, there has been an exponential rise in the use of foodbanks in the UK. The Trussell Trust, the largest foodbank provider in the UK (but not the only provider), reports that the total number of emergency food parcels distributed in 2021–2022 was just over 2.1 million. While this represented a drop from the figure of 2.5 million parcels distributed in 2020–2021, there has been an overall rise of 81% in the uptake in food parcels in the last five years (The Trussell Trust, 2021). In the period of 2021–2022, two out five food parcels (38% of all food parcels) were distributed to children. Foodbanks are a highly visible sign of inequality—we see the signs of visible poverty in children arriving to school hungry. Foodbanks are essentially a response to ensure that children and young people have access to food when all other sources have been exhausted. From another perspective, it could be understood to be a final attempt to ensure that the human rights of children and young people to experience ‘a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’ is being upheld (Unicef, 1990, article 27).

There are some good examples of Catholic communities and groups responding to the crises caused by the effects of the pandemic. The Saint Vincent De Paul Society in Leeds and Bradford, for example, ensured that its foodbank service remained open during lockdowns and provided food to all who were in need (Eastwood, 2020). This is a very good example of a *Community intervention* by a group within a religion that provides aid to the local community (Todd & Rufa, 2013). Crucially they insisted that the food was of good quality. This insistence on quality food means that the food will be nutritional—essential for the growth and development of children and young people. In Scotland all children in primaries one to five are entitled to a free school meal regardless of the family financial situation (mygov.scot, 2022). After primary five, the free school meal entitlement is means tested. The universal free school meal provision up to primary five applies to all state funded schools and this includes the 307 Catholic primary schools, meaning that all children in these schools are entitled to a free lunchtime meal.

4.3 School uniform

There is, of course, a wide and at-times heated debate about the advantages, disadvantages, cost-effectiveness of school uniforms for children and young people and, for our purposes, in Catholic schools (Ansari et al., 2021; Brunnsma, 2004; Reidy, 2021). While there is limited space to engage with these debates and the area of Catholic school uniform is under researched, it is worth observing a number of points. Dwyer-McNulty (2014) argues that school uniforms in Catholic schools in America were significant in many respects, in

particular for Catholic school girls. The uniform could be used as a representation of the institution of the Church and promote the idea of respectability in the educational endeavour of a minority denomination. They were also used as instruments of control and to deter vanity, by supporting the idea of modesty in dress.

One popular and positive argument about the value of uniforms in Catholic schools is that the uniform reinforces the idea of the equality of all: it is a symbol of the equality of all created in the image of God (Porath, 1987). This argument is highly pertinent for this reflection on the impact of poverty in Catholic schools. First this argument is challenged by the cost of uniform which is an additional cost to fees that have to be paid in many Catholic schools, for example in America (Guzmán et al., 2012). Second, it is challenged by the inequality that is demonstrated in the proliferation of school uniform banks in many places. School uniform banks are where parents and guardians, who have limited financial resources, can access free second-hand uniforms or purchase second-hand uniforms at a low price. A good example is The St Patrick's School Uniform Bank in Smithtown NY. Families have the opportunity to apply to the Tomorrow's Hope Foundation for tuition assistance based on their financial circumstances. Further, the school uniform bank provides second-hand school dress and sports uniforms free of charge. (St Patrick School, 2022). There are similar uniform banks in many Catholic schools in the UK. These interventions can be understood to facilitate equality but do raise deeper questions about the purpose of school uniforms and the related questions about the cost and affordability of school uniforms in Catholic schools (Shanks & McKinney, 2022).

There is another series of questions in the UK around the availability of clothing grants for school uniforms provided by Local Authorities for children in the Catholic schools (and all other state funded schools) and whether these grants are adequate and are calculated on the actual costs of uniforms. The uniform is expected to clothe the children and young people over a period of time (often a school year) and the grant may not allow for replacement items required because of wear and tear.

4.4 Young carers

During the pandemic, the work and responsibilities of young carers, and the particular challenges they faced during restrictions and lockdowns, was explored in research and became better known and understood in the public forum. A young carer is typically a child or young person under 18 years of age who cares for a member of the family or a friend. They may have to care for them because they suffer from physical or mental illness or the effects of addiction and the care can take many forms from day-to-day needs to emotional support. The young carer may also have to care for siblings. Young carers are not necessarily in situations of poverty and deprivation, but the evidence indicates that many of them are in homes with very limited resource (Vizard et al., 2019). Research studies from the UK and Australia indicate that young carers have complex and busy lives and may struggle to attend to their school studies which can compromise opportunities in future employment and Further and Higher Education (Moloney et al., 2020; Moore & Barry, 2014). Further challenges for young carers arose during restrictions and lockdowns as the support for registered carers from social services was often limited or suspended as social service staff reduced physical contact time. This meant that the children and young people often had to assume extra caring responsibilities. They also were more likely to suffer the effects of social isolation during the periods of restriction and lockdown. As more has been

learned about the lives of young carers, there is greater recognition of the need to support them, and this is becoming evident in many Catholic schools.

5 Concluding remarks

Child poverty and the effects of child poverty on school education and the life chances of children and young people predate the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated some forms of child poverty and served to highlight some lesser-known forms of child poverty. All of these forms of child poverty will continue to disadvantage a significant number of children and young people in the post pandemic era. Catholic schools in UK (and in other parts of the world) have the aim of tackling the hidden costs of the school day for the most vulnerable children and young people, an aim that is shared with other state-funded schools. This can be understood as ‘poverty proofing’ the Catholic school. However, there is a deeper rationale for the care of the poor and the disadvantaged for Catholic schools that is expressed in the theological preferential option for the poor. The preferential option for the poor demands a Christian response to immediate material needs such as food for children in Catholic schools and items of uniform for school, but also seeks to challenge the structures that create the need for foodbanks or uniform banks.

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This article is partly based on a paper delivered at the Network for Researchers in Catholic Education Conference at St. Mary's University, Twickenham, 2022.

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