

Child & Educational Psychology Service Newsletter

Luton

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POVERTY AND IMPACT IN SCHOOLS

Poverty and inequality are persistent and complicated problems with wide-ranging consequences for young people, families and communities. This newsletter is not long enough to do justice to the range of concerns and viewpoints that need to be heard. We hope this is part of an ongoing dialogue with those we work with and will lead to collaborative work to help address one of the most pernicious challenges facing our children and families.

Poverty is not having the resources to participate in family life and events and activities of the society to which you belong. Therefore, it's about being excluded as well as in some cases not being able to meet basic needs such as food and warmth. Families with insufficient financial and physical resources are also more likely to experience more pressure on their emotional, support and cognitive resources; often with long-term consequences. Inequality also contributes to the wider impact on children and families. Some groups are more at risk of poverty than others such as women, ethnic minorities, refugees/asylum seekers, the sick and disabled, and those with lower levels of education. Child poverty is complex as children are aware of financial pressures on the family and try to alleviate stress on the family in a range of ways.

Many school staff have long been involved in supporting families in poverty and further widened their roles over the pandemic and since to help families cope with the cumulative pressures of austerity, the pandemic, and the cost of living crisis. In this edition of our newsletter, we consider some of the psychological aspects of poverty including shame (page 2); the school-family-child relationship and narratives about poverty (page 3); the impact of poverty in the classroom both from the perspective of school staff (page 4) psychological research (page 6); and pose the question of whether rewards and consequences unfairly impact young people living in poverty (page 8). Finally, we briefly review the Council's vision for transforming our town and ending poverty (page 9). We want to promote debate and have more conversations about this issue which affects so many in our town. We want to work together to develop understanding and approaches that help break the cycle. We want to hear from YOU! Please get in touch...

psychologyservice@luton.gov.uk

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*Throughout our newsletter when we talk about parents, we are referring to all those with a parenting role, e.g. birth parents, grandparents.



Meet the team

Jo Summers, Principal Educational Psychologist; Melernie Meheux, Senior EP (management); Rachel Caldwell, Senior specialist EP (LAC/ Social care); Liane Al-Baba, EP; Chris Avis, EP; Jill Bolton, EP; Denise Burford, EP; Charmaine Davies, EP; Tanisha Esbrand EP, Julie Gibbons, EP; Rebecca Hancock, EP; Mercedes Johnson, EP; Helena Kennedy, EP; Steph Nash, EP; Katie Suggs, EP; Selina Taylor, EP; Wura Odurinde & Henna Chauhan, Administrators.

We need you!

FREE BOOK to one of our readers! We are looking for a Newsletter reader to review a book by Jean Gross CBE who spoke at the recent Level Trust conference. Free copy of her recent book 'Reaching the Unseen Children

Practical Strategies for Closing Stubborn Attainment Gaps in Disadvantaged Groups' in return for a book review to reach us in September. Please get in touch if you are interested!

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Please see [page 9](#) for our plans to work with schools, families, young people, community groups & council colleagues to develop good practice ideas and more to respond to some of the issues raised in this edition



Poverty, inequality and the impact of shame on children's development

Think of a time when someone humiliated you. What did it feel like? What did you do?

Shame is an emotion that develops in early childhood. Brené Brown, social worker turned author usefully defines it as: “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging”. It is that powerful and intense feeling that leads us to seeing ourselves as bad, unworthy, and inadequate prompting a desire to hide, escape and/or strike back.

Let's now think about “poor shaming”.

Poor shaming includes incidents, events or behaviours where children (or staff) experience shame as a direct consequence of not having the material goods or resources deemed acceptable by the (perceived) majority. For example, delivering free school meals in a way that singles these children out; requiring several items of uniform that need to be purchased from a specialist provider; homework that requires a computer, internet connection or non-provided materials to complete; comments about the clothes worn on non-uniform days; not being able to participate in learning and social events due to financial constraints; being verbally and physically targeted due to your haircut, school shoes and/or school bag etc. You can add your own.

Poor shaming also involves children and young people's awareness of the shame that their parents feel of living in poverty and society's negative perceptions of their families (explored in the article on page 3). Parents and children mask and manage poverty. Children often avoid asking for money, or things required of them at school and self-exclude from learning and leisure activities (Treanor, 2020).

Therefore, some shame is experienced through policies and practices not intended to harm; and when those without material means and resources are targeted.

“the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging”

In the 1960s, researchers developed a hypothesis referred to as The Just World Hypothesis. This proposes that individuals need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve, thus generating a propensity to blame or hold individuals responsible for suffering their fate. This might explain why schools and wider communities have evolved in terms of some of our customs and practices which are not empathetic towards those without “disposable finances”. For example, themed non uniform days- and end of year “proms”.

Nationally, and in Luton, schools have been developing their policies and practices to ensure that they provide not only physically but also psychologically safe environments for pupils and staff. We are very proud of our schools in Luton for continuing to develop and reflect on what it means to be Trauma Informed. But are we adequately addressing poor shaming? Does poverty and the impact of poverty warrant its own policy and set of training resources, or should it be consumed into general and existing policies? We are keen to hear from you.

Did you know? School costs, stigma and bullying

Children are acutely aware that their parents struggle with the cost of school. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of children in families who are ‘not well off at all’ said they had been embarrassed because they couldn't afford a cost of school. More than a quarter (27%) said they had been bullied as a result. More than half of children have avoided asking their parents or guardian for something school related because they thought they would struggle to afford it. (Holloway et al, 2014)

Parents, schools, children and narratives about poverty

Letter to the editor (not ours)

I completely understand Kerry Hudson's feeling of fear at the checkout when her card was rejected. I am 74 and remember childhood poverty, the shame of being turned away from the corner shop where we could get no more credit and having to tell my mother that I couldn't get the shopping she'd sent me for, or the shame of having to tell various "tallymen" who knocked at our door that my mother was out while she hid in the kitchen. The hatred of poverty has shaped my life and, just like Kerry, I have made sure that my children have never known it. But it is still rife. A while ago I was in a queue at a supermarket checkout behind a mother and her daughter, who I guess was seven. She had all her items checked through, but the vouchers she had from the government to cover school meals over holidays wouldn't work, so she and her child had to go home empty-handed. I was too far behind her to offer to pay, and when I got home I shed tears for her, her child and the shame they must have felt. But the real shame is on the sort of society that allows this to happen.

Bill Walsh

East Hoathly, East Sussex
Letters to the editor
The Guardian 2/6/22

Key to understanding parents' experience of poverty is to understand the impact of stress, uncertainty and shame on mental health, or emotional distress. Mental health is heavily influenced by social, economic and physical health (World Health Organisation, 2014). Poverty, inequality and uncertainty threaten our basic psychological needs to feel: safe; able to make decisions about our life; connected; and valued. Some of the impact can be mitigated by trusting others or perceiving our community environment positively; and conversely low trust in others and a sense of a hostile environment is disempowering (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2021). Despite lingering as a persistent idea in politics and the media; psychological research has rejected the idea of the culture of poverty – a subculture of dependency where families have little or no aspirations for change (Robson, 2021; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2021). One of the key ideas from research into different groups of people faced with financial instability is the idea of 'mental bandwidth'; if your resources are taken up with the stress of financial juggling and uncertainty; there are less resources available, e.g. 'to ensure that you are eating healthily, or that your kids are doing homework – everything is neglected' (Shafir quoted in Robson, 2021). Psychological research tells us that financial instability, not dependence, has the damaging effect on decision making and that choices are rational in the context.

Another poorly understood area is around parents' aspirations for their children. Research tells us that parents living in poverty are aspirational for their children. For example, they consistently want their children to achieve beyond their own achievements and consider educational achievement as central to this (Treanor, 2020). Alternative reasons for finding it difficult to engage in school life include lack confidence, skills or poor past experiences of schooling. For example, Sime & Sheridan (2014) found poorer parents had high educational aspirations for their children, but also a sense of inadequacy and low confidence in terms of knowledge and skills to help them learn.

to support children you have to support parents

Children's sense of school belonging is linked to home-school relationships. Children's well-being and the impact of poverty is inextricably linked to the impact on their parents. Children are aware of family stress and will often try to reduce it by going without and taking on caring responsibilities (Treanor, 2020).

Treanor (2020) argues that it is not enough to reduce stigma in schools; there needs to be an active promotion of dignity and respect. She argues for policies and practices that foster strong school-family-child relationships and show children how much they are valued in the classroom (as opposed to assuming that families don't value their children's education).

It's our firm belief that to support children you have to support parents. In addition, access to services is affected by how parents perceive they are viewed by those offering support. Stigma and shame reduces take up of help. Parents have to feel safe in order to effectively use support. Parents often feel shame about living in poverty and go to some lengths to mask their family's circumstances from school staff. This has led to a project in Scotland called *1 in 5: Raising Awareness of Child Poverty*, which worked in schools to help school staff understand the causes and consequences of poverty; reduce the costs of the school day; and reduce poverty related stigma for young people and their families.

Luton school staff work with our colleagues across the Council, charities and voluntary sector to support families living in poverty. We've a great interview with a SENCo and family worker on page 4 about their experiences of supporting children and families. We'd love to hear more from you about your thoughts on the issues raised in these articles, good practice, and ideas for next steps.



What do school staff think?

Based on your experience, what is the impact of childhood poverty on pupil outcomes?

SENCO: What we find is that a lot of our children who are living in poverty don't have as many of the experiences to hook their learning on to. So for example, I've got Year 6 this year, and they've had two years out with the lockdown. We were talking about something the other day and one of the boys said that he's never been to the zoo. That's an experience that you just assume people would have had, but he hasn't experienced that. I think their knowledge and understanding of different places is really limited.

The children also struggle a lot with their vocabulary and I know there is research and statistics about the tens and thousands more words that children have when they've come from a family who read a lot or work in certain jobs, and are not living in poverty and so on. Some of our families in poverty, are working and trying really hard to make money but are in quite low paid jobs, which means that the time and attention that they can give to their chil-

about what's going on at home. Sometimes it can also present as not having the right things on the right day, forgetting homework, maybe things coming back to school in not necessarily the way they were sent home, for example, we've had children's homework books come back to school and they are mouldy because the house the isn't heated or isn't insulated properly. Before I became a SENCO, I didn't realise that if you don't develop your gross motor skills they impact your fine motor skills, so when I had these children who couldn't join their handwriting or had messy writing that they couldn't read, I thought why and later realised that they can't ride a bike, or kick a ball in a straight line, and I was like "whoa, this is a bigger thing". We find that with some of our children, their motor skills are impacted, because outside of school, they don't really go out and play because they haven't got the space or where they live isn't very safe, so they are not climbing and jumping and skipping, and when they come up to juniors they can be quite uncoordinated, and their handwriting is a barrier the at

In the classroom it can present as children not being present all the time, whether that's attendance, or being awake, alert and functioning so that they are able to access what's happening in the classroom, which is strongly affected by if the children are tired, hungry or distracted, because they're worrying about what's going on at home.

dren to do things like reading and homework is impacted. Their extended and wider reading isn't as great because they have fewer opportunities to access things like the library, as it is not a priority. We're always trying to get the children reading, by giving them as many books as possible. We also have a spine across the school where each year group will read three books as a minimum, and so by the time they leave us they will have read 12 novels for their age group.

Would you consider children's experiences of childhood poverty, to be an additional need?

SENCO: I think it is an additional barrier to learning. It's something that can get in the way of how well children can access the curriculum. In the classroom it can present as children not being present all the time, whether that's attendance, or being awake, alert and functioning so that they are able to access what's happening in the classroom, which is strongly affected by if the children are tired, hungry or distracted, because they're worrying

that point. As a result we put things in place to support this.

I feel it also presents as emotional, and as the relationship with the children and staff develops, you may notice that they are a little bit withdrawn or teary on certain days and through discussions with them you find out what is wrong so that you can support the child and their family.

Given the disadvantage that some children will face at school as a result of the circumstances they are experiencing, how do you as staff, provide opportunities in school so that all children have an equitable experience of learning and education?

SENCO: Within school, we always try to create ways to enable the children to have the same starting point, so our whole school priority in our school's development plan this year, is about vocabulary and using vocabulary for writing. Whenever we are looking at a book or we're starting a new unit, before we give the children the model text, we pick out and teach them the vocabulary that they

Advantage and disadvantage in the classroom

Children's patterns of thinking, attention, regulation, and language will all be influenced by their experiences in the family including their experience in relation to poverty and inequality.

There are many individual, community and group based factors affecting the advantage and disadvantage in the classroom that different pupils will experience. Research suggests that ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES) and gender are the three characteristics that affect educational experiences and outcomes the most; and SES is the largest driver of differences in performance (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011). However, our experiences will be affected by all of these aspects of our identities, and more, and how they interact. An exploration of these complex issues is beyond the scope of this article.

Our early experiences of the availability of resources affect our behaviour and decision making in many ways. For example, academic psychologists Sheehy-Skeffington and Rea summarising their literature review note that 'People low in socio-economic status [SES] may be more likely to choose smaller rewards now over bigger rewards later; leading to decisions that are damaging in the long term.' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017, p. 2). They also note that people with a lower SES tend to have lower: self-worth, belief in their ability to learn, sense of school belonging and trust in others.

Factors such as maternal malnutrition or elevated stress levels during pregnancy, likely to be linked to living in poverty, have a lasting impact upon the architecture of the developing baby's brain. Stanford Psychologist, Anthony Wagner, coined the term 'neurocognitive privilege' to describe the ways in which people who are not stressed are better able to draw on their memory systems to behave more optimally in their everyday lives (Burford, 2020). Other

executive function skills (skills that support proactive self-regulation and goal directed behaviour) are also linked to children and young people's experience of resources and certainty/uncertainty about resources. For example, Sheehy-Skeffington and Rea's research review found a consistent relationship between two key skills for learning in school age children:

In particular, the poorer one's socioeconomic background, the worse one is likely to perform on measures of selective attention and inhibitory control, both of which are important for focusing on a goal and resisting distracting alternatives that might derail one from achieving it. (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea, 2017)

Causes may include the way brain architecture is impacted through developmental experiences and links with mother's verbal ability. Childhood nutrition is linked to impaired engagement in education (British Psychological Society, 2021). In addition, adapting a thinking style in the face of scarcity and uncertainty away from future gains towards immediate rewards should be understood as a rational response to a person's experience (British Psychological Society, 2021). In addition to past experience, current experiences of poverty and financial insecurity can affect children and young people's ability to attend to the here and now. They may be preoccupied by

family stress and this is discussed in our interview with school staff, page 4. One educational blogger summarised the response to the research as follows: *These findings suggest that poverty doesn't just mean dealing with a lack of physical resources, but also a diminution of cognitive resources. But it also prompts more immediate action for those working directly with students living in poverty. In their conclusion, the authors suggest that, in the same way that we're*



wary of imposing monetary taxes on the poor, so should we be careful of imposing cognitive taxes upon them. Instead of engaging students in lengthy conversations about the importance of homework, or prompting them to write detailed plans about how they're going to manage their time (both cognitively demanding tasks), perhaps we should be focussing on simple interventions that aim to reduce the cognitive burden, such as scheduling text message reminders to help them stay on top of their studies. (Lovell, 2018)

One helpful model to use when supporting these children and young people is the Cognitive Load Theory. Put simply, we can only process so much information at once. The theory explains how processing new information can result in 'cognitive load' on working memory which can affect how much information is transferred to long-term memory, and therefore learning outcomes. Therefore, because working memory is highly limited, learning experiences should be designed to reduce the 'cognitive load' of tasks in order to support transfer to long-term memory (unlimited). Ideas to reduce 'cognitive load': providing worked examples when introducing a new process before moving onto completion tasks (partially completed tasks with gaps to fill in); avoiding irrelevant information including reading out text that is provided because we read at different paces; avoiding a student having to switch their attention between different formats (e.g. visual picture and written) (Inner Drive, 2022).

Another area of consistent research findings is the relationship between poverty and low SES and language skills. Language skills are key to school readiness as well as other skills such as behaviour regulation and mental health. The link between poverty and language skills is so strong that it led the All Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and Language Difficulties to recommend that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds should be given additional speech and language support in the early years (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2013). Is this an acknowledgement that poverty is a barrier to education (a special educational need?) in itself? They also went on to recommend that children referred to mental health services have their speech and language needs assessed.

What makes us healthy?

Good health matters, to individuals and to society. But we don't all have the same opportunities to live healthy lives.

To understand why, we need to look at the bigger picture:

- Good work
- Our surroundings
- Money and resources
- Housing
- The food we eat
- Education and skills
- Transport
- Family, friends and communities

The healthy life expectancy gap between the most and least deprived areas in England is over **18** YEARS

Find out more: [health.org.uk/what-makes-us-healthy](https://www.health.org.uk/what-makes-us-healthy)

The Health Foundation © 2010 The Health Foundation

Do rewards and consequences disadvantage those living in poverty?

We thought about first writing about the evidence of the impact of rewards and consequence systems on reducing intrinsic motivation and increased stress responses for all children, but the purpose of this is to ask are these responses amplified for children who are living in poverty? These are based on real circumstances for children in Luton, not real children.

Lucas is in Year 1. He lives with his 8 year old brother & parents in a flat. His parents work shifts with Amazon. He enjoys playing with his three cousins. His aunt & uncle also work for Amazon. There is always one adult to look after them all and it is fun sleeping in two places with his cousins & brother. They can't afford to go out, they don't have a garden or outdoor space and it is hard for one adult to take them to the park nearby. He loves playing on the X-box with his cousins & brother. At school he knows he is 'naughty'. He knows he can't sit still like the others and often misses playtime because he is 'naughty'. He spent the afternoon this week sitting in the head teacher's office after he was 'naughty' at playtime, but he enjoys fighting his brother & cousins like that. The head teacher told him he was going to be excluded, but no-one answered the phones because they were working.

Kyle shares a bedroom with his older sister, and two younger brothers (two bunkbeds). His mum works full-time shift work and has the smaller room and his dad works away. Kyle and his sister help getting the younger brothers to school. Kyle is often late. He often doesn't do his homework; he has no space to work, he needs help and is too tired. He tries to ignore how he feels about 'attendance' and 'homework' celebration awards and assemblies.

Aysha works really hard at school and tries hard to earn praise points. She has never got any behaviour points. Aysha always wants to tell her parents when she has done well as she knows it is important to them. She doesn't tell anyone that she hears the conversations about how her parents are struggling with paying bills, but she does try to eat less. She got her first behaviour point for not concentrating in a lesson and really doesn't want to tell her parents and upset them. Aysha worries about getting detention – she would miss her school bus and her parents would have to come and get her – she knows that fuel prices are really high at the moment.

Neither Aysha nor Kyle share their circumstances with schools because they know the 'rules' are for everyone and they keep themselves to themselves when it comes to interacting with the adults in school as they worry what might be thought or happen if they shared too much.

Ways to get involved....

- Join the conversation: email your views psychologyservice@luton.gov.uk, talk to your educational psychologist, tweet us your views [@lutonpsychology](https://twitter.com/lutonpsychology) #Luton2040 #povertytoflourishing
- Want to contribute to the next newsletter? Get in touch, as above.
- Want to review the book 'Reaching the Unseen Children: Practical Strategies for Closing the Stubborn Attainment Gaps in Disadvantaged Groups' by Jean Gross? Please contact dense.burford@luton.gov.uk for a FREE copy of the book if you can get a review to us by September.
- Have a suggestion for next book to be reviewed? Let us know!
- Want to review training or events? Let us know!
- Interested in working towards a set of good practice guidelines for schools and educational settings? Please get in touch. psychologyservice@luton.gov.uk



Luton Council has set out its ambition that Luton should be a vibrant town where people achieve their aspirations and no one should live in poverty by 2040 (Luton Council, 2020). Luton is a town of thriving communities and culture with many assets. Work by the 2040 team identified our young population as one of our strengths, as well as our thriving voluntary and charity sector. The challenges are also steep, we have one of the highest poverty rates in the country and weaker educational attainment than other parts of the country. Luton Council have adopted the Minimum Income Standard model as a way to track poverty. By this measure, in 2020 an estimated third of households in Luton had a below decent standard of living, including 12% that are unable to afford basic needs (Luton 2020). A further 28% were above the financial quality of life line but by a small margin and vulnerable to a change in circumstances.

In 2019, 46% of children in Luton were living in poverty, up from 33% in 2015; the seventh highest rate of any local authority in the country and the second highest outside of London (Growing Luton Together, 2019). The impact of this is clear to see. Children living in Luton's most deprived areas are on average 15 months behind those from more affluent backgrounds in their vocabulary skills by the age of five, with these skills shown to be an important early indicator of progress in later life (Luton Council, 2020). The strategic response are set out in a town wide vision for Luton 2020 – 2040, A place to thrive click [here](#). The target outcomes are below (see image).

We spoke to Jane Malcolm, Head of Policy, Strategy and Partnership Luton 2040 and formerly Chief Executive of the Level Trust. She told us that all school staff and those working with children should have training to help them understand poverty. She challenged services to consider what they are already doing towards Luton 2040 goals and how their service or setting has changed as a result of Luton 2040.

She challenged us to work with families, young people, educational professionals, community groups and our council colleagues to develop ideas about what it would mean to be a **Luton 2040 school / educational setting**; a school/nursery/college which helps break down the barriers discussed in this newsletter and more. We know there is good practice in our schools and other educational settings and we know we haven't been able to hear all the voices that needed to be heard in this newsletter. If you want to get involved, please email psychologyservice@luton.gov.uk

Your community needs YOU!



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Thank you

Thank you to those who contributed to this edition including Rachel Caldwell, Denise Burford, Tanisha Esbrand, Chelsea Markwell, Jo Slifi, Steph Nash, Chris Avis, & our interviewees. :-)

Coming up in the next edition...

- Interview with a young person about her experiences being filmed for a programme about growing up in poverty
- Interview with Jennie White, new Chief Executive of the Level Trust
- A book review from one of our readers (see page 1)!

If you would like to contribute to our next edition, please get in touch psychologyservice@luton.gov.uk

