The role of schools in alleviating child poverty through food banks

A vital but unrecognised service

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Abstract

Schools in the UK have adapted to a context where 4.5 million children live in poverty, including by opening food banks providing free food for families living with food insecurity. Stepping into this new role as a provider of food involves schools moving beyond their core purpose, although this work remains unfunded and unrecognised in accountability measures. Using data from case studies of six primary schools which operate a food bank, this paper explores how schools have become responsibilised by record levels of child poverty to address the immediate needs of the child and to reduce the longer-term impact of food insecurity on the wider family. We explore the reasons why food banks located in schools are effective in helping families, and how they impact on children's learning. Teachers' uncertainty about this new role is also discussed. We conclude that while the schools have a positive impact, their work should not absolve the state from responsibility for reducing child poverty.

Keywords: child poverty; food banks in schools; primary school; ethic of care; policy vacuum; food insecurity

Introduction

In the UK, 4.5 million children are living in poverty, according to government figures, with children in lone parent families, in larger families, from some minority background and in some regions more likely to experience poverty.[1] This figure, representing 31 per cent of children, is a record high. School staff have been keenly aware of this increase and responded by providing for families in numerous ways during the cost-of-living crisis of the early 2020s, such as through free breakfasts and uniform, and subsidising extracurricular activities.[2] One common response has been to open a food bank, providing free or heavily subsidised food to families on the school site. In a 2023 survey, 79 per cent of schools in England were giving out food parcels or vouchers, or operating a food bank.[3] These food banks (also called food pantries) often open weekly for a set time, allowing parents to choose some food to take home. The food is often donated by food-sharing organisations who reallocate food waste from commercial businesses such as supermarkets. This provision is distinct from free breakfast clubs and free

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school meals in that it is intended to help the whole family, not just the school child. Contrary to their name, many food banks also include other goods, such as toiletries, clothing, shoes and baby equipment.

It is estimated that there are 4000 food banks in schools in England, which is more than the number of food banks in the community.[4] This raises questions over the role and purposes of schools within wider society, as they step into this more welfare-oriented role. In this paper, using interview data collected as part of a project on food banks in primary schools, we consider the reasons why schools have stepped beyond their core purpose of education to provide food for families in need.[5] We argue that schools have become responsibilised by a situation where children arrive at school experiencing the multiple effects of poverty, including hunger. In the face of a retreating welfare state, schools as frontline services have taken on the role of providing food to families and are effective at doing this work. While they recognise that this is not the school's main purpose, teachers and school leaders feel morally obligated to help, and it is this ethics of care which is prioritised over concerns about accountability measures. This raises significant questions as to the purpose of schools within a society which is failing to provide adequate food for children, and at the same time failing to recognise the work done by schools to address the impact of poverty.

Context: austerity and the cost-of-living crisis

While schools have a long history of providing for families in poverty through various means, the use of food banks in schools is a relatively new phenomenon, linked to rising needs caused by government cuts in welfare since 2010. Austerity policies introduced by the coalition government (2010-15) after the 2008 global financial crash saw cuts amounting to £14.3 billion across public services, including education, welfare and local authority funding.[6] Families living in poverty were some of the worst affected, simultaneously facing lower welfare payments whilst also having reduced access to services such as Sure Start.[7] The two-child benefit cap, introduced in 2017 to deter those receiving welfare payments from having larger families, is thought to be responsible for 470,000 children living in poverty.[8] Austerity resulted in a dramatic increase in food bank usage. In 2010 Trussell (the largest food bank provider) had only 35 food banks, but by 2019 there were 1200, supplying 1.9 million food parcels.[9]

From early 2020, the Covid pandemic highlighted to the wider public the role that schools play in alleviating poverty amongst families, with children from low-income families losing access to free school meals (FSM) whilst schools were closed to most.[10] The issue attracted media coverage. News stories featured head teachers delivering food parcels to families, and frustrations with an inadequate system to provide families entitled to FSM with supermarket vouchers.[11] School staff themselves reported that

their focus had shifted, and that the welfare of children and families had become of greater concern than learning.[12]

The Covid pandemic was followed immediately by the cost-of-living crisis, a sharp increase in the price of food and energy from late 2021 resulting in increasing inflation.[13] It coincided with the end of a £20 per week Universal Credit increase introduced during the pandemic, leaving families facing increased costs and a lower income. By September 2022, the proportion of families reporting that they were skipping meals or going hungry due to food costs had reached 26 per cent, exceeding the figure during lockdown in 2020.[14] Schools themselves faced rising costs, with 80 per cent having to make cuts to afford rising utility bills.[15] Nonetheless, half of schools reported that money was being spent on food, uniform and other goods for families in need; many stated that reduced wider support left families with few other avenues for help.[16]

The research study

A qualitative case study approach was adopted, focusing on six primary schools across England as 'telling cases'.[17] Sampling was purposive with schools required to be operating a food bank or similar provision (e.g. food pantry, food cupboard), and schools were recruited via social media posts and the researchers' networks.[18] Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants (n=15) across the schools with a range of staff interviewed depending on their involvement with the food bank.[19] Participant information is shown in Table 1 on page 50.

Ethical approval was granted by the UCL ethics committee and the BERA (British Educational Research Association) ethical guidelines followed, with participants, schools and localities anonymised and informed consent given by all interviewees.[20] Particular care was taken in asking staff not to identify families to ensure their confidentiality, and data was stored on a university network to ensure privacy and that the research complied with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). A £50 voucher towards the food provision was offered after interviews had taken place and therefore did not function as an incentive for participation. Nonetheless, the donation was regarded as ethically important by the researchers given the time the participants dedicated to the study and the resourcing implications of running a food bank.

Following interviews, data was transcribed and thematically analysed, drawing on the research questions and main themes identified in the literature.[21] Codes were initially generated individually, with both researchers then meeting to further discuss their interpretation of the data and finalise codes and themes. The overall findings are presented in our book on the projects.[22] Here we set out findings relating to the purpose of schooling, demonstrating with the example of food banks how schools have been forced to serve broader purposes beyond education during an era of increasing child poverty.

School and context	Participant pseudonym	Role
Booth – community primary in deprived, multiethnic area of East London	Michael	Head teacher
	Matt	Manager of food pantry
	Michelle	Chef
	Mark	Head chef
	Marianne	Support staff
	Martha	Year 6 teacher
Lansbury – community primary in deprived part of Midlands city	Andrea	Head teacher
Peabody – academy primary in outskirts of London	Lorraine	Head teacher
	Lesley	Deputy head teacher
Rowntree – Church of England primary in deprived area of the North of England	Charlotte	Head teacher
	Catherine	Year 6 teacher
Twining – community primary in deprived, ethnically mixed area of North London	Sasha	Head teacher
	Sophie	Year 2 teacher
	Sarah	Support staff
Webb – community primary in socially mixed area of North London	Grace	Head teacher
	Genevieve	Deputy head teacher

Table 1: Schools and participants

Findings: the importance and impact of school food banks

We begin by exploring how food banks *in schools* were an effective means of alleviating the impacts of child poverty upon learning; this was a key reason why schools were stepping into this new responsibility.

Why have food banks in schools*?*

One of the questions driving the research was whether food banks *in schools* offered particular advantages for families, given the large number that already exist in communities run by charities, and therefore why schools were operating them. We found that there were distinct advantages for families of having a food bank in school,

according to school staff. In the interviews, participants discussed some of the barriers to families accessing food banks beyond the school, including the need for a referral and the stigma associated with community food banks. Furthermore, to go elsewhere involved additional journeys, often on public transport:

> Lots of our families haven't got the capacity to go somewhere else. So for example, if you don't have a car, public transport is very expensive for an adult. So here, they have to come here to pick up their child or collect their child. (Grace, Webb)

> You had to be referred [to other food banks]. And it was really difficult, and also our parents – I'll go on about that lack of trust and they don't trust anybody. But they have that trust with us. (Sasha, Twining)

As well as convenience, trust was integral to many of the families using the school food banks and participants spoke about the close relationship between the primary school and parents, enabling families to share their challenges with school staff. Regular contact with parents afforded school staff an insight into the challenges facing families, meaning that they could proactively direct support at those in need:

> We see parents every single day … Which means they can go, 'Miss, can I just have a word with you? I'm really struggling with …', or 'Any spare uniform anywhere? Because I just can't afford …'. Those opportunities for informal chats which lead to us understanding the issues far better, seeking ways to help. That is a very unique position for primary schools to be in. (Andrea, Lansbury)

Through offering immediate support schools have the potential to prevent families' hardship from worsening. This is particularly important given the large number of families who experience food insecurity yet do not access community food banks.[23] Schools provide timely, accessible and ongoing assistance in a familiar setting.

Schools' in-depth knowledge of families also enabled them to tailor support, ensuring that the way in which help was offered met the needs of parents and promoted dignity. For example, whilst many schools operated food banks openly, placing food on tables for families to freely select, others gave food parcels discretely or followed the individual requests of parents:

> Some families can be quiet, some are really open and some are quite happy for their children to walk out with their bags of food and to them, that's fine. Other people, 'No, what's the quietest part of the day?'. And they really want this completely under cover and that's absolutely fine; it's what works for them. (Lesley, Peabody)

Thus, school food banks were an effective and destigmatising method of providing food for hungry families. The schools were also motivated by the impact on children's learning.

Impact on learning

Whilst respondents could not quantify the impact of the food bank upon educational outcomes for pupils, all spoke of the positive effect on learning. For many, this could be seen in greater attention and concentration during lessons due to reduced hunger:

> I think it then helps the children learn, I think if the children have got a full belly they're more willing to concentrate. If they've not got full bellies they're tired. I think we do – the food banks - do definitely help children. (Marianne, Booth)
>
> It's just not being able to concentrate. You know what it's like when you have nothing to eat and you've got nothing in your belly, you can't concentrate. (Sophie, Twining)

Addressing the immediate, physiological sensations of hunger and its impact on concentration was one mechanism through which the food bank was seen to help. Another route was proposed by some school staff, relating to reductions in family stress. Many interviews featured (anonymous) discussions of the difficult and complex lives of families, and the high levels of anxiety endured by parents struggling to feed their families, and children who were witness to these challenges. Participants asserted that these wider concerns around poverty further impaired children's concentration and prevented parents from supporting learning at home:

> The last thing a child is going to be able to do is to sit there and concentrate on their work – one, if they're hungry, two, if they're worried 'Is Dad coming home tonight? Is he going to start arguing with Mum?'. They've got all these other sort of worries and concerns. The last thing they're going to be able to do is to sit and pay attention to a bit of history about Henry VIII and his six wives. It's just not going to happen. (Sasha, Twining)
>
> 'We've had a nice dinner together and then we sat down and we did a little bit of colouring … and then we read a story.' Whereas before, that parent would be 'So I haven't got food, what am I going to do? What am I going to cook? I need to go and ring someone to get some money or I need to go'. It's taking that away and allowing them to parent. (Lesley, Peabody)

Through reducing stress and worry for parents, food banks could support children's learning by enabling parents to engage in activities such as reading with their child, and reducing the 'trickle down' to children from parents.[24] Thus providing food to the whole family is positive in a way that simply feeding the child at school is not. However, as we examine in the second section of findings, there were also disadvantages and uncertainty about schools' role in helping families.

Findings: policy context and schools' wider purposes

In this section we examine the wider context whereby school food banks remained unrecognised and unfunded despite their positive impact, and the reasons why schools still operated them in this context.

The policy vacuum: unrecognised and unfunded provision

Although our participants were generally very positive about the impact of their food banks, they were clear that these initiatives were not motivated by policy, but by an ethics of care (which we return to below). There is little guidance on what schools should do to alleviate the impacts of child poverty, beyond free school meal provision and pupil premium funding. As such, we describe this situation as a *policy vacuum*, which mirrors the 'persistent lack of a policy response or effective policy framework taking responsibility for food insecurity' in society more generally.[25]

This lack of policy matters because operating a food bank takes up a great deal of time and has budgetary implications, and yet there is no funding for these activities. Head teachers explained the costs of equipment and staff time, and how they needed to engage in fundraising activities:

> I guess it is about that time, we're reaching well beyond our core purpose as a school and when resources are stretched to deliver even our core purpose to try and do the over and above is also a challenge. So we do a lot of fundraising to make sure that we can bring the funds in to keep the staffing levels adequate to be able to deliver these over and above things. Also storage space and space is at a premium, so I think it's all budgetary pressures that are the negatives. (Michael, Booth).

These comments reinforce survey data from 2023 which suggested that half of schools were 'reducing spending elsewhere in their budget specifically to accommodate the cost of the additional support they are providing to pupils and their households'.[26] As Michael recognises here, 'reaching beyond our core purpose' is difficult when funding is insufficient to cover the basics and fundraising is necessary for these 'over and above things' like food banks.

Furthermore, staff were aware of the lack of official recognition for their roles in addressing family poverty. The two main accountability mechanisms in operation in England – the statutory assessment system and the inspectorate, Ofsted – were seen as failing to relate to the beneficial impact of the school on families. The head teacher at Rowntree Primary School, Catherine, argued that their food bank 'won't have an impact on our SATs results or things like that that might put us in a league table', but that it improved relationships. Other head teachers commented on Ofsted:

> [Ofsted were] very complimentary about everything we do, but they're not interested in your food bank. And actually, they would be almost critical of it if you talked about that, trying to 'make an excuse' – in their words – for other things. So it's almost like you've got to just do it and not talk about it to the people who are holding you to account. Because they would say 'well, that's distracting you from reading results in Year 6'. (Andrea, Lansbury)

This lack of recognition is significant in a context where Ofsted inspections and test results are high stakes for schools.[27] These head teachers fear that their work with the school food bank will be seen as a distraction, or child poverty as an 'excuse' for their results, so that, as Andrea comments, you 'just do it and not talk about it to the people who are holding you to account'. This continued commitment to the food banks, in the face of budget pressures and a lack of recognition, was a key feature of our case studies, where many participants were highly committed to this provision, as we discuss in the next section.

Questions of purpose and an ethics of care

The reasons why schools operate food banks are complex, but our findings suggest there were moral and ethical justifications which over-rode all other considerations. These were at times presented as human and emotional responses or as the only possible solution in the face of a retreating welfare state.

Participants explained how food banks were related to their professional sense of care for children. They simply could not accept children facing hunger:

> If any child comes in and says they've not eaten, or if they come in and there's something not right, the staff will go, 'What did you have for breakfast today?' and then they're scooped and [we] feed them. (Charlotte, Rowntree)

> As little as they are, they were coming to school without eating. We've had the odd child faint and then teachers come down for an apple, or orange, or whatever I've got in here. (Michelle, Booth)

As head teachers explained, caring is a key part of teaching in a primary school, and feeding children, both immediately and through the food bank, is a part of that care:

> It's like we're humans and our natural instinct is to care. That's why I came into this profession. It's a caring profession. (Sasha, Twining)

> We do it because there's a need, but it's not our job to feed the children in the community. Our job is to look after them and educate them and care for them while they're at school, not to feed them at the weekends or holidays, but we can't help but be concerned about that. (Catherine, Rowntree)

As we see in Catherine's comment, caring is so intrinsic to teaching that 'we can't help but be concerned'; they have no choice but to try to address children's hunger. But, as we also see in her comment, there is an awareness of the complexities of responsibility for this hunger. Ambivalent feelings about moving beyond education and undertaking work 'way beyond my remit' (Sasha, Twining) were a common thread among the participants:

> I'm happy to do it [run the food bank] and I enjoy doing it, but it's not acceptable and it makes me really sad that we have to. But we will carry on doing it. Because like we shouldn't have to offer free wraparound [care]. We shouldn't have to write letters about housing. We shouldn't have to worry about being closed because of the strike day, that children aren't going to be warm. It's completely unacceptable. (Grace, Booth)

Through these reflections on the school's role, several participants came to the conclusion that despite their doubts, there was simply no other option for schools:

> It's really hard, isn't it? Probably not [schools shouldn't have them] but someone's got to do it, haven't they? Unfortunately, at the moment, we live in a time where they're needed and if we don't do it, who will? We have the children for the majority of their days with us; this is their safe space and if we are lucky that we have staff and parents who can afford to contribute to that, so we shouldn't have to do it but it needs to happen. (Lorraine, Peabody)

Thus the school, as the frontline service that sees children every day, simply has to offer a food bank in the absence of other support for families in need. As Lorraine says, it simply 'needs to happen', so they get on with it. We conceptualise this as an ethics of care, built on compassion and emotion.[28] In this we align with perspectives from social geographers Cloke, May and Williams who argue public food banks can potentially be conceptualised as 'spaces of care'.[29]

Conclusion

Our research suggests that schools running food banks are an effective way of addressing the impacts of child poverty, in that they provide easily accessed and non-stigmatising ways of feeding families. But this situation is not without costs: the burden of poverty falls more heavily on some schools than others, potentially exacerbating inequities between schools. Importantly, this provision is also precarious, dependent on donations and goodwill, rather than a formally recognised and funded part of the welfare system.

In some ways this research tells us a positive story of schools who care about more than just results and Ofsted inspections, who reject this framing of their purpose and instead value improvements in children's learning and participation, and relationships

between home and school. Caring about children who are hungry, it seems, overrides the other purposes of the school, at least some of time. But our findings also lead us to concerns about the precarity of this provision, and inequities between schools. Schools have become responsibilised to deal with child poverty, without any support or recognition. Their ethics of care and hard work should not absolve the state of its responsibility to provide an adequate standard of nutrition for children, whatever their circumstances. Child poverty is a problem that only governments can fix, through benefit reform for example, not an issue that schools can resolve on their own.

Schools are an important part of alleviating the everyday suffering of children living in poverty, but they cannot address the long-term cause of food insecurity. Thus, just as the state supports food banks more widely, we would argue that schools should be supported to provide food for families in need in a non-stigmatising and efficient way, and this work should be recognised as a key contribution of the school to the community it serves.

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Notes

1. This figure relates to relative poverty, after household income. See Child Poverty Action Group, 'Child poverty reaches record high – failure to tackle it will be "a betrayal of Britain's children"', London, CPAG, 2024: https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-reaches-record-high-failure-tackle-it-will-be-betrayal-britains-children; and Department for Work and Pensions, 'Households below average income (HBAI) statistics', London, GOV.UK, 2025.

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26. Lucas et al., 2023, *op. cit.* p8.

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