



"It's like dropping a stone in a pond and watching all the ripples spreading out from it"

Local Matters

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | OCTOBER 2023

An evaluation of the Local Matters participatory research and teaching programme: How has the participatory methodology worked and what has been the impact on education policy and practice?

Manchester Central Foodbank, Dr Liz Gregory, Sandra Clare

Project summary

This report presents findings from an evaluation of Local Matters, a participatory research and teaching programme based at the University of Manchester.

The programme is led by Dr Carl Emery and Dr Louisa Dawes who work alongside head teachers and other school staff to examine how poverty is understood and responded to both locally and nationally.

This report, funded by UK Research and Innovation, presents evidence of how the participatory research in the Local Matters model works and illuminates the impact of the programme on education policy and practice at both school- and area-level.

Background

There are 4.2 million under-16s living in poverty, representing 29% of all UK children. More than a third (34.3 per cent) of children in the North-West of England are living in poverty before housing costs, the equivalent of ten children in a classroom of 30. Of the 27 parliamentary constituencies in Greater Manchester, 23 have child poverty rates of over 30%.

However, this only tells part of the story as the child poverty rate differs considerably within Greater Manchester, for example 45% in the City of Manchester, compared to 22% in neighbouring local authority, Trafford. These differences also are also highly pronounced between neighbourhoods and wards within local authorities.

It has been well documented that pupils living in poverty experience educational failure, known as the attainment gap, when compared to their wealthier peers and this seriously impacts on children, families and society in manifold ways.

(Data from Greater Manchester Poverty Action and the Child Poverty Action Group, 2022)



One participant said:

Absolutely transformative... the [Local Matters] programme is like dropping a stone into a pond and watching all the ripples coming from that. And each new cohort adds to the ripple effect... and there are lots more ripples that I can't see yet but they're there

Participant B



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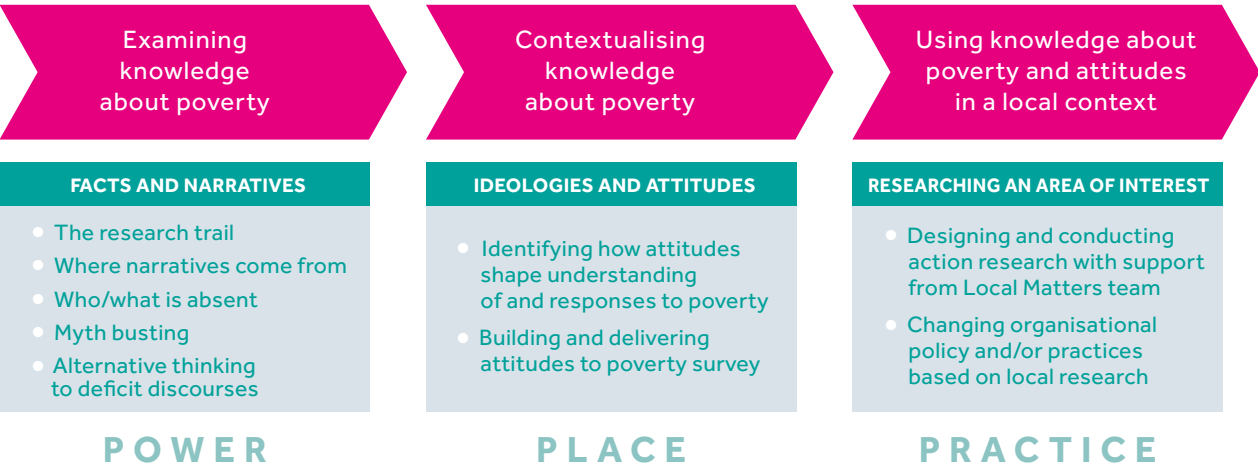
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The Local Matters participatory research and teaching model

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 fixing the attainment gap through the Pupil Premium (PP) grant via short-term interventions in the classroom.

Local Matters is critical of this approach because it positions the child as an atomised individual whom schools can repair 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 professional autonomy of teachers, school leaders and the broader district policy actors.

Taught Sessions + Attitudinal Survey + Action Research



The Local Matters programme, built on Nancy Fraser’s (1995) Parity of Participation model (representation, resources, recognition) is a twelve month participatory research programme through which head teachers and their colleagues critically explore existing literature and data about poverty, co-construct a school survey of attitudes towards poverty, design co-enquiry action research projects, and bring knowledge and learning together to develop school policy and practice.

It is a collaborative, relational, approach, developed with educators from the beginning, that places negotiated partnership, equality and the critical illumination of power as the foundational values for the teaching, learning and research developed.

Adapted from Social Mobility and Attitudes to Child Poverty in Schools in England: Findings from the Local Matters Attitudinal Survey
BERA Conference 2023



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Methodology

We asked two research questions:

RQ1

How has the methodology of participatory research in the Local Matters programme worked?

RQ2

How has Local Matters impacted on education policy and practice in relation to poverty?

A mixed methodology was adopted. An online survey was conducted with school staff (n=31) who were either current or previous participants of the Local Matters programme. Five respondents elected to take part in a follow-up focus group. Additionally, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with the three-area education leads.

Participants were drawn from three local areas in the North-West of England (Cheshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester).



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Findings

RQ1 How has the methodology of participatory research in the Local Matters programme worked?

This question was explored to illuminate the participatory methodology from two perspectives: participation between university and school staff on the programme with an emphasis on professional learning and at a school level between teachers, pupils and their families.

Key Findings:

90%

reported the social justice research projects had a huge impact on their own professional learning and development.

80%

found the space to problematise their own school context very good or outstanding.

88%

reported a huge impact on their own professional learning and development following the attitudes to poverty survey.

- The Local Matters model empowered school leaders, with a more accurate understanding of poverty in their specific contexts, to make changes in their schools based on local knowledge.
- Rather than the research being done to pupils and families, their daily lived experiences were shared, and shaped co-enquiry projects in schools.
- It nurtured new forms of professional learning and development as well as co-creating networks of local poverty communities of practice amongst teachers and their schools.
- School leaders developed their own understanding of the 'whole child' through family conversations and creating day diaries based on shadowing pupils to experience the full school day in their shoes.

The programme provided school leaders, within a trusting environment, the space and time to discuss how poverty is experienced in their schools and the prevailing attitudes to poverty held by staff within their schools. It became a safe, critical, space.



What participants said:

Session one, the myth-busting... people didn't know. I learned a lot in terms of the facts. I really think that session enables people to challenge misconceptions and gave them the confidence to do so... that's really powerful.

Participant A

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.

Participant B

For me it's been creating the research projects based on what I thought would be beneficial to the children, not just for me to go into a research project and get you know, whatever out of it, and because I think we get involved more, they're a bit more engaged because it's a bit more real to them.

Participant C

Local Matters changed my vocabulary. I've started consciously trying to avoid 'disadvantage' and instead use 'underserved'. Let's try and change the narrative to a more positive one.

Participant 4



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Findings (continued)

RQ2 How has Local Matters impacted on education policy and practice in relation to poverty?

Data for this question were illuminated in participants' responses related to how the knowledge and understanding from the Local Matters research and teaching programme has shaped new ways of working.

Key Findings:



- The programme powerfully shaped area-wide education policy regarding how poverty is measured and resourced in schools through the enactment of new, localised metrics. In one Local Authority this resulted in a £1.8m investment for 2024, a substantial policy change that will have an enormously positive impact on the lives of children and their families in poverty.
- Helped participants to view poverty from a different perspective: a social justice lens rather than a deficit gaze. This included engaging with parents/carers and children and to value local knowledge to reshape school practices such as afterschool clubs, parents' evenings and curricula.
- Provided valuable knowledge to schools in the form of academic resources, survey data and highly localised data on poverty levels within the school community.
- Developed new pedagogic models for more equitable school experiences, including the restructuring of the school day with soft starts, and the teaching of Maths and English later in the day to ensure greater inclusivity for all pupils.

Taking part in the programme has made participants more sensitive to the needs of others and more mindful of the huge impact that poverty plays in the lives of school communities.



What participants said:

People are uncertain what to say about poverty but the programme gave them the knowledge and confidence in what words to use and what questions to ask.

Participant B

It was an opportunity to really look at poverty, because it's something that people talk about without actually understanding: what it is, what it looks like, how it's different in different localities

Participant A

It made me go back and question my own values, maybe go back and question my own preconceived ideas, potential stereotypes and prejudices. So, it's really made me stop and think and make sure, (for example) don't confuse poverty with neglect, because they are two very, very different things

Participant 3

The impact on the curriculum has been huge. One school used local maps in a history lesson, looking at old and new to see how the area had changed...it's nice for the children to learn more about their area and to see it reflected in the curriculum they study

Participant B



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Implications and recommendations

Findings suggest the Local Matters team has successfully co-created a participatory research and teaching model that, driven by equitable values, has had a transformative effect on personal and professional practice, and school policy and practice (both locally and district wide).

- The co-produced attitudes to poverty survey seems to be a central process that acts as a tool of enquiry, self-reflection, knowledge generation and research application.
- The collective tasks of debating discourses and unpicking poverty-related theories and myths fosters deeply reflective practice.
- The acquisition of knowledge and resources illuminates issues of social justice contextualised to the participants own school communities.

Local Matters has empowered school staff and leaders to be advocates and critical voices for the local whilst also contributing to a broader, collaborative, professional learning and development network.

However, whilst school staff and leaders are consumed by discourses demanding schools fix poverty or mitigate the associated impact on attainment, participants identified lack of time due to the daily challenges of school life as a significant barrier to engaging in the whole process.

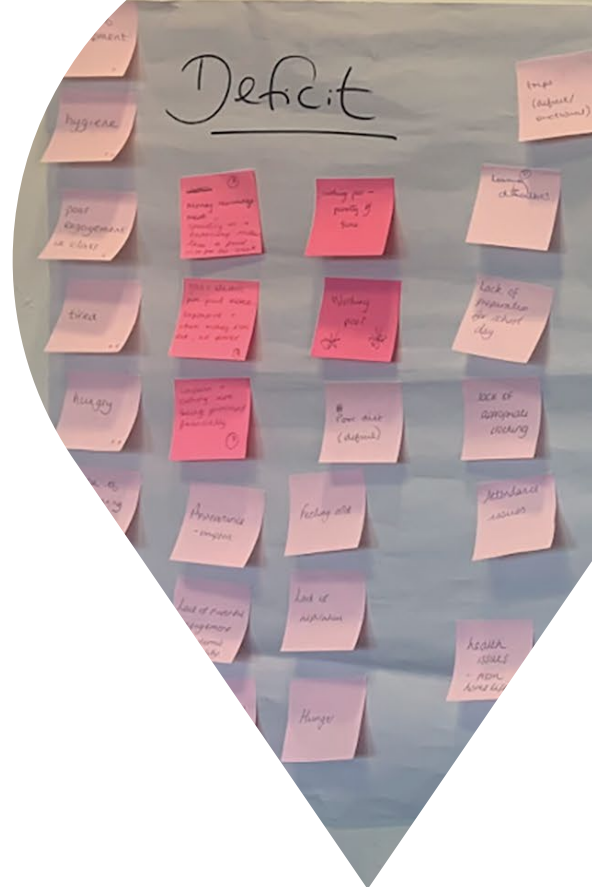
- The time required to design and complete the action research project prevents school leaders from maintaining engagement with the Local Matters team.
- Complying with priorities specified by the Ofsted inspection framework leave school staff and leaders fearful to enact locally identified changes.

It is recommended that:

a) participants receive greater financial and practical support in attending the programme.

b) the Local Matters team develop an abridged version of the programme.

c) stakeholders engage in further debate about what schools can realistically do about the poverty within which children in their schools are living.



Contact information:

Dr Carl Emery
carl.emery@manchester.ac.uk

Dr Louisa Dawes
louisa.dawes@manchester.ac.uk

Click here for the Local Matters page on University of Manchester website.

www.socialresponsibility.manchester.ac.uk/all-news/legacy-news/local-matters/



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