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**Title: “It’s a struggle” - the role of the school well-being lead in supporting families in poverty**

**Introduction**

This paper explores one primary school’s response to addressing poverty experienced by children and families, within a post-covid context. It draws on a small-scale qualitative case study exploring the role of the Health and Well-Being Lead [HWBL] in a primary school in the Southeast of England. This study is born out of previous research funded by TACTYC which examined the contribution of Maintained Nursery Schools [MNSs] in low-income areas of England to Early Years Education and Care (Authors’ own, 2020a; 2020b). The most prominent finding from the previous research was how these nurseries not only supported the holistic education of the child but were also attuned to the wider needs of the family. Part of the findings included the need for a designated member of staff, funded by the local authority, who could be sent out to offer support to families as a preventative measure when they saw that “*the wheels [were] getting wobbly*” (Authors’ own, 2020a: 56); acting as a bridge between the home and the setting. The present research arose from an encounter with Katie (pseudonym) at a university conference, who was fulfilling a role in a primary school which was very similar to the one identified in the research with the Maintained Nursery Schools. Although Katie worked in a school, she was not a teacher, her background was in family support. This paper presents a case study focusing on Katie’s role as a Health and Well-being Lead [HWBL], within a primary school in an area of relatively low-income in a predominantly affluent market town. The research was unfunded and arose from a joint interest between the school where Katie worked and the researchers to explore the contribution that the role of the HWBL makes to the children and families at the school. It privileges the voices of the families and staff, including the ‘struggles’ families face, their resilience and innovation in addressing these, and how they are supported by the HWBL within the school context. Although the context has changed from early years (where the need for this role was originally recognised) to a Primary school; the role, with a focus upon care for the whole family unit, remains the same.

## **Literature review**

Despite the UK having one of the largest economies in the world, there are 4.2 million children (29%) living in relative poverty after housing costs (Department for Work and Pensions [DWP], 2023). The deadline for the government to 'end child poverty for ever' over a 20-year period (Blair, 1999) has long passed. Since the rescinding of the Child Poverty Act 2010 in 2016, England is now the only country in the UK which does not have a child poverty strategy. In the UK the number of children living in poverty has increased by 500,000 over the last decade (SMC, 2021), with numbers in England proportionally much higher than in Scotland and Northern Ireland (SMC, 2021).

Poverty has an impact on every aspect of children's lives including the economic, social, well-being, housing, and education (Ridge, 2011). Cooper and Stewart's (2021) international systematic review of research in Europe (including the UK) and the US, concludes that low income has a causal detrimental effect on children's cognitive development, education outcomes, behaviour, and health, as well as environmental factors, such as parents' mental health, parenting, and the home environment. Although all families are vulnerable to poverty, it is a far from a 'level playing field', with some groups significantly more affected than others; and causes intersecting to create multiple disadvantage (CPAG, nd). Family poverty is highly gendered, nearly half (44%) of lone parent families live in poverty (DWP, 2023), and most of these are women (90%), who are at higher risk due to inequalities in work opportunities (Alston, 2018; Millar and Ridge, 2013). Black and Minority ethnic groups in the UK are twice as likely as white groups to live in poverty due to intersecting issues of discrimination and bias in the workplace, geographic location, migration status and educational attainment (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017; DWP, 2023; McGregor-Smith, 2017).

### *The impact of Covid-19 on children living in poverty*

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant global impact on children and families. Compared to other nations in the Global North, the UK has been badly affected both in terms of death rates and economically (Holt and Murray, 2021). The pandemic has exacerbated existing economic issues related to austerity policies, Brexit (the UK's departure from the European Union [EU]) (Holt and Murray, 2021), and more recent impacts including the war in Ukraine (Patel, 2022). For all children in England, but especially for those living in poverty,

concerns have been raised about the long-term impact of enforced lockdowns, including extended periods of school closure on children's learning (Holt and Murray, 2021; Taylor, 2021); and mental health (Taylor, 2021). A key concern is the increase in the rate of pupil absence from school since the pandemic, which for children living in poverty is significantly higher than their more affluent peers (HCCPA, 2023).

To mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic the government funded a package of strategies and activities to support children and young people's well-being and educational recovery, with a particular focus on children living in low-income families (Department for Education [DfE], 2022a). Evidence so far suggests this has had little impact on children's outcomes in education and well-being. The Children's Society (2023) reports in the 'The Good Childhood Report', that trends in children's happiness and well-being with life as a whole, have continued to fall since the pandemic particularly in measures of satisfaction with friends, appearance, school and school work. In regard to children's education, there is some evidence that reading levels have recovered to pre-pandemic levels, however significant gaps persist between children with low and high levels of disadvantage at all key stages in both mathematics and reading (Andrews, 2023; HCCPA, 2023). Rates of pupil absence continue to be higher than before the pandemic, with anxiety being identified as one of the key issues (HCCPA, 2023; Ofsted 2023). The HCCPA (2023:3) predicts that it is likely to take 'as much as another decade to get back to the position before the pandemic'.

### *Challenges for schools and children's services*

Schools and children's services are key in addressing child poverty; however, the government has failed to recognise the strain these provisions are under. Schools in England face multiple challenges, including financial difficulties; staff retention and recruitment; and an increase in children's mental health needs (HCCPA, 2023). The DfE's (2023) survey of 11,177 leaders and teachers in Spring 2022, found that teachers and leaders were working unacceptably long hours, struggling with work over-load, experiencing low well-being, and dissatisfaction with pay. For those who took part in the survey 25% intended to leave the profession in the next 12 months. The current crisis in UK schools reflects years of under investment and cuts to education and children's services. Spending per school pupil fell by 9% in real terms between 2009/2010 and 2019/2020, and despite an additional £2.3 billion in the 2022 Autumn budget,

school funding is likely to be 3% less in 2024/25 than it was in 2010 (Drayton et al., 2022). Whilst local authority spending on children and young people's services has fallen by £241 million in the most deprived fifth of local authorities, the most affluent have seen an increase of £228 million (Pro Bono Economics, 2022). This imbalance in funding, is likely to exacerbate existing attainment gaps and further disadvantage children living in low-income families.

In 2020 to 2021, 80% of local authority spending on children and young people, was focused on late intervention services (such as safeguarding and looked after children), whilst spending on early intervention services (including family support) has been halved since 2010-2011 (Pro Bono Economics, 2022). Key services such as Sure Start Children's Centres, established in the late 1990s to provide fully integrated universal and targeted services to 'improve outcomes for children and families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers' (DfE, 2013: 7), have been particularly effected. Numbers of children's centres decreased by over 30% from 3,620 in 2010 to 2,350 in 2019, with those in areas of high deprivation having the most reductions (DfE, 2019a). These cuts have been made despite the research indicating that without early intervention the needs of children and families are more likely to escalate and reach crisis point, creating a greater demand for late intervention services and increased costs to the local authority and taxpayer (see Allen, 2011; Edwards et al., 2021; Pro Bono Economics, 2022).

### *Discourses of poverty*

Approaches to addressing poverty in the UK have largely been dominated by neoliberal discourses of 'work' and an 'underclass' which have perpetuated intersectional disadvantage (Authors' own, 2019a; Authors' own, 2019b). With changes in government, policy has shifted from a focus on welfare to a focus on 'work' by providing intensive support for the most disadvantaged to gain employment (Simpson, 2013). At the same time 'underclass' discourses have framed poverty in children and families as 'a problem of welfare dependency, poor parenting, psycho-social problems and family dysfunction' (Churchill, 2013: 218). Government policies such as Universal Credit (the amalgamation of several benefits into one), introduced in 2013 as a way of reducing child poverty by promoting work, has been hampered by long waiting times for payment, sanctions, and difficulties with applications (DWP, 2010; HCCPA, 2018). Rather than supporting those on the lowest incomes, Universal Credit has

failed to keep pace with the real cost of living (with unemployment benefits at their lowest since 1990-91) resulting in many families unable to afford essentials and falling into debt (The Trussell Trust, 2022). The situation has been exacerbated by the withdrawal of the Universal Credit £20 uplift in October 2021, introduced during the pandemic to support families.

For many families surviving on low incomes, work is not a route out of poverty. The percentage of children in poverty living in working families has increased significantly over the last two decades with government figures stating that in 2021/22, 67% of children in poverty lived in a family where at least one person was working (Francis-Devine, 2023). The pressure to take a job can mean settling for insecure, poorly paid, part-time work (Rabindrakumar, 2018). For young families, and in particular lone parents, a lack of affordable and available childcare, makes moving from welfare to work particularly challenging (Harding et al., 2017; Rutter, 2015). This is exacerbated by the fact that the number of childcare providers in England fell by 25% (21,763) between 2015 and 2023 (Ofsted, 2023) due to underfunding, unaffordable wages, rises in the cost of living, and recruitment and retention issues (Adams et al., 2023). Although the government has promised further support for families with increased funding for free childcare places (Gov.UK, 2023), this is unlikely to be effective unless issues within the sector are addressed and early years provision properly funded.

‘Underclass’ discourses which serve to judge and shame those in poverty are persistent and pervasive in society, although more recent research suggests that there is more public recognition of the inequalities that exist in the UK since the Covid-19 pandemic (NatCen, 2022). Tyler (2013) argues that the poor, particularly lone mothers, have been constructed as an underclass, ‘objects of disgust’, legitimising a punitive government response and economic sanctions for those accessing welfare payments. Often parents, in particular, are singled out in the media and government policy as responsible for, and causing their own ‘troubles’, transmitting poverty to their children via inadequate parenting, lifestyles and values through a cycle of deprivation (Welshman, 2006; Boddy et al., 2016). Lister (2015) argues that individualising poverty serves to stigmatise and pathologise those in poverty through a process of ‘othering’, which blames the poor for their own and societies’ problems whilst legitimising the position and privilege of the ‘non-poor’ (Lister, 2004). In their research

Chase and Walker (2012:751) found that parents living in poverty experience shame and dehumanisation through a process of stigmatisation and labelling and respond by 'not asking for help' or by trying to hide their poverty through 'keeping up appearances'. The social aspects of poverty, such as stigma, shame, and fear of being identified, are often overlooked despite being important issues for both children and adults (Ridge, 2011; Chase and Walker, 2012). Therefore, supporting children and families in poverty is more complex than it may first appear, and requires careful consideration and sensitivity.

### **Context of the research**

The research that the following discussion is based upon took place in June 2022, in 'Old Market Primary School' (pseudonym), situated in a pocket of deprivation within a relatively affluent market town in the South-East of England. Despite the relative affluence of the town, the school had high numbers of children living in families on low incomes who were entitled to Free School Meals FSM (42.5%). This figure far exceeded both local and national comparisons, with 18.8.% of children in SE England, and 23.8% of children nationally (England only) eligible for FSM (Gov.UK, 2023a). In 2011 England introduced the Pupil Premium [PP], providing additional funding for state funded schools to support disadvantaged pupils (including children eligible for FSMs, Looked After Children, and children who have a parent serving in the armed forces (HCL, 2023). At the time of writing all stated funded schools receive £1455 pupil premium funding for each child who is eligible for FSMs (HCL, 2023). Old Market Primary School had 53% of all children who were entitled to Pupil Premium funding, compared to other schools in the area who on average had between 10 to 20 percent of children who were eligible for PP (HCL, 2023).

The role of HWBL was specific to the school and created in response to some of the challenges Old Market Primary School had faced in relation to children's behaviour and supporting families in need. As a consequence the school decided that more pastoral support was needed to support children and families, hence the creation of the HWBL role. Although the role was bespoke to the school it is in line with guidance issued by HM Government and Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2021); and the green paper 'Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision (Department for Health [DoH] and Department for Government [DfE], 2017). Both

documents advocate the need for a whole school approach in promoting children and young people's mental health and well-being, more specialist Mental Health support; and more joined up working between Health and Education. In England the government have offered funding to every state school and college to train a Senior Mental Health Lead [SMHL] to deliver a whole school approach (DfE, 2021). The training is non-compulsory and to date 14,000 schools and colleges in England have claimed a grant to train a SMHL with an overall take up of 50%. Although progress has been made some settings will not have access to the training until 2025 (Gov.UK, 2023b). As of yet there is no evaluation of the SMHL role, to how the role is being implemented, the effectiveness of the role, and the sustainability of the training is unknown. In contrast to England, other areas have taken different approaches to address children's mental health and well-being. For example, the Welsh government have developed a whole school framework to support children's mental health and well-being and issued statutory guidance on how to embed this for all children, staff and the community (Education Wales, 2021). Early findings suggest that most schools are developing or implementing the approach, however, forthcoming analysis will demonstrate in more detail how schools are developing and delivering the approach (Welsh Government, 2023).

At the time of the study Katie's role had been in existence for about 3 years. The role was full time and primarily focused on supporting children and families with PP funding. Although not a teacher or part of the senior management team Katie worked closely with the Head Teacher, Deputy Head and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), and had her own private office in the school. On a day to day basis the role included: supporting children in breakfast and lunch clubs; attending meetings for children in need; working with children one-to-one, supporting with behaviour and emotional development; meeting with parents; liaising with outside agencies; supporting children at homework club; and supporting children in class.

## **Methodology**

The research took the form of a case study. Drawing on the work of Thomas (2013a: 595) a distinction is made between the subject and object of the case, the 'subject' being the inter-relationships between the HWBL, parents, staff and children within the school, and the

'object' being the analysis and theorisation of these inter-relationships. In keeping with this approach, we adopted a qualitative constructionist research paradigm, based upon the principal that "the world is constructed (produced) through various discourses and systems of meaning we all reside within", therefore there is no one objective truth, rather that knowledge is a product of "how we come to understand it" (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 30). Taking this approach enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of how the role of the HWBL supported children and families in poverty within the context of this school.

In total there were 16 participants, representing a cross section of the children, parents and staff who worked with the HWBL. Ideally, we would have heard the views of all those who had worked with, or been supported by the HWBL, but pragmatically, this was not possible. However, we acknowledge that due to the small sample size and sampling method, this cannot be taken as representative of the views of everyone in the school.

Once we had decided who it was important to hear from we next decided which were the most appropriate methods. A range of methods, which were both sensitive and reflexive, were necessary to ensure that we were able to listen to the different voices of our participants, enabling a focus on their lived experience (Clark, 2017). To this end the following methods were chosen:

- A group activity/discussion with six children (aged between 8 and 11 years old) who had worked with the HWBL;
- Semi-structured interviews with five parents and one grandparent who had been supported by the HWBL;
- Semi-structured interviews with three staff members who made up the Senior Management Team [SMT] at the school (Head Teacher, Deputy Head Teacher, and SENCo);
- A semi-structured interview with the HWBL;
- A 'walking tour' of the school led by the Head Teacher.

For the children we chose a multi-model method which involved drawing a picture of the HWBL together with an informal discussion about how they interacted with her. The intention was to recognise the children as active participants in the research process, giving them the

opportunity to express their views using both visual and verbal modes of communication (Clark, 2017). For the parents, staff members, and HWBL we chose semi-structured interviews, with a small number of open questions designed to illicit a 'conversations with a purpose' about the role of the HWBL rather than a formal discussion (Burgess, 1984: 102) and 'open up' topics which were meaningful to our participants (Riessman, 2008). The 'walking tour' of the school was designed to provide detailed contextual information about the school from someone with lived experience and overall perspective of the school.

Before the research started institutional ethical approval was gained, demonstrating adherence to recognised ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). As the research was undertaken in a school where many of the families were on low-incomes, and where the role of the HWBL was to work with parents and children who were recognised as 'vulnerable', careful consideration was given to how we could conduct the research in a sensitive and respectful way. In discussion with the HWBL we agreed which parents and children could be invited to take part in the research, we also discussed the most suitable approaches to take, to ensure that we did not cause unnecessary discomfort or harm. Although this made the sample more selective, our priority was to protect the well-being of all involved and for participation in the research to be a positive experience (Costly et al., 2010).

Prior to data collection, written consent was given by all participants. For parents and staff this included permission to audio record the interviews. Participant information sheets were discussed with parents and children before they decided whether they were willing to take part. Parents were given the opportunity to be interviewed in pairs or bring a family member to interview, as a way of trying to make the experience more comfortable. As a result one parent chose to bring her Mum, and four other parents chose to be interviewed in a pairs. All parents had children attending the school (in the case of the grandmother they had a grandchild at the school) and had been supported by the HWBL. All parents and the grandparent identified as female. Everyone gave consent to be interviewed and were included in the analysis. The interviews with parents and staff, and the children's activity took place in school during normal work hours, and for the children the activity was not too far outside of their usual routine. The interviews with parents and the grandmother were conducted in the HWBL's room, a space which was familiar to the them and lasted between

24 minutes and 56 minutes. The children's activity also took place in a familiar room, and children's assent was observed throughout the activity.

In the first stage of analysis, data was fully transcribed, anonymised and pseudonyms assigned. Several of the interviews were particularly complex, especially those that involved more than one participant. Due to this we took the decision to "keep the whole in mind" (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013:64), considering each interview in its entirety. This initially involved the research team listening to, exploring, and discussing the recordings together. Drawing on the work of Frosh and Barister (2008) a psychoanalytical approach to understanding the data was taken, acknowledging how the "researchers' different situated experiences and knowledges infuse constructively their readings and interpretations of the texts" (Authors' own, to be published).

The researchers then explored the data individually, coming back together to share understandings and explore emergent themes. Once we had agreed key themes these were organised using a data reduction grid, drawing together data that referred to a particular theme (Authors' own, 2014). This was used as a basis for a deepening of the analysis, as well as seeking out further relationships and patterns. One of the key strands which emerged from the analysis was 'poverty'. Within this strand five sub-themes were identified, which are discussed in the next section. The voices of respondents are presented in italics.

## **Findings**

In the following section we present the findings from the five poverty sub-themes. These include: "It's a struggle", exploring the struggles for parents who are living in poverty; "Cuts, early intervention, and filling the gap", how cuts to services have exacerbated hardships for families; "listening, making time and not judging", considering how the well-being lead supports parents by taking a sensitive and empathetic approach; "innovation and helping your family", the way parents respond to poverty; and "I'm not a martyr", exploring how supporting parents and families impacts on the staff at the school.

### **"It's a struggle"**

All the parents who participated in the research talked about the challenges they experienced in their lives, many of which were related to poverty. Staff also recognised poverty as a major contributory factor to the struggles faced by parents. The term 'struggle' is employed to refer to these challenges, as this is the term most commonly used by the parents and teachers who took part in the study. Causes of the struggles were multivarious and related to the cost of living (for example, price increases in heating, food, and transport); the impact of adverse unexpected events (for example, an essential household item breaking); health issues; having a child with special education needs and disability [SEND]; losing a job; and bereavement.

Sharon (parent) talked about the many struggles she experienced in her life and how increases in the cost of living had impacted significantly on her family. Her eldest son had SEND and was at risk of exclusion from school. A major challenge was how she was going to afford to take him to school following the recent increases in the price of car fuel. She presented this situation as a choice, between fuel for the car or electricity to cook with, sharing how she had recently resorted to cooking on a fire outside because of the rising costs. Sharon also shared how these struggles were exacerbated by her own health conditions, sharing:

*I've got certain health conditions with my hips and my knees I usually have the heating on from August ... might sound like crazy but if I get cold in my knees then ... I struggle to walk.*

Other parents talked about how unexpected events, such as a washing machine or oven breaking, were a particular 'struggle'. Sally told us how, on dropping her child off at school she *"just burst into tears because my washing machine had broken that morning, and I was like what am I supposed to do?"*.

Staff were very aware of how unexpected events contributed to parents' financial difficulties and poor mental health. Katie (HWBL) explained how a series of events affected one particular parent, saying: *"She's got all these financial problems .... she'd lost her job ... her uncle died ... she's having mental health problems ... one of her kid's Dad is coming out of prison."* The Deputy Head teacher recognised the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent increase in the cost of living, saying *"if you haven't got much money then that adds large amounts of stress doesn't it?"*. Overall, Katie (HWBL) recognised how poverty could

be a major barrier to being a 'good parent', and that her role was to help them negotiate the obstacles. She reflected:

*And I think a lot of our parents can't be the parents they want to be to their kids because they've got debt collectors on the phone or they're hungry ... so I think it's removing those barriers ... because they are all good parents, they all love their kids.*

### **Cuts, early intervention and filling the gap**

All of the staff that we spoke with raised concerns about how cuts to support services and decrease in funding, had contributed to and exacerbated parents' struggles. Long waiting lists and changes in access for Early Help (local authority support for keeping children safe or achieving change) had resulted in a lack of early intervention and problems escalating. The SENCo explained:

*The early help is called early, but it never is ...it's very slow ... now it's always a long referral, so it isn't early, it isn't quick ... and [becomes] a much bigger problem for the family.*

The demise of Surestart Children Centres and their replacement with Family Hubs was a particular concern. Katie (HWBL) shared how the reduced services provided by Family Hubs was "really problematic" for the families that they were working with, and that, as a result "schools [we]re picking up a lot of the work". In addition, to concerns about the lack of services, Katie specifically mentioned the impersonal nature of the Family Hub, which meant that families were less likely to engage with the service. She said:

*I mean they'll like and say 'Come and send them and come and talk about their problems with this person ... this strange person ... this strange place and our families just don't feel comfortable to do that.*

As a consequence, the school was increasingly relying on voluntary organisations for support, as, in the words of the Head Teacher, "There's no services left which are publicly funded." All the staff recognised the negative impact that cuts to support services were having on families, and how the role of the HWBL was essential to 'plugging the gap'. This, the Deputy Head explained, was vital if children were to be provided opportunity to succeed. He said:

*We needed someone to replace those services to be able to liaise between parents and school and support parents who were struggling either emotionally or financially [...] so the children could engage with education as best as possible and take some of those stresses away from families.*

### **Meeting basic needs, listening, making time, not-judging, and empathy**

Katie had previously worked as a family support worker in the local children's centre and had a good working knowledge of services and how to access support. This knowledge was particularly valued by both the head teacher and parents. A combination of practical support, good knowledge, and building trust through a non-judgemental and empathic approach supported early intervention and helped to address 'struggles' when they arose. As Katie explained: *"some of the parents you can kind of see it spiralling you can almost catch it before it gets too serious"*.

To help address food poverty the school had introduced a breakfast club, funded by Greggs. All children who were entitled to pupil premium and working parents were able to attend the club and have a free breakfast. Katie was part of the team who ran the club. The Head Teacher commented on how Katie was able to notice the signs that a child might be coming into school hungry, and would prioritise that basic need. In addition to meeting basic needs, an empathetic and non-judgemental approach was recognised as important in building relationships and trust with the parents. Taking time to listen was something particularly valued by these parents, who shared:

*She's always there to make time (Sharon)*

*Any problems, anything – for the most stupidest things (Amy)*

The senior management also recognised the importance of being *"being available"*, and, to facilitate this, had made Katie's role full time. Alongside the importance of listening was a 'non-judgemental' approach, something which was recognised by both parents and the HWBL. For Amy this was particularly important when dealing with domestic crises, as she told us: *"no other school would have looked twice at me, or they would have judged me. Katie was straight away like 'let's see if we can sort something out for you, don't stress'"*.

For the HWBL being 'non-judgemental' was integral to her role and part of the school's strength-based approach. She explained how important it was, in her work, that she did not

portray a sense of superiority, “*looking down on*” on parents, adding: “*it’s not teacher ... it’s not teacher, kind of pupil, it’s ... we’re all shoulder to shoulder*”. At the root of this non-judgemental approach was an empathetic attitude and being able to see things from the parents’ point of view. As Katie explained:

*That’s a hard thing to do isn’t it, to sit there and say ‘I’ve got no money, I’ve got no bread to feed my kids.’ I would hate to be in that position, I have been many years ago and it’s a really shit place to be.*

### **Initiative, ingenuity, and agency**

Whilst some parents talked about how Katie, was the person who they turned to in times of crisis, others talked about how they had addressed their own struggles. Sharon tackled increases in food prices by teaching her children about finances she said: “*I’m very open with my kids about money because I’m trying to teach them about credit*”. She shared strategies that she implemented to address the cost of living which involved the whole family. These included making food shopping into a game for the children; involving the children in creating a compost in the garden; foraging for food; and growing her own food. This final approach she perceived as particularly important, sharing: “*I just think if people aren’t growing stuff how are they going to eat?*”. In contrast to discourses about the ‘shame’ of poverty, this parent felt empowered to challenge the school and suggest ways they could support parents who may be experiencing food poverty. She had even proposed that the school develop its own vegetable plot that could be used by families, “*Because people don’t have any money*”. However, this parents’ view of taking responsibility and addressing her own poverty, contrasted with those which suggested educating parents to better ‘manage’ poverty. An example of this was given by the Deputy Head:

*we can’t take away their parents problems all the time .. I think that’s impossible but if we can educate children on you know how to manage that and parents as well as how to manage that hardship because sometimes it’s going to happen, particularly if you’re in a difficult financial situation.*

This suggests that a co-produced approach would be beneficial where parents and school staff can work together as equal partners to look at ways that children and families living in poverty could be supported.

### **“I’m not a martyr”**

All the staff commented on how maintaining the high level of support for parents and families impacted on the well-being of those working in the school. Staff on low wages were ‘struggling’ in similar ways to some of the families they were supporting. For example, the Head Teacher shared his surprise at seeing several of his own staff coming to collect food provided by a charity during the pandemic. He said:

*we had a delivery from UK harvest, ... And I looked out the window and it occurred to me that there were five or six of my TAs [teaching assistants] out there, getting food.*

Despite the HWBL describing herself as “not a martyr”, it was clear that she was putting in extra time during the school holidays to ‘check in’ on parents and families who were struggling financially. She justified this by saying:

*I don’t think anybody should work in the holiday but sometimes I think a 5 minute email to check in because otherwise the kind of catastrophes that await in September are very many.*

The Deputy Head also recognised how staff at this school were ‘consumed’ by the ongoing worry of the children and found it more difficult to ‘switch off’ from school outside of work hours compared to teachers who worked in more affluent areas.

### **Discussion**

In the following discussion we explore how the sub-themes identified above contest stigmatising discourses of poverty and reflect the impact of increasing financial hardship on low-income families in the UK. The discussion is organised into the following sections: the impact of poverty on families; the challenges faced by schools and services; supporting families – taking a non-judgemental approach; challenging dominant discourses of poverty; and sustainability.

#### *Impact of poverty on families – unexpected events (‘curve balls’) and increasing hardship.*

The impact of poverty on every aspect of children’s and families’ lives is well documented (Ridge, 2011; Cooper and Stewart, 2021). Similar experiences were relayed by the parents who participated in this study, as they talked about the impact of financial ‘struggles’ relating to transport; school attendance; health; essential amenities (washing clothes; heating);

necessities (food); and mental health and well-being. Contesting a political discourse of ‘troubled’ families, referring to those families that are or cause trouble (Levitas, 2012), the parents talked about how unexpected events (such as a broken washing machine), which were no fault of their own caused ‘trouble’ for the family. Authors’ own (2019c) in her work with early years practitioners refers to these unexpected events as ‘curve balls’, and how multiple curve balls, have a profound impact on families lives, creating further debt and adversity. Both parents and staff who took part in this study talked about how events outside their control (such as poor health, death of a family member, having a child with SEND, or increases in the cost of living) impacted on their child’s education, exacerbated health issues (both physical and mental) and compromised safety within the home. At the time of the data collection the UK was experiencing one of the sharpest increases in the cost of living since the early 1980s, with inflation reaching 11.1% in October 2022, a level higher than in most comparable economies (Harari et al., 2023). This has had a significant impact on the cost of food, energy, and fuel prices. Although inflation eased to 8.7% in May 2023, this was not as much as expected and prices continued to rise (Harari et al., 2023). Unless addressed, this is likely to have an ongoing impact on the lives of families on low incomes, who are already facing unsustainable financial struggles.

#### *Challenges faced by schools and services*

The lack of investment and cuts to education and children’s services budgets has had a significant impact on children living in the poorest areas (Drayton et al., 2022; Pro Bono Economics, 2022). All of the staff who took part in this study raised concerns about the impact of cuts to children’s services and how the lack of early intervention exacerbated problems for both children and families. With a demise in services, there was more reliance on signposting to voluntary organisations for support. These experiences reflect a broader context of increased numbers of children and families requesting support and longer waiting times for early intervention services (The House, 2023; UK Parliament, 2022). The HWBL discussed the ineffectiveness and impersonal nature of the new Local Family Hubs, part of the government’s ‘Best Start for Life: a vision for the critical 1,001 days’ levelling up economic opportunity in England agenda (HM Government, 2021), which were intended to build upon the work of the Sure Start Children’s Centres. The government have committed to providing additional funding for 75 local authorities to move to a Family Hub model to deliver the Best Start for

Life programme (Department for Health and Social Care and DfE, 2023), however, the programme is in its infancy so the effectiveness is yet to be measured.

### *Challenging dominant discourses of poverty*

Parents, particularly lone mothers, have been singled out in the UK media and government policy as responsible for and causing their 'troubles', transmitting poverty to their children via inadequate parenting, lifestyles and values through a cycle of deprivation (Welshman, 2006; Boddy et al., 2016). In contrast to stigmatising discourses, the approach taken by the HWBL to support parents was non-judgemental, strengths based, and empathetic. Rather than blaming parents for their 'struggles', she constructed them as 'good parents', who 'love their children'. The relationship between the HWBL and the parents, embodied key principles from Rogers' (1959) person-centred approach, in particular unconditional positive regard (a warm caring for the parent), empathetic understanding (to sense the other parents' world as if it were your own), and congruence (being genuine with the parent). Instead of feeling judged, parents who participated in this study gave many examples of how they felt both listened to and accepted by the HWBL, which supported a trusting and congruent relationship.

An underclass discourse serves to 'other' those in poverty through a process of labelling and stigmatisation, for example, media portrayals of those in poverty (particularly lone parents) as being 'not bothered' or 'scroungers' can cause feelings of shame and dehumanisation (Chase and Walker, 2012: 751). Contesting an underclass discourse, one parent talked in detail about how she addressed her 'struggles', demonstrating her self-initiative and ingenuity in making food more affordable for her family. Rather than demonstrating shame or trying to hide her poverty, this parent talked with pride about how she had involved the whole family in innovative approaches to growing, foraging, and finding affordable food. This example suggests that an approach which listens to and gives recognition to parents who have lived experience of poverty could potentially support other families, and help to 'shame-proof' practice in schools.

### *Sustainability*

Although the HWBL described herself as “not a martyr”, it was evident that the workload and emotional burden of supporting the children and families at the school was having an impact on her, raising the question whether the role was sustainable. Other Staff were also working extra unpaid hours and finding it difficult to ‘switch off’ from school. Some of the lower paid teaching staff were ‘struggling’ in similar ways to the families they were supporting, for example, coming into school for free food during the Covid-19 pandemic. The experiences of the staff in this case study can be understood within a broader context of issues experienced more generally across England. Years of underinvestment in, and cuts to, education and children’s services, has resulted in too many staff working unacceptably long hours, struggling with work over-load, low well-being, and dissatisfaction with pay (DfE, 2023; NAHT, 2022). As discussed in previous research with early years practitioners, this begs the question of how can school staff be expected to address poverty for children and families, when they themselves are struggling emotionally, physically and, in some cases, financially (Author’s own, 2019a).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to explore one primary school’s response to addressing the poverty experienced by children and families, within a post-covid context. Although it is not possible to make generalisations from a small case study, equally there is a likelihood that this school’s experience will reflect those of similar schools. Regardless, we argue that this research makes a unique contribution to existing and emerging research about the experience of families living in poverty in England and how they can be effectively supported within schools. Our findings indicate that for the parents who took part in this study, poverty affected many aspects of their lives, causing significant financial struggles as well as impacting upon mental health and well-being. The data suggest that the role of the HWBL was highly valued by both the parents and the staff who took part in this study. It is difficult to determine to what extent the role’s success is due to Katie’s character and skill or the role of the HWBL itself (this is discussed more in a forthcoming article). However, across the interviews it was clear that there were common attributes which supported the effectiveness of the role. Essentially, it was agreed that a non-judgemental, strengths based, and empathetic person-centred approach created a trusting and open relationship with parents where they could both share and receive support for their ‘struggles’, without fear of being shamed or judged. In contrast

to dominant discourses which individualise and blame 'parents' for their poverty, the voices of the parents and staff in this case study present a narrative where parents are presented as 'good', and conscientiously strive to provide the best that they can for their child, within their means. However, it was also evident that the workload involved in supporting families was having an impact on the HWLB and other staff.

Although this study reports on only one primary school, we contend that the case reflects the broader context of years of government reduction in funding and general neglect shown toward schools and children's services; and how this has led to a crisis for children, families, and schools. In response to listening to the voices of the parents and staff who took part in the study, it is clear that the role of the HWBL has made a positive impact at Old Market Primary School for all involved. However, further research is needed to determine whether such a role could be a valuable resource for all primary schools and aligned to the role of the Senior Mental Health Lead. In terms of wider implications whilst we welcome the government's offer to fund training so that every state school and college in England has a Senior Mental Health Lead, there is no additional funding to support the role in settings, raising questions about the sustainability of the role. In conclusion if the government is serious about addressing children's mental health and well-being there needs to be properly funded initiatives which go beyond training, and address some of the route issues around early intervention, staff retention and recruitment in children's services and schools, otherwise the valuable work that people like Katie perform in school, will continue to be the exception rather than the rule.

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