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The Educational
Institute of Scotland

EIS Briefing on Digital Poverty

October 2021

Background

For some time, the EIS has raised concerns about the unequal access among school pupils to the devices and internet connectivity, and in terms of digital literacy skills, to enable full participation in digital-based learning.

For example, the 2015 Face Up to Child Poverty publication highlighted the difficulties that young people from the poorest backgrounds face in engaging with homework activities that require internet research, either because they have no access to a computer at home or because access to the internet is limited or non-existent at home.

The EIS has also highlighted that aside from lack of access to digital devices at home, many young people living in poverty don't have a place where they can sit down to concentrate on schoolwork because of overcrowding and lack of space in the home and/or the absence of furniture such as a table, desk or chair. In these circumstances, even with access to a tablet or a laptop, young people continue to be digitally excluded.

> **"During the pandemic, the increased reliance on digital learning further exacerbated the impact of the digital divide..."**

During the pandemic, the increased reliance on digital learning further exacerbated the impact of the digital divide on those young people. This is in the context of more than **one in four** (260,0000) children being in poverty today with current forecasting that the figure is set to rise further to 29% by **2023-24**.

Tech poverty is an issue that the Equality Committee has returned to again and again, and one which it was agreed would be included in this session's refresh of the Face Up to Child Poverty publication.

This briefing is the first in a series of briefings that will culminate in the publication later this session, of refreshed advice on how EIS members might seek to mitigate the impact of poverty in the classroom and the wider school.

Pre Covid Context

The digital divide has been a campaigning issue for some years for the trade union movement, including the EIS.

The 2019 Scottish Household Survey highlighted that whilst 96% of households in the 20% least deprived areas had access to the internet, only 82% of households in the 20% most deprived areas had access.

This inequality is even more stark when examined on the basis of income. 65% of families with an income of less that £10,000 per year had internet access- that leaves over a third of households in that income bracket with no access at all. When it comes to those earning more than £40,000 per year, nearly all (99%) have access.

Between those two extremes, there are also the scenarios that see sharing of devices and broadband/data between siblings and/ or between children and parents. This clearly has implications for young people's school experiences.

> **"The extent to which young people are able to take part in learning activities that require the use of Wi-Fi or personal data when working on homework, will have been very much dependent on family income..."**

The extent to which young people are able to participate in learning activities that require the use of Wi-Fi or personal data when working on homework is very much dependent on family income. Family income continues to be a determining factor in the ability of pupils to make use f personal data to access the internet when in class, as increasingly pupils have been prompted to do for certain learning activities in school.

For the young people living in the 20% most deprived households, lack of internet access and the associated stigma are most definitely serious issues.

Digital Exclusion and COVID 19

The experience of the pandemic that has so far featured two periods of lengthy school closure and a shift to remote learning from home, has brought the inequality of digital exclusion into even sharper focus.

As with many pre-existing inequalities, the pandemic has shone a harsh light on digital inequality and exclusion, and indeed has been shown to have exacerbated the problem.

Audit Scotland's report '**Improving outcomes for young people through school education**' published in March 2021, highlighted the disproportionately negative impact of school closures on young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. It underlined that these pupils were most negatively affected by the shift to remote learning because of their lack of access to digital resources- devices, internet connectivity and digital literacy.

The report concludes that lack of access to computers and tablets was a significant barrier to young people living in poverty being able to access and stay engaged with the remote learning offer. Difficulties were further compounded by the lack of parental knowledge of the various platforms used by schools.

The EIS all-member survey '**Teaching During the Covid-19 Shutdown**' pointed to similar conclusions. 64% of members responding said that pupils having no access to technology was a barrier to home learning. Most said that their highest attaining students were engaging better with online learning than the lowest attaining.

The Scottish Government **Equity Audit** published early in 2021 highlighted also that:

> 'Variation in the availability of technology for children and young people was evident, with socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people being most negatively affected.'

Widely reported during the earlier stages of the pandemic, in the media and by teachers, and evidenced by research carried out by EIS FELA, was that many young people were solely dependent on mobile phones to access lessons on digital platforms, conduct research and write assignments. Although young people in these circumstances had 'access to a device', the device having only a small screen and keyboard, was insufficient for and entirely unsuited to, their learning needs.

Digital Exclusion Beyond Education

The impact of digital exclusion during lockdown, goes beyond access to education and will also have intensified isolation and loneliness for those unable to use social media to connect with their **peers and community networks** during lockdown.

Since we know that existing inequalities have been deepened during the pandemic, the impact of digital exclusion is likely to have disproportionately affected those who are at higher risk of experiencing poverty, such as households with a disabled family member and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic households.

Digital Exclusion and Fuel Poverty

In seeking to address the digital poverty gap, it's important to bear in mind that devices and internet access are dependent on electricity to run.

For many living in the poorest households, lack of access to the internet intersects with fuel poverty.

The definition of fuel poverty in Scotland is if a household spends more than 10% of its income on fuel costs and if the remaining household income is insufficient to maintain an adequate standard of living.

> **"...there are 311,000 households (12.4%) in extreme fuel poverty..."**

Data from the most recent Scottish House Condition Survey shows that 613,000 households (24.6%) were living in fuel poverty in 2019, compared with 619,000 (25%) in 2018.

Within these figures, there are 311,000 households (12.4%) in extreme fuel poverty, compared with 279,000 (11.3%) in the same period.

These figures are likely to have worsened as a result of the poverty impact of the pandemic and will increase further with the imminent withdrawal of the £20 per week Universal Credit uplift by the UK Government. (The £20 uplift has been paid throughout the course of the pandemic to Universal Credit recipients.)

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) **highlights** that while £20 per week:

'may seem inconsequential to those who've been fortunate enough to retain a steady income throughout the pandemic ... for families struggling with rising living costs and hits to income wrought by a loss of job or hours, it can be the difference between buying sufficient food or going without, turning on the heating or sitting in the cold.'

JRF also evidences the fact that people living on the lowest incomes frequently pay the highest costs for electricity, being more likely to have to pay for electricity by expensive pre-payment meters and being less likely to switch users (partly since the ability to so this is frequently dependent on internet access). **UK poverty: Causes, costs and solutions**

For many families for whom the choice between heating and eating is a very real one, so too is scarcity of electricity to constantly power computers, laptops, tablets and smart phones.

Therefore, even if a young person living in poverty has their own device or has been supplied one by the school/local authority, and been provided data, it can't be assumed that the family income will stretch to keeping the device fully charged.

Remote Parental Engagement and Involvement

During the course of the pandemic when schools were closed and while restrictions have been in place in relation to parental visits to school buildings, schools have sought to maintain parents' engagement and involvement in their children's learning by providing opportunities for this by digital means.

> **"...some parents are at risk of missing out on opportunities to work with their child's school in order to support their learning and enhance their outcomes..."**

However, the same issues around inequality of access to devices and broadband, inequalities in relation to acquisition of digital literacy skills, and challenges around fuel poverty, apply equally to parents living on low income as for their children, in relation to how far they can engage in digital-based activities.

This means that under these circumstances, some parents are at risk of missing out on opportunities to work with their child's school in order to support their learning and enhance their outcomes.

Scottish Government and Local Action

The Scottish Government early in the pandemic made £25 million available to councils to reduce the numbers of children and young people with no access to devices and/ or internet connectivity. The Scottish Government has also previously? pledged to ensure access to a device for every school child in Scotland by the end of the current parliamentary term in 2026. The process of providing devices to all students has begun.

However, the impact of these policies to date has been variable across local authority areas, with many young people and their families still experiencing digital exclusion today.

...Yet Ongoing Digital Exclusion

Whilst some local authorities have been able to provide devices and to enable internet access, for example through the provision of dongles, this has not been a universal offer and has at times been slow to implement, in part due to hardware supply and transportation issues. This means that in rural areas where there are difficulties with internet connectivity, families living in poverty face further barriers to digital access.

There is also the matter of compatibility of devices issued with the platforms used by schools. This can be problematic for young people who have access to only one device at home, with no option of switching to a device that enables access to the particular platform or software being used by a school.

The EIS Headteacher and Depute Headteacher Network highlighted a further consideration regarding the necessity to keep devices updated and in a good state of repair. Issuing devices to young people and their families is only part of the solution. Without operating system updates and knowing how to do this, and without support to repair or replace malfunctioning devices, devices will be defunct.

This combination of factors means that thousands of young people in our schools are still without working digital devices at home and continue to be data poor.

While some local authorities have begun to support parents with regards to digital literacy, many parents and carers, especially those with general literacy challenges or who have English as an additional language, do not have the skills to be able to support their children to use devices, the internet or specific digital platforms at home.

EIS Advice

It's essential that there is sensitivity to the stark inequalities that exist with regards to families' and therefore students' internet access in terms of availability of working devices and WiFi or data purchase.

It's equally important to remember that lack of/restricted internet access at home for many young people whose families are living on low income is linked to inability to meet the costs of electricity.

No assumptions should be made that all young people/parents have access to devices, broadband or data at home, or that there is an unlimited power supply in all homes.

Schools should consider their approaches to supporting young people to charge their phones/tablets while in school buildings, particularly where it is understood that some families' electricity supply and costs would generally make charging of devices problematic.

When considering setting homework activities that require online access or opportunities for meeting with parents remotely, these inequalities should be borne in mind and steps taken towards ensuring that no young person/parent is excluded from any activity.

Many schools will have identified which students/families are struggling with internet access at home and taken sensitive steps to address this, for example by providing a device, and to keep following up, for example, by keeping the data supply topped up.

Some local authorities have also begun to support families in relation to electricity costs.

It shouldn't be assumed that all young people and/or their parents have the requisite digital skills to be able to access more complex online learning activities and/or a range of digital platforms.

For some parents, a phone call might offer a better opportunity for engagement with the school than an online meeting while restrictions on face-to-face meetings in school buildings remain in place. As the easing of restrictions allows, one to one in-person meetings with individual parents/carers within school buildings may be possible, depending on the outcomes of school-based risk assessments and other school-based agreements.

Some local authorities/ schools have begun supporting parents from poorer socio-economic backgrounds with digital literacy in order that they can support their own children at home. The capacity to do this is resource-dependent, in some cases it being dependent on the availability of home-school link support. This is a matter that could be explored with the school's SMT in the first instance.

Where these measures have not been possible as yet, other steps are needed within the school to ensure that young people are not missing out on learning experiences that are being offered to others.

This might mean that any internet-based learning is scheduled to take place during class time, using the school's WiFi since it shouldn't be expected that all students can use personal data to carry out research activities in the classroom.

Where there are issues with the reliability/ capacity of the school's WiFi provision, this should be raised with the local authority with a view to the requisite improvements being made.

Where the schools WiFi provision cannot support such use by groups of students at once, then alternative means of accessing research material from the internet- for example, downloading, printing, photocopying and enabling equal access for all students, should be arranged.

In setting up any learning activities that require the use of the internet either in class or at home, due sensitivity to income-related inequalities should be given to avoid any young person experiencing stigma as a result of their/ their family's digital exclusion.

Call for good practice sharing

Any member who wishes to share good practice in digital equity is welcome to get in touch with the EIS Education and Equality Department by contacting: **jharris@eis.org.uk**

Reminder...

Of the issues:

- Inequality of families' / students' internet access in terms of availability of working devices and of WiFi or data purchase

- Lack of/restricted internet access at home for many young people is linked to low income, often including the inability to meet the costs of electricity

- Provision of devices alone doesn't fully address digital exclusion

- Many young people and parents don't have the requisite digital skills to be able to access more complex online learning activities and/or a range of digital platforms

- Risk of young people being left out of homework activities that require online access

- Risk of stigma arising from digital exclusion and poverty

- Risk of parents being excluded from engaging remotely with their child's school.

Of how to support:

- Sensitivity needed to the fact that more than a quarter of young people in Scotland live in poverty and therefore digital poverty

- All internet-based/ digital learning activities should be considered with due sensitivity to income-related inequalities to avoid stigma

- Issuing devices to young people/families who don't have them

- Ongoing technical support, repair and data supply are also needed to help reduce digital exclusion

- Enable young people to charge their phones/tablets while in school buildings in stigma-free ways

- Schedule internet-based learning during class time, using the school's WiFi

- Consider alternative means of remote engagement with parents who don't have digital means while Covid restrictions are in place

- Look at how resources might be allocated to support parents with digital literacy skills.

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