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NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Tees Valley Education

A trust's place-based strategy for understanding and tackling inequalities



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

Tees Valley Education

At a glance

School group

Tees Valley Education (TVEd): primary, secondary and SEND-specific contexts

Place

Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland

Phase

Primary, secondary and SEND-specific contexts

Key partners

A partnership network of over 280 organisations across education, health, industry and the third sector

Contributor

Sean Harris, Director of PLACE

Understand the problem before acting, and work through what already exists locally rather than building something new.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Almost 70% of children in the Trust's schools qualify for free school meals. However, TVEd does not use this as an overarching proxy. Rather, they recognise that poverty and inequality rates are not neatly captured in FSM statistics. TVEd believes deeply in high-quality teaching, but not that schools can teach children out of poverty alone. Free school meal data is a signal, not a diagnosis. Staff listen deeply to children and families before acting. TVEd believes that a commitment to deep social justice requires deep social listening and seeing our roles in education as civic and social architects.

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To provide one component part of this in action, TVEd has provided the following as one example of inequality impacting the lives of many children and families. Listening uncovered sleep inequalities as a hidden barrier to learning, and this challenges the narrative that families lack aspiration. What emerged through conversation was that local opportunity was often invisible to children. By sleep inequality, TVEd refers to multiple barriers such as bed poverty, inadequate sleeping resources, and structural barriers to sleep impacting families and children (e.g. unstable housing, cold temperatures and being unable to afford rising fuel costs).

Working in partnership. TVEd explored for some years the idea of establishing a charitable foundation or blueprint that would help coordinate local place-based responses to problems such as sleep inequality. However, after careful social listening and scoping with local families and other organisations it became apparent that this would duplicate existing provision and potentially add to issues for local charitable organisations already doing good work.

As a result, TVEd spent considerable time exploring what a partnership methodology could look like for local communities across the Tees Valley. This led to the establishment of the award-winning methodology of PLACE (People, Learning and Community Engagement) as a response to understanding and tackling place-based inequalities across the Tees Valley.

As Sean Harris says, we "gang up on the problem, not on each other". In the case of tackling sleep inequalities, TVEd partnered with Zarach, which provides beds, and The Sleep Charity, which trains Sleep Champions, alongside other partners to plan and implement this work.

Another aspect of the PLACE approach is Classroom to Careers, in which children at an early age have meaningful encounters with hyperlocal industries across the Tees Valley. This has involved educators and industry leaders across local communities working together through the methodology of PLACE to both design and deliver curriculum, encounters and meaningful interactions with children and industry from a very early age.

Through PLACE, TVEd is adamant that schools and academies should not see their role as ‘beating hearts’ in communities, but rather as vital organs in ecosystems designed to support conditions for all children to flourish, especially those facing poverty-related barriers to learning.

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The net: building capacity together

TVEd created PLACE (People, Learning and Community Engagement), led by a Director of PLACE, and treats poverty work as core school improvement rather than something separate. The priorities of PLACE focus specifically on persistent problems of inequality that they know impact conditions for learning and access to learning. Staff across the five schools take part in poverty-informed professional development and research. In addition, this is offered to schools and other settings around the UK. TVEd has worked with over 8,500 educators and leaders to help develop poverty-informed and place-led change in their own contexts.

What is in place

PLACE has received acclaim from a number of investors, policymakers and professional spheres of influence in and beyond education. However, TVEd is clear that whilst it plays a strategic and leading role in convening, PLACE as a methodology is delivered across multiple partners and networks all working together to ensure conditions for children's learning work well.

To give examples of some of the impact of this work:

Over 400 beds delivered to families facing bed poverty and sleep inequality in just 18 months through a place-based partnership and the work of Zarach

Over 200 sleep champions trained to help diagnose and respond to sleep inequalities; facilitated through the expertise and work of The Sleep Charity

Over 1,000 children have engaged with local industries for meaningful encounters with over 98% of them saying it has helped them understand more about the opportunities and roles available to them in the Tees Valley

Over £2 million of additional investment provided to local communities and projects to support families and children facing significant levels of inequality

The publication of an award-winning book Tackling Poverty & Disadvantage in Schools which has received acclaim from across the education sector

Published research and insights with partners such as the Child of the North, the Centre for Young Lives and the Centre for Social Justice

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Over 8,500 educators and leaders served across the UK to develop poverty-informed and place-informed work in their own contexts

Challenges and lessons learned

As part of their broader system change work, TVEd is clear that PLACE also exists as a methodology to shift mental models in and beyond education that sometimes compound inequalities. For example, the misconception that low-income families somehow need fixing or lack aspiration. Evidence illustrates this is not the case, but as Katrina Morley OBE (CEO of TVEd) says, "if a child cannot see it, then it is hard to be it". This is why approaches such as Classroom to Careers help to create visible opportunities for children and families.

How they made it possible

First step: listening to families and children, and asking local partners before building anything. It is imperative that we see our role as convening with others and understanding the context that we serve. We need to shift away from narratives that place us as the spearhead or solo leader in ecosystems.

Roles and time: a senior Director of PLACE role, with poverty-informed practice treated as core school improvement rather than an add-on. It is important to establish principles such as PLACE as a methodology rather than as a model. As we often say to settings we work with, do not simply adopt our model, adapt it but adopt the principles and intentionality that sit behind it.

Funding is important, but money alone cannot solve inequalities. Instead, develop a clear theory of change and collaboration (ToCC). We then use these to identify potential resource flows and funding opportunities. This avoids chasing money or funding; this can also help to shift the narrative from intervention to ecosystem. If you have to attract funding, then consider doing this alongside partners around common problems rather than all the funding going to one silo organisation.

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Partners: local charities and employers deliver; the Trust connects, secures funding and shares the learning. It is important to develop ecosystem maps and asset mapping tools to support with this. This helps both to direct and discern our work and priorities, and who we need to work with.

Starting with what you have: a family survey in the school newsletter led to a community magazine co-produced with families, which includes ideas such as budget cooking and low-cost days out. You do not need to simply run focus groups about poverty; our marketing and messaging focus groups have facilitated broader discussions about local need in such a way that families are able to maintain dignity without talking directly about poverty or inequality. However, these opportunities also matter.

Before creating anything new, map what already exists locally.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Ask local partners first: our first idea, a new charity, would have duplicated what already existed.

In your setting

School context: What problem are we actually trying to solve, and whose knowledge is missing? Phrases like educational disadvantage and child poverty are arguably too broad in their scope. So, consider the domains of the problem you may need to prioritise and which directly impact learning conditions and access in your setting

Working in partnership: What already exists locally, and what should the school group contribute or leave to others? Educational inequality cannot be tackled by education alone; so we need to be careful about proposing that quality-first teaching or the efficacy of a teacher is the most important solution. Evidence tells us this matters, but it takes a whole-school culture and ecosystem to impact inequalities.

Building capacity together: Do we treat poverty and disadvantage as core school improvement, with senior capacity behind it?

> *"Do not copy the projects. Copy the discipline and intentionality."*
>
> **Sean Harris, Tees Valley Education**

Full paper and supporting sources

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