

# SSAT Journal 25

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# Curriculum, misconceptions and poverty

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**Poverty is arguably the most complex of issues facing children, communities and schools. We have [written about this before at SSAT](#). Poverty is complex and multi-faceted, so the response to it from schools needs to be more than a welfare or pastoral one. In *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* (2009), American educator Eric Jensen explores risk factors linked to disadvantaged pupils.**

He notes the importance of leaders knowing that poverty “involves a complex array of risk factors that adversely affect the population in a multitude of ways”. Poverty is clearly on the radar of schools, charities, and policy-makers. However, between the political rhetoric and some people’s limited lived experience of hardship, [poverty can often be misunderstood](#) (Harris, 2024).



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Despite recent pedagogical and sector advancements, we have observed some detachment of poverty, hardship, and disadvantage from curriculum and policy developments. Understanding of curriculum has expanded, yet attainment and post-school education continuation remain heavily influenced by indicators of disadvantage (Lessof et al, 2018). Middle leaders and classroom teachers play pivotal roles in crafting curriculum, emphasising the need for collective input beyond senior leadership (Oates, 2010; Robinson, 2015; Turner, 2016) but perhaps curriculum is still too often contained in senior leadership silos. Curriculum development is iterative; it demands ongoing review, discussion, and refinement (Turner et al, 2016). In my experience, poverty should be at the heart of curriculum discussions too.

Our project revolves around developing the educational journey for children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, by incorporating their perspectives into curriculum design. As teachers, we have observed how easily assumptions about pupils' prior knowledge can lead to gaps in understanding. We [implemented a small-scale pilot project across two multi-academy Trusts](#) initially that helped us to see this. In one RE and humanities lesson exploring Islamophobia, a year 9 pupil innocently questioned the term "British Muslim". In another example, a primary-aged pupil thought that an issue for people living near the coast might be that a coconut could fall on their head. Perhaps you are unfamiliar with our beaches in the North of England, but we don't have any palm trees or coconuts on our coastline! In both cases, pupils' misconceptions were significant and were amplified by the context in which these pupils lived.

With funding and support from Let Teachers SHINE, we embarked on a journey to explore how curriculum can better support pupils from low-income backgrounds. Collaborating with the Chartered College of Teaching and Evidence Based Education, we deepened our understanding of poverty and misconceptions. We have researched teachers' understanding of misconceptions and their incorporation into curriculum and lesson design, mapping common misconceptions and poverty's exacerbating role.

This year, our project team have worked hard together to understand and define what we mean by poverty and to consider what we mean by 'misconceptions'. This has involved teachers working closely with colleagues at the Chartered College of Teaching and Evidence Based Education to develop our knowledge of pedagogy, research and curriculum. Colleagues have researched with two of our academies how teachers and support staff understand the concept of misconceptions and how they plan for these as part of curriculum and lesson design. This has involved a team of teachers beginning to map the most common misconceptions that arise in a selection of subject areas (e.g. reading, science, history) and the reasons why this might be. This team have then considered and researched the ways in which poverty further contributes to these and how teachers can begin to plan with this in mind.

In the upcoming year, we plan to expand the project, working in co-production with pupils to contribute actively to curriculum development. Our goal is to create a toolkit rooted in children's voices, providing practical guidance for educators to address poverty-related barriers to learning. This project validates our commitment to equitable education, beyond mere financial support. I'm thankful for SHINE's support and excited to continue reshaping education for all children, bolstered by the support of colleagues at Evidence Based Education and the Chartered College of Teaching.

**Sean and the team at TVEd work with schools and organisations across the UK, developing research and approaches to poverty-informed practice in schools.** You can find out more by visiting <https://www.teesvalleyeducation.co.uk/trust-specialisms/social-justice-equality/>



**Katrina Morley** (@Katrina\_morley) is CEO of Tees Valley Education Trust. Katrina is equally passionate about social justice and works alongside a vast network of

individuals and organisations to champion social justice through the work of schools and system leaders in education. Examples include Northern Power of Women, Tech Equal, Schools North East and SSAT National Primary Board.



**Sean Harris** (@SeanHarris\_NE) is a doctoral researcher with Teesside University investigating poverty and how system-leaders can further work with children and

families to investigate it. Sean is also an education journalist and leader of research at Tees Valley Education Trust. Sean writes extensively about teacher-education, social justice and leadership development.

## References

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## Other links

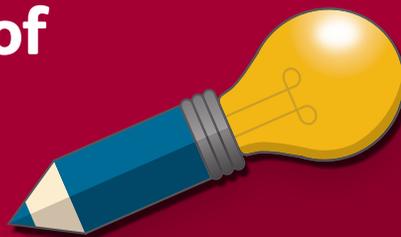
Chartered College of Teaching  
<https://chartered.college/>

Evidence Based Education  
<https://evidencebased.education/>

SHINE: Let Teachers Shine funding  
<https://shinetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/let-teachers-shine/>

Tees Valley Education  
<https://www.teesvalleyeducation.co.uk/>

# Would you like to showcase elements of your school practice nationally?



SSAT aims to promote fresh ideas for ambitious schools via our publications that share innovation and best practice from school-based practitioners and thought leaders in education.

We are interested to hear about any aspect of your practice – whole school, departmental or smaller scale.

We find the most successful pieces have a practical element that could be used as a discussion point in schools or provide insights into a classroom strategy that has had a positive impact.

You may wish to share reflections on an aspect of education policy, issues affecting schools or share recent practice on key areas such as:

- ▶ **Curriculum**
- ▶ **Leadership**
- ▶ **Teaching and learning**
- ▶ **Teacher and/or student wellbeing**

Your article could be included in one of our weekly e-bulletins to members or in the next edition of the Journal.



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We exist to help improve outcomes for all young people. As a membership organisation of schools and academies across the UK and internationally, we work with leaders, teachers and pupils to drive school improvement and innovation, and celebrate their successes.

We believe in a **truly school-led system**, with schools working in partnership across and beyond the education sector.

At SSAT's heart are our **membership networks**, bringing together school leaders, teachers and pupils. We have been working with schools for over 30 years, and continue to **offer insight and understanding** into teaching, learning and system leadership.

Our **professional development** and **school improvement programmes** help leaders and teachers to further outcomes for all young people, and develop leadership at all levels across the system.

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