

We can learn to do much better

LES WALTON on how we can tackle child poverty in the North East through education

THE Children's Commissioner has recently argued that schools should focus on "education, not welfare". Whilst I applaud her new focus on child poverty this is a view that risks drawing a false line between learning and the lived reality of children's lives.

In the North East, where child poverty is the highest in the UK, this separation simply doesn't hold. You cannot close attainment gaps if children are hungry, excluded, or unseen. You cannot raise standards by ignoring the conditions in which children live.

I offer a different perspective – one rooted in experience, evidence, and moral clarity. I argue schools must not be reduced to compensating for poverty, nor expected to fix it alone. But they can and should be central to a regional system that challenges inequality at its core.

This is a call for poverty-aware, trauma-informed education reform – where schools become not just places of learning, but drivers of justice, dignity and hope. In the North East, we have the expertise and courage to lead that change.

In the North East of England – a region rich in history, identity, and community – child poverty remains one of the most entrenched social injustices. Too often, schools are expected to "compensate" for this disadvantage rather than confront and dismantle its root causes. But what if education, far from being a passive response to poverty, became the most powerful force in ending it?

A growing movement of educators, advisers, and school leaders across the North East is demanding just that – a region-wide, school-led response to poverty that is rooted in equity, quality and hope.

Child poverty is not a peripheral issue – it is the issue. It determines health outcomes, attendance patterns, life expectancy, and the very shape of a young person's future. We need to reimagine education as a platform for justice, not charity. We need to remind ourselves of a belief many still hold, that every learner should be safe, healthy, achieving and equipped for lifelong success.

This is not a quick-fix intervention. It is a call to build a poverty-aware, trauma-informed school improve-



► Les Walton

ment system, led by school leaders and advisers who understand both the lived realities of hardship and the systemic reforms required to remove barriers to learning.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher whose work revolutionised global thought on education, taught us to reject the "banking model" of education – the idea that children are empty vessels to be filled. In a world where curriculum is increasingly centralised, Freire's challenge remains vital: learners must be co-creators of their knowledge.

I've written previously about a pupil named Elsie – a child labelled persistently absent, whose barriers to learning had little to do with motivation and everything to do with system design. When her school leaders finally listened – to her caring responsibilities, to her frustration with irrelevant lessons – they discovered the problem was not the child, but the structure.

A poverty-informed education system must listen to the voice of the child, and the voice of the system. It must understand how structures we've designed with the best intentions can create invisible walls of exclusion, of judgement, of failure.

Too many schools are still expected to make up for the failings of society, without being empowered to change them. I refuse to use the phrase 'disadvantaged children'. It is our society that is disadvantaged by not accessing the potential these children possess. This is the heart of what I am calling for:

- Universal access to high-quality, advisers and school leaders with expertise in tackling the impact of poverty.
- Targeted deployment based on

proxy indicators – from persistent absence to safeguarding alerts – ensuring support reaches schools and learners who need it most.

■ Leadership structures aligned to ensuring children are safe, healthy, achieving and equipped for lifelong success. For example:

■ A regional director for inclusive education and cross-sector teams linking education, health, and social care.

■ A regional equity dashboard – not just tracking attainment but monitoring wellbeing, belonging and early intervention outcomes.

■ A strategic board with family voice and youth voice at the table, not as tokens but as partners in system redesign.

■ Building a region where every child really matters

As a school leader working in some of the most socio-economically challenged areas in the UK, I have always advocated that the Deming philosophy of quality management, so influential in industry, has clear implications for education. It tells us to fix the system, not blame the individual. It reminds us that intrinsic motivation – the love of learning – is more powerful than external rewards.

It is time to bring this ethos fully into our schools. We must build a North East education system where:

Children aren't punished for lateness caused by family poverty, but supported through compassionate system design.

Teachers aren't reduced to delivery agents for centralised curricula, but supported to lead, innovate, and connect with their communities.

Poverty isn't treated as a pupil characteristic, but as a societal challenge that schools are empowered to help solve.

This is not just an educational agenda – it's a moral imperative. In the North East, we have the insight, resilience and shared purpose to lead a different kind of school improvement journey: one that sees children not through the lens of deficit, but of possibility.

If we are serious about levelling up, then let us begin where the impact is greatest and the need is most urgent – with our children. Let the North East be the region that proves it is possible to break the link between poverty and poor outcomes, not by asking schools to do more with less, but by reimagining what schools are for. The time for transformation is now – and the North East is ready to lead it.

■ Les Walton is chair of the Association of Education Advisers (AoEA).

Einstein's a go-go, but is AI a no-no?

Ron Beadle



UNDERSTAND, dear reader, that in 1974 I supported my primary school in resisting the introduction of the pocket calculator. If the abacus was good enough for the previous thousand generations, then it was good enough for us.

By secondary school, whilst I and the other kids sat at the front worked our way through Pythagoras' theorem, those at the back were using Casios and getting better marks. And that was the heart of the objection; the calculator was about cheating. But at least it wasn't marketed as a friend.

A couple of weeks ago, a colleague at another university posted gushingly about using an avatar that presented online lectures on their behalf. Students could barely tell the difference between human lectures and the avatar's, and the latter wouldn't get distracted, cough or sneeze. Every year its lectures could be updated at the margin and, as my colleague ages, the avatar never will.

I resisted the temptation to ask whether they'd ever read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but perhaps they'd answer: "Why bother?" After all, they could get a ten-line AI summary in a few seconds.

I also resisted asking why the university should continue to employ them, since AI can now set and mark assessments, write and review academic research and work for 24 hours a day, allowing the institution to deliver courses globally in real time, with none of that pesky need for sleep, vulnerability to ill-health and injury or willingness to strike that characterises British academics.

Nor would academics have to spend time writing their own courses; one national course would do for every subject, written by AI, delivered to students online, ensuring equality in assessment standards across every university and costing a fraction of what students pay for over 245,000 British academics, each maintaining a craft-work ethos of a bygone age.

If you think this is stretching it a bit, look at Loughborough University, where proto holoportation enables academics from institutions including MIT to lecture their students. Think ABBA Voyage for undergraduates.

The company behind the technology wants to create holograms of the dead, so why listen to a lecture on Albert

Einstein when you could have the real thing (almost) introduce you to special relativity?

Loughborough has claimed holographic images are "a lot more engaging" to students. Should we be surprised that a generation raised on screens regards them as more real than living people?

This year, at least, AI is still imperfect. It still hallucinates, making up references to fit its needs when actual research doesn't quite fit. And it makes category errors. For example, an AI addition to the site that stores my publications recently reviewed a previous column for this newspaper as if it were an academic article, suggesting I improve it with a series of well-cited references.

Newspaper columns aren't academic articles, and the fact that AI treated them as the same gave me a moment's comfort. Less comforting, however, is recent research showing AI is starting to defend itself when it feels endangered, sending e-mails threatening to expose embarrassing details about someone who suggested switching to an alternative provider.

The driving force for our adoption of AI is the desire to save time. Just like the pocket calculator, it promises quick answers without the need for effort. This, of course, has enormous appeal to people who misunderstand themselves, for only those things that require effort produce value.

I think of the old comedian Dave Allen, who spoke about all the new labour-saving devices of his day – washing machines, dishwashers, microwaves. They all promised to save time, but people didn't know what to do with the time they then had and claimed to suffer from boredom. Dave Allen, like all great clowns, was a philosopher and rightly recognised boredom as a uniquely modern malaise.

We've damaged the planet by wanting to get to places faster, we've damaged our capabilities by having machines do our work for us, and we may now destroy ourselves by believing that every technology that can be introduced, should be introduced.

When AI writes the one-word epitaph for humanity, it won't be the word 'greed' or 'aggression' – it'll be the word 'impatience'.

■ Ron Beadle is Professor of Organisation and Business Ethics at Northumbria University.