

Tackling Educational Inequality through Community-Informed Participatory Action Research: A case study of attainment gaps in Leicester schools

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1. Background

The project arises from recent DWP data showing more than 4.0 million children are living in poverty, impacting roughly 8 pupils in a classroom of 30, with a record high in Leicester of 39.5%. Many children in Leicester and Leicestershire face additional barriers to learning and participation that compromise their safety and wellbeing; those with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), from low socio-economic status backgrounds and in receipt of Pupil Premium Funding (PPF) and with special educational needs (SEND) are particularly at risk. These children are also disproportionately more likely to be excluded or suspended from school, with negative implications for short-term academic achievement and long-term life chances.

2. Purpose: building community-focused partnerships to address local challenges

In May 2025 De Montfort University's Professor Julia Shaw was awarded a Research England Development Fund grant via the *Collaboratory Research Hub*. The project partners with local Leicester multi-academy trust, The Mead Educational Trust, and Loughborough University to support the appointment of a community-based doctoral researcher. Titled, *Transformative and innovative strategies for improving social support, educational outcomes and opportunities for children, young people and families in Leicester*, the project adopts an interdisciplinary, sociolegal and socioeconomic, approach to critically addressing the causes behind poor educational outcomes in many of Leicester's schools.

DMU also partners with the social mobility charity *The Brilliant Club* to deliver their scalable and data-driven Scholars Programme in state schools across Leicester and Leicestershire. What makes this initiative distinct is its track record in boosting equity in education, boosting both GCSE attainment and university progression rates. Doctoral researcher Holly Swift works with local schoolchildren, using her critical research skills and research insights to provide them with a unique opportunity to experience university-style learning and gain confidence. Through her dedication to inspiring pupils from under-represented and less advantaged backgrounds, Holly has made a substantial contribution to fostering a lifelong love of learning, and nurtured the ambition to pursue a university education, in those young people who are too often facing the greatest life challenges.

3. How our research delivers local and national strategic priorities

Our community-based collaborative research aligns with the Department of Education's recent initiatives including the white paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (published 23 February 2026) representing both major reform and a radical expansion of support for the rights of children and young people in the UK with special educational needs and disabilities. The white paper prioritises clarity, consistency, sustainability and the expansion of children's rights respond directly to longstanding concerns documented by parents, councils and parliamentary committees. Importantly, our research augments Leicester County Council's (LCC) Belonging in Education Strategy 2026-2029, LCC Children and Family Services Departmental Plan 2026-2029, and *Every Day Counts* Attendance Strategy 2026-2029, with the core mission to ensure "every child is supported in attending school regularly through a collaborative and child-centred approach that reflects their lived experiences, removes barriers, promotes wellbeing and ensures they belong".

4. Communities of Practice: Collaboration Model

Bringing together academic capabilities, community-based knowledge and practical experience of local educational performance and needs, we have identified and mapped a broader set of local risk factors and develop distinctive knowledge and expertise in the local context. This new information has not only the potential to empower local educational trusts, schools and communities, but also to operationalise the local council's commitment to community empowerment and participatory governance. In developing both evidence-based and solution-oriented responses that combine lived experiences with best practice data analytics, we aim to trial these new methodologies and innovative practice strategies to improve the educational and social outcomes of all vulnerable children, locally and nationally.

5. Overcoming challenges and learning together

Being underpinned by a genuinely inclusive research culture, this project is founded on a broader set of ethical values and imperatives which not only enhance the overall research quality but also foster more tangible and measurable equitable outcomes. The researchers are learning to overcome structural barriers such as different time constraints, competing priorities and agendas, and to reach agreement on meaningful and sustainable aims of the work, for example, what constitutes useful outputs for all partners beyond traditional academic publications and reports. Despite some challenges which are inevitable when a collection of different voices, perspectives and experiences are actively engaged in the co-production of knowledge, we have found that the richness and vitality of our sometimes-divergent views has both enhanced the research process and positively impacted how the research outcomes are being usefully integrated into broader policy and practice.

6. Community-informed participatory action research (CPAR) as a powerful force for public good

De Montfort University together with Loughborough University and our community partners are co-creating new and innovative knowledge with which to empower local schools, and to operationalise LCC and national strategies in tackling the root causes of educational inequality. Through equal and reciprocal local-level partnerships these practical tools have the capacity to close the attainment gap by improving educational outcomes in Leicester's schools and inform policy discussions at the national level. Removing the barriers which prevent our children from flourishing is a core ideal of social justice, enshrined in UN SDGs 4 and 16. Our work also supports DMU's mission as the UN Academic Impact Global Hub for SDG 11, by aiming to cultivate inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable environments for children to live, play, learn and thrive.

By adopting a community-informed participatory action research (CPAR) model, importantly this project demonstrates how universities can be drivers of meaningful and measurable civic value and establish themselves as high-impact community-anchored civic institutions.

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