

Transcript

00:00:01 Claire

Welcome to the Repair-Ed podcast where we reflect on education and reimagine equitable futures. I'm Claire Neaves, a researcher who worked in education in the city of Bristol in the South West of England for over 15 years. In each episode, I'll talk to educators and thinkers about current injustices in our schooling system and their ideas for creating fairer educational futures. This podcast forms part of Repair-Ed: a 5 year project, funded by UKRI to examine educational inequality in Bristol's primary schools.

00:00:33 Claire

Welcome to another episode of the Repair-Ed podcast. My guest today is Charlotte Orpin-Wright, a regional delivery lead for the Education Endowment Foundation and a former teacher. In fact, we both taught at the same school many years ago.

00:00:47 Claire

Afternoon, Charlotte. So you're here in a personal capacity today, although we're hoping that some of your knowledge of the data through your role in the EEF will be really interesting for our listeners, especially those who are local to Bristol and the South West.

00:01:00 Claire

Can you share a bit about your journey into teaching and then how you ended up in your current role?

00:01:05 Charlotte

Yeah, absolutely. Hi Claire, great to see you today. So I was a teacher for around 12 years. I taught originally for 2 1/2 years in South America, actually in Argentina in Buenos Aires in an international school there. I was a teacher of English and then I came back to England and qualified through Teach First back in 2013. I was one of the first, well in fact the first cohort in the South West.

00:01:32 Charlotte

So I taught in a South Bristol school, in fact the school where Claire and I met. And then I continued to teach in Bristol schools until 2023 and I took on various middle and senior leadership roles across that time before moving over to the Education Endowment Foundation where I now work as the regional lead for the South West and South coast of England.

00:01:56 Claire

Great, thank you. Could you explain a little bit about what the Educational Endowment Foundation does?

00:02:02 Charlotte

Yeah, absolutely. So we're an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational attainment. So essentially at the EEF, we believe that the amount of money your parents or carers earn should not dictate your outcomes in education. And unfortunately, the data shows us right now that there is a huge link and it's something we're working hard to try and address.

00:02:29 Claire

Great, thank you. So our project, Repair-Ed, focuses on educational inequality and I know you've got, as you said, some particular insight into economic disadvantage through your work. So would you be able to share a bit of the data from the South West and perhaps Bristol in particular?

00:02:44 Charlotte

Yeah, absolutely. So the Education Policy Institute, I'll call them the EPI in this talk today, they've recently released a report in 2025, just in September, actually, looking at the gaps in months in terms of attainment for children at all key stages. So from early years right the way through to key stage 5.

00:03:08 Charlotte

So I mean, that's a great place to start when we're thinking about data. So if we think about early years, you know, right at the start of a child's journey. The national picture in England right now is that even at that early stage, there's a 4.7 month gap between children who receive free school meals and children who do not.

00:03:28 Charlotte

That gap widens again nationally into key stage two, where it's around 10 months difference in learning.

00:03:36 Charlotte

And then finally, by key stage four, there's a 19.1 gap in learning between those groups of children.

00:03:43 Charlotte

And unfortunately, in Bristol, the gap's even bigger at every single key stage. So in early years, there's a five-month gap in Bristol, and then it widens to 13 months at key stage 2, and then into 22.4 months. So nearly two years' worth of learning gap by the end of key stage 4, those crucial GCSE results.

00:04:07 Claire

I was going to, and I was going to say, what does that gap actually mean? So is that comparing kind of end of key stage outcomes, like statutory...

00:04:14 Charlotte

Exactly. So it's using the national data points. So looking at GCSE results, SATs at the end of key stage two, year six, and then a good level of development in early years.

00:04:27 Charlotte

So it's a really stark picture to be faced with, you know, in 2025, that there's such poor outcomes for children who receive free school meals compared to children who do not. And it's something that at the EEF we're deeply concerned about.

00:04:43 Charlotte

And in fact, interestingly, pre-pandemic, there was sort of a 10-year period where the gaps at all key stages were closing. You know, real, you could call it sort of rapid narrowing over the 10 years before the pandemic. And then unfortunately, during COVID, the gap widening, I mean, it took place for every group of children, but actually the biggest gap widening took place within socioeconomically disadvantaged children's households.

00:05:15 Charlotte

And so now really we're still reeling from that as a country trying to close those gaps again. But when you look at the data, it's almost 10 years of lost progress that's happened. So yeah, it's a big job for school leaders and teachers to try to overcome that now.

00:05:34 Claire

And I know that it's something that school leaders and teachers are directed to focus on in terms of addressing those gaps. For those listeners who aren't teachers, do you want to explain a bit about sort of how we categorise these children?

00:05:53 Claire

So you've mentioned free school meals and then there's the pupil premium. So what's kind of the intention with the pupil premium?

00:05:59 Charlotte

Yeah, so Pupil Premium exists as a way to essentially give schools some money, a premium, for children who are either living in poverty, and that's defined by children who receive free school meals. So you're only entitled to free school meals if you meet certain criteria. It's now based on universal credit, and in the past it was to do with family income. So that's one way that you'd be classed as, as pupil premium.

00:06:28 Charlotte

And then another way is if you're a looked after or a previously looked after child, so if you've been in the care system.

00:06:34 Charlotte

Interestingly, actually at the EEF, we tend to focus when we do our data analysis, we look specifically at those in receipt of free school meals. That's because our brief is around socioeconomic disadvantage. And of course, there's lots of children, you know, perhaps who are adopted, who are actually then in wealthier families. So however, the way pupil premium works is those children are included within the categorisation as well, because they will be vulnerable in their own ways as well.

00:07:03 Claire

Yeah, so there's that distinction between pupil premium and in receipt of free school meals, which is specifically economically disadvantaged. I'm just wondering actually, because I came out of teaching a while back and the difference between basing pupil premium or free school meals on income versus universal credit, has that, so does that mean that there are potentially families who would be entitled to benefits who aren't claiming them, who therefore then aren't in receipt of free school meals and could be.

00:07:44 Charlotte

Yeah, absolutely. And there's a huge, that's a real problem across the country, but especially in rural communities, there can be stigma attached to a signing up to receive free school meals, and especially in schools where actually there's fewer families taking up those meals. It can be a real struggle for teachers trying to encourage families to claim them when they're entitled to them because they don't want the stigma of it. And then that means that premium, that money that's really there for the children to have that extra input in school isn't being claimed by the school. So that doesn't help.

00:08:24 Claire

And that amount of money varies vastly from school to school, doesn't it? Because of course, children who are in receipt of free school meals aren't evenly distributed across. And we've got a map on our website which shows kind of the distribution. And it's really unequal, isn't it?

00:08:42 Charlotte

Absolutely. So, you know, a big inner city secondary school, their people premium funding could be hundreds of thousands versus a small, you know, one form entry primary school in a rural community. We might be talking a few 100 pounds a year. And so what schools can then do with that money varies drastically.

00:09:02 Charlotte

And it's important, I think, that schools are really taking the time to look into how they're spending their money. There's better and worse ways to do that. I think that's something we might touch on later on in the podcast.

00:09:16 Claire

Yeah, well, let's get into talking about schools because you worked in Bristol for over a decade as a teacher and a senior leader. So what was your experience as a teacher in Bristol?

00:09:26 Charlotte

Yeah, I mean, I think I find it quite hard to answer a question like that because I worked in quite different schools. So I originally worked with yourself, Claire, in a South Bristol school, very high numbers of children who were PP and a very particular, I guess, kind of demographic of children there. And then I worked in a central Bristol school, which was just very different in terms of the student population. Again, still a large number of children receiving free school meals, but actually what that looked like, the needs of those communities were really different even within Bristol, for example, the school I worked at most recently, lots of children who were international, who'd come from other countries, and so perhaps English was not their first language and there was sometimes challenges around that, but actually perhaps had families that were really keen for them to do well within the English education system.

00:10:28 Charlotte

So kind of quite different, just different, different children, different needs. And so I guess, yeah, Bristol as a whole, I find it hard to comment on that. It's a diverse city with a, that has

a diverse set of needs as it should, which would reflect the student population. So I think ultimately there won't be one kind of fix all solution as there never is with tricky problems.

00:10:54 Claire

Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, one of the ideas that we're working with on the project is around Bristol being this divided city. And so you worked in a few schools around Bristol. Was that your experience, that kind of communities were very different? I mean, from the outside, Bristol is a really diverse city, but kind of when it comes to individual school communities, was that diversity there or were they very different, the schools you worked in?

00:11:23 Charlotte

Yeah, I think my experience with the South Bristol School was it served the South Bristol community that was immediately outside the school gates and that was a very different community to the school that I then worked at in central Bristol.

00:11:39 Charlotte

I think it's, I worked in secondary schools and actually my central Bristol secondary school did serve a lot of Bristol because of the nature of, it was on bus routes essentially so children could get there from lots of different places which was very different to the South Bristol school where actually everyone was just within, almost within walking distance of that school.

00:12:00 Charlotte

But I think within the primary schools, it's even more pronounced where they're smaller, they have smaller catchment areas. And so, the quality of each primary school is very different in Bristol, even just a few miles apart, because of, as you described, serving those different communities.

00:12:20 Claire

Yeah, there's sort of really distinct challenges in each of the schools. And I think it's sort of important to acknowledge that whilst your work is around educational disadvantage, there are lots of other factors at play, aren't there? You know, there's racism, there's classism, you know, the special educational needs system needs a complete overhaul.

00:12:42 Claire

You know, there's so many factors at play. If you think about kind of your knowledge and understanding of the statistics and then your experience in classrooms and working with families, what do you think are the biggest barriers to equity in education at the moment?

00:12:56 Charlotte

Oh, such a big question. I think, look, high quality teaching is one of, if not the biggest lever we as educators have to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. I think, you know, the practitioner ultimately is the intervention. And yet in England, you know, we're facing worsening shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in secondary STEM subjects, but actually really across the board. And a large part of this shortage kind of reflects declining rates of retention among early career teachers and also female teachers in their early 30s leaving in droves.

00:13:34 Charlotte

And we know that this recruitment and retention crisis is, is hitting all schools, but actually schools serving poorer communities are being impacted the most by these issues.

00:13:44 Charlotte

So the April 2025 EPI report examined the differences between teaching workforces in schools and compared sort of the most advantaged and disadvantaged pupils and the schooling they were receiving. And it found these substantial and persistent gaps in terms of teacher experience in the classroom, who was in front of these children was radically different depending on the communities that those schools served, as well as in subject expertise and staff turnover and absent rates.

00:14:17 Charlotte

So for example, teachers in disadvantaged schools just are less experienced. On average, they have three years less teaching experience than those in less disadvantaged schools. That's a national picture, but I don't see any reason why that wouldn't be the case in Bristol as well.

00:14:35 Charlotte

And interestingly, school leadership experience gaps have widened as well in recent years. And that's new. So there's been gaps in experience for a while in across the board in teachers in front of children. But actually recently, the leadership gaps have grown as well. So head teachers in the most disadvantaged schools have on average three years less experience than those in more affluent schools.

00:15:04 Claire

And you could argue they have a harder job as well.

00:15:08 Charlotte

That also plays out in the stats as well. So the average, the turnover rate of staff is around 7 to 8% higher in schools that serve more disadvantaged communities. So when I'm talking about, you know, what, how do we change things? How do we improve things? We need high quality teaching to be going on and we need leaders, experienced leaders. And at the moment, schools serving disadvantaged communities are really, really missing out, I suppose, on that.

00:15:39 Charlotte

So I think, you know, we need to incentivize somehow, you know, we need to incentivize the best teachers to work in schools which need the most. So that could be a financial incentive, but it could also be a more sort of creative approach. For example, like a nine-day working fortnight is something that the EEF is doing an evaluation of at the moment. So thinking about whether that has an impact on teacher retention, if you can be more flexible and sort of creative in thinking about how to retain teachers.

00:16:12 Claire

There is an academy trust that's implemented that, isn't there?

00:16:15 Charlotte

Yeah. That's the one that the EEF is evaluating right now, so it's the Dixon Academy Trust. So it involves changing teachers' contractual hours to give them an extra day off a fortnight, but with no reduction in salary. So it'll be really interesting to see the impact that has on staff retention. I mean, the initial data from the trial is really positive. So it's been positively received by staff, of course, but you know, job satisfaction has gone up. There's fewer claiming that they're thinking about leaving, but it will be a while yet, but until the final evaluation is out. So, watch this space.

00:16:54 Claire

And I suppose that flexibility, sort of going off track here, but it's something I'm really interested in... That flexibility would do a lot to address that demographic of women in their 30s being a huge group who leave, conscious that we both left teaching as, you know, women in our 30s. And, you know, a lot of that is down to caring responsibilities, which fall mainly on women and it just not being compatible with teaching as a career.

00:17:28 Charlotte

That's it. I think work-life balance ultimately changes as you age. And yeah, I think you and I have both experienced it as women in schools. And I think actually that's something that we need to think hard about because these are the teachers we want to hold on to and who ultimately should then go on and be leading schools. And yet we're losing them in droves.

00:17:49 Charlotte

I think another thing as well around, another barrier really, is just around the understanding of disadvantage. So this is something I see a lot in the South West. Just to truly change things and improve things within a school, there needs to be a real understanding of the needs of disadvantaged pupils. And that needs to avoid deficit narratives. And by deficit narratives, I mean, kind of the stories that one might tell themselves around certain pupils that actually, you know, sometimes I've heard, for example, socioeconomic disadvantage being somehow grouped together with lower ability or lower aspiration. And those things are completely separate, right?

00:18:33 Charlotte

So that still goes on in schools where there's an assumption that perhaps that family doesn't value education, that child doesn't have high aspirations for themselves and so therefore they're not going to do well. And it's incredibly unhelpful and it's untrue. The EEF's done research into this and actually children from socioeconomically disadvantaged households do not have lower aspirations than children from any other households. Their families do not care less about education than other families. In fact, it just, it might be that those narratives are almost pushed onto the children and they take them on themselves, or as they go up through the education system, the barriers really are things like a lack of opportunity, a lack of choice, a lack of availability to resources that their peers do have available to them. And that's gap widening, right? So I think we need educators, we need school leaders and teachers to have really spent time thinking about that and understanding that because you need to be quite a skilled practitioner, I think, to understand the nuance of that and then actually work out what it is that your disadvantaged pupils need and the community that you serve needs.

00:19:49 Charlotte

And so...Yeah, we need headteachers to give staff time to do that thinking and really understand the context in which their school is placed. So, and that might involve pupil voice, it might involve parent voice. It really should involve kind of bringing the community into schools, I think, to understand what's going to make the difference here rather than making assumptions.

00:20:12 Claire

Absolutely. And I think one of the things that comes out in a lot of this, whether it's research or just general kind of discourse around educational disadvantage and deficit narratives, is that quite often teachers and school leaders don't share the same background as the pupils that they're teaching. And they come in with almost this kind of saviour complex of, you know, it came to mind when you were talking about incentivising working in disadvantaged schools earlier.

00:20:42 Claire

So that sounds great, but we need to do that in a way that avoids kind of a doubling down of that saviour mentality of, I'm a middle class, usually white, teacher who's going to go in and, save these disadvantaged children from their awful upbringings and backgrounds.

00:21:02 Claire

And because that's really pervasive, isn't it? And I think there's a lot at the moment around white working class boys, although, you know, I think this week, as we're recording this, there's been an article written about now white working class girls are the forgotten, you know, and there's so much kind of deficit narrative that plays into that, you know, even kind of putting aside the race issue where, you know, when we talk about working class, we're not talking about white children. You know, there are plenty of Black and brown families who are working class.

00:21:37 Claire

But yeah, it's really difficult, I think, avoiding that deficit thinking and we talked a bit about it in another episode with Curtis from Class 13 and they're really, really good to check out on deficit narratives.

00:21:54 Claire

I think...Let's come to hope because, that's, you've sort of started talking a little bit about what would make a difference, but, where is the hope in the system? Are there any examples of schools or areas that are doing really, really well in tackling disadvantage or, what are the strategies that are having an impact?

00:22:12 Charlotte

I think, I mean, thinking about thinking about approaches and strategies, a big thing that we have to that we have to acknowledge is the pupil premium, so the money that's given directly to schools, it's essentially the biggest redistribution of wealth that this country's

ever seen with the aim of improving outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children.

00:22:33 Charlotte

It's a huge, it's a huge, hard, like hard-fought for, hard, you know, hard-won policy that should be there to try and to try and make a difference. Now, there's ways, there's better and worse ways to spend that money and the EEF's looked at that a lot. So I think, there's hope in that because we've got examples, from across the country of schools doing incredible things with that.

00:23:04 Charlotte

I think, the Guide to Pupil Premium is a great place to start. That's on the EEF website. But I think schools thinking hard about what they're doing with that money to really have the best impact on teaching and learning is hugely important.

00:23:20 Charlotte

I think, I think partnership feels really important right now. And so whether that's thinking locally, regionally, nationally, sort of system level change feels, feels so important. Having worked in schools for 12 years, we know how busy and how stretched school staff are, including leadership teams, perhaps especially leadership teams and head teachers. This is a really sticky problem in terms of, you know, I started off with the data. The data's gotten worse in recent years in terms of the poorer outcomes for disadvantaged children. And so just sort of doing, expecting schools to manage that themselves or headteachers to sort them out themselves...

00:24:05 Charlotte

If that feels, that doesn't feel like the right approach anymore, there needs to be more middle-tier organisations, organisations like Repair-Ed and like the EEF thinking, you know, wholesale about this and really trying to work with headteachers, with local authorities, with multi-academy trusts in partnership to move things forward. And there is that work going on and I think there is hope in that.

00:24:29 Charlotte

And then I think finally, just we do have more knowledge now than we did 15 years ago about what works well for disadvantaged pupils in terms of high-quality teaching and learning in terms of approaches. And so even though there's absolutely no silver bullet, there never will be. Everything's got to be, you know, all evidence research has to then be taken alongside contextual understanding and professional knowledge. We do have some

things that you can use as a teacher now to say, right, you know, in my school, we know that literacy is one of our biggest areas that our disadvantaged children are underachieving it. Well, we've got some stuff on that, right? There's guidance reports, there's the teacher's toolkit online, which the Education Endowment Foundation has created, which essentially synthesizes peer reviewed evidence from hundreds, if not thousands of studies of trials and gives you your best bets about what will work.

00:25:28 Charlotte

We're not saying that this will definitely fix, you know, the challenge in your school, but it's a best bet, right? Because we've done these trials at scale and it's a bit of a numbers game. Once you've done a randomized controlled trial, you know, with enough schools, it's more likely that it will also work in your school as well. So I think that's a huge, that's a huge hope that schools will continue to use those resources and really tailor what they're doing to think about the children who need it most, which the data tells us is the socioeconomic disadvantaged children.

00:26:03 Claire

Do you do any analysis at the EEF around just thinking you said that, you know, these are the children who need it most? Does the EEF work at all with other characteristics like race, like special educational needs, or is it just economic disadvantage?

00:26:18 Charlotte

Our brief is to improve outcomes for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. We care deeply about all children and SEND is something that we talk about and think about a fair bit, actually, if I'm honest, when I go out and speak to head teachers, because it's such a live issue right now in the system. We, say some things about it. We have a guidance report about SEND in the mainstream.

00:26:44 Charlotte

We've worked a lot with Gary Albin. So we have bits and pieces, but actually, that's not our work. And it's sort of, I guess it's about not trying to do too many things and spreading ourselves thinly, but there are great organisations out there and I think we can all agree that the SEND system right now does indeed need an overhaul and there's work going on to do that. So we're sort of watching with bated breath at the EEF to see how that plays out.

00:27:12 Claire

Yeah. I want to ask what might be quite a provocative question, but I'm sure it's one that you've been asked before, if not you personally, but the EEF, because you talked about the

pupil premium funding as like wealth redistribution. So why not, just give that money directly to families to try and lift them out of poverty?

00:27:38 Charlotte

I guess, it's a tough question, but I guess, I mean, that money's come from the Department for Education. So that's the pot, that's the pot where the foundation money has come from. I guess, that's a kind of government policy question, isn't it? Someone's made the decision that that...

00:27:58 Claire

And I suppose it's not...It's not much money per individual child, is it?

00:28:02 Charlotte

Yeah.

00:28:02 Claire

You know, so thinking about the kind of things that you can do with that money, that will have, you know, so like you said, there are schools where it's, thousands and thousands, so you can work at scale, put all that funding together, but sort of for an individual family, that money wouldn't go very far.

00:28:19 Charlotte

And it's about what, it's about what, it's about the value of education and what education can mean to a child and a family long term, right? Because if, you know, success in education, and this is something the EEF does talk about a lot, it's, we're not in it because we care about grades. It's about the life chances that this then provides and the choice that it then provides to that child for the rest of their lives.

00:28:45 Charlotte

And actually, in terms of, yes, it's about the grades tell us something, but actually when you look at things like health outcomes for children long term, that can correlate quite closely with how they've done at school, because what it means is it can lead to all sorts of changes in terms of what food they're able to eat as they grow up, what sort of things they're exposed to or not exposed to.

00:29:09 Charlotte

It can change the direction of a child's life. And so, yeah, it feels investing in education ultimately is it's another lever, isn't it? It's another way to try and, I guess, yeah, it's another form of social justice ultimately to improve people's lives.

00:29:27 Claire

And one of the things that we're writing a paper on at the moment is organised abandonment. So looking at applying that theory to kind of the intentional disinvestment in certain communities. And, you know, one of the things that we're arguing is that where this happens, you're not only kind of depriving children in schools of, you know, quality education in the moment and communities of what they need more widely, but you're foreclosing educational futures.

00:29:57 Claire

Because as you say, education has such a big impact on what people go on to do. And Keziah talked on the podcast around, measuring outcomes. Yeah, it's not just about grades. You know, she was saying, “judge me on what those kids are doing, you know, by the time they get to 25, where's their life started to take them?” And yeah, so I think investing in education is obviously, you know, something that we all want to see.

00:30:24 Claire

So I think that's a good time to ask our final question, which is the same for all guests on this first series of the podcast. What would a just education system look like to you?

00:30:35 Charlotte

So I think ultimately it would be a system that allows children from all backgrounds to thrive. It would have a curriculum that excites and inspires and serves the students who study it, and the schools would be places of inclusion and hope and achievement and celebration for all.

00:30:55 Claire

That's a really, really lovely vision, which I wholeheartedly agree with. And I think that notion of serving the community comes back to our earlier discussions around how diverse those communities are and how distinct they are. It's not necessarily going to be the same in every school, but it needs to work. And you mentioned senior leaders and teachers really understanding the communities that they work with and it's absolutely vital.

00:31:25 Charlotte

And I think that, yeah, thank you. I think something that I almost had to balance when I was moving from sort of senior leadership in schools into working for the EEF was really, I think evidence research can sometimes feel very blanket, can't it? You can feel very much like this is what you do, do these things. And I think it's really important to acknowledge a), that the EEF isn't saying that, but b), we as school leaders, system leaders in education need to really always take in the contextual factors because every school is different, every child is different, and what research evidence tells us is that it's a best bet, right?

00:32:07 Charlotte

But you have to combine that with the professional knowledge of that school that the school leaders will bring and also the contextual information as well. And so there's three parts to that puzzle and you need all three to move forward, I think.

00:32:20 Claire

Great. Thank you so much, Charlotte. It's been really good talking to you today.

00:32:23 Charlotte

Thank you.

00:32:26 Claire

Thank you for listening to the Repair Ed podcast. Please take a listen to our other episodes and if you'd like to be a guest, get in touch. Our e-mail can be found on our website: www.repair-ed.uk.