

Addressing Poverty Through Celebrations in Schools

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Introduction

Pupils in lower-income households experience holidays, birthdays, and leavers' celebrations differently from pupils in higher-income families.

Around a third of children aged eight to eighteen fear that a friend or classmate won't get any presents or celebrate Christmas this year because their family can't afford it (Action for Children, 2023). Primary school children who **receive few or no gifts from Santa may not understand why** they do not get the same gifts as others (Action for Children, 2024) and may **question whether they're "good children"** (BBC, 2023). Also, for families in low-income households, school **fundraising activities can take up a large proportion of their weekly income** (Horgan, 2007).

Additionally, more than a quarter of **parents believed it was their duty to organise a birthday party for their child, even if they couldn't afford it**. Many cited a desire to compensate for their memories of poor childhoods, missing out on birthdays and fear of their children being bullied (Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2013).

The Poverty Proofing© the School Day Bradford sample by Children North East raised several points that need further work within this area.

In **69%** of schools, pupils were **uncomfortable having conversations about holidays as it highlights finances** – *'I don't like it because we don't celebrate Christmas.'* (pupil)

In **53%** of schools, pupils felt **financial pressure to bring in sweets to celebrate** – *'When it's our birthday we can bring in sweets to share out with our class, you don't have to but it's a nice thing to do.'* (pupil)




In **38%** of schools, **there is a gift/card giving culture around Christmas/end of year** – *'I don't bring anything in and sometimes I have felt sad about it.'* (pupil)

In **46%** of schools, it was identified that **handing out party invitations in school time excludes some children** – *'You saw children giving out some invites at break time and you felt a bit sad that you hadn't been invited.'* (pupil)

Use this document to **consider how your school's approach to celebrations is experienced through an income inequality lens**.



Questions To Ask Your School

	Question	Page
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are pupils financially able to participate in activities relating to holidays? Are pupils able to choose whether they participate in holiday-themed activities and disclose this privately? 	<u>4</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do pupils feel excluded from celebrations which may be happening outside of school? Are in-school celebrations inclusive? 	<u>6</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are all pupils financially able to participate in Leaver's celebrations? Is there a clear agreement on teacher-pupil gift exchanges? 	<u>8</u>



Holiday Celebrations

What Citizens Say



'I find it a bit embarrassing sometimes to say to the teacher I can't afford it or don't want to do it. It makes me feel bad as Christmas is all about giving, not receiving.' (pupil)

'There were [Eid party] activities during the day and after school, our families were invited to come to, it was a really big event and good fun.' (pupil)

What Your School Can Do?

Barriers

Guidance

Pupils are asked to **share and write about where they have been and what they have done** over the **holiday** period.

- **Have questions that can be used in whole-class discussions and** do not highlight financial inequalities. **Such as 'Who did you spend time with?'** Could these discussions occur one-to-one **between pupils and staff** rather than in front of other pupils?
- Approach asking pupils what they have done at weekends or holidays through the **lens of safeguarding.**

Pupils are **automatically included in class Secret Santa.**

- Agree on a **consistent approach** to Secret Santa that does not require children to buy or donate.
- Could **all presents be made in school** or purchased by the school?

Parents attending school discos must pay for tickets to attend and **supervise their children.**

- Consider whether activities to raise funds for PTA **put parents under further pressure.**
- Could a donation be a possible solution rather than a set price?

Pupils are **asked to bring resources to create holiday cards and decorations.**

- **Consider alternative funding sources.**



Barriers

Guidance

Pupils asked to bring in party food.

- Consider requesting seasonal/party food from **catering suppliers** for school dinners.
- Consider whether **religious events can be used as a learning experience or to engage with the wider school community.**

Stalls or entrance to winter fairs may add up quickly for families, especially those with more than one child.

- Make families **aware of costs before** the event, allowing them time to plan expenses.
- Ensure there **are activities that have no cost attached** at events.
- Ask for **donations** rather than buying prizes to keep costs low.
- Consider **alternative funding**, allowing events to be free or low cost.
- Consider whether a **winter fair is the right thing for families at this time.** Would a summer fair be more appropriate or no fair at all?
- Could entrance or activities be paid **as you feel?**

Case Study

Bradford School



Pupils discussed fun things that happen at Christmas, 'Santa gives you a book, everyone gets one and it's nice to have a present,' (pupil) including how they made Christmas cards and decorations in class and that **'school provided everything'**. (pupil)

A quiet space at lunchtime is provided for children who are fasting, for example during Ramadan, demonstrating that school is **inclusive to children of all faiths.**



Birthday Celebrations

What Citizens Say



'It kind of made me feel a bit sad as my friends got [a party invitation] but I didn't.' (pupil)

'My mum didn't give me any sweets to hand out and people asked me why not.' (pupil)

What Your School Can Do?

Barriers

Guidance

Not all pupils can bring in sweets to celebrate their birthday.

- Consider **curtailing the bringing in of sweets**.
- Explain to parents that they are not permitted as they **contradict healthy eating policies** and may pose problems for pupils with **allergies**.

Not all pupils can purchase gifts or celebrate birthdays with friends.

- Pupils could **make cards for all the other children** at the start of the year, and the birthday child could pick one out of the pack.
- Several schools have introduced a **birthday hat and badge** or allowed children to go in for lunch first on their birthday week.

Pupils discussed that **not everyone in the class is invited to the party**, which can make some pupils feel left out or excluded.

- Agree on a **consistent approach** to distributing party invitations in school that does not involve pupils handing out the invitations in front of the whole class.
- Some schools have decided not to **allow invitations inside of school**, asking families to arrange them before or after school.



Case Study

Bradford Schools



'All children have their **birthday acknowledged in assembly**. They receive a sticker, and everyone sings *Happy Birthday*.'
(staff)

Some schools have decided to **not allow invitations inside of school**, asking families to arrange them before or after school.

One primary school ensures that children's birthdays are celebrated in school with the **singing of Happy Birthday – sweets are no longer given**.



Leavers Celebrations

What Citizens Say



'I have to buy the large size and it's more expensive.' (pupil)

'We have to pay £15 which is a lot of money for my mum.' (pupil)

What Your School Can Do?

Barriers

Families **cannot afford to purchase Leaver's memorabilia** for their child(ren) at the end of the year.

Some pupils bring in **gifts for staff** at the end of the year and at Christmas, which can put some pupils under pressure.

Guidance

- Can leaver's celebrations and memorabilia be altered to **ensure no cost to families?**
- Consider **other ways pupils can show appreciation** to their teacher rather than bringing in gifts.
- Alternatively, all **pupils could be given time and resources to make their teacher a card** or write a
- letter of appreciation.
- Families could be **asked to donate to the food bank** rather than bring in a gift for their teacher. Donations could be collected in a central area of the school so pupils cannot identify who brings donations.

Case Study

Bradford School



'We **had a little party with ice-cream and popcorn**. We played games and watched a movie, the school paid for it all.' (pupil)

At the end of Year 6, **pupils are provided with a leavers' book that can be signed, free of charge**, 'everyone gets one.' (pupil)



References

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BBC (2023) 'Children in poverty can feel unworthy at Christmas' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-67660495> [Accessed 11 December 2024]

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Poverty and Social Exclusion (2013) Birthdays on the breadline <https://www.poverty.ac.uk/editorial/birthdays-breadline#:~:text=Over%20half%20of%20parents%20in%20lower-income%20groups%20cannot,stress%20surrounding%20children%27s%20parties%20for%20those%20in%20poverty.> [Accessed 11 December 2024]



If you have any feedback on this document or good practice that your school is doing, **we would love to hear from you.**

Please email schools@mylivingwell.co.uk.

