Opinion — Cllr Alison Dickie has her finger on the pulse

Digital Equity in a Digitalised World

by Cllr Alison Dickie, Vice-Convener of Education, Children and Families on The City of Edinburgh Council.

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Agreeing funding in the recent Council budget to accelerate ending digital poverty in Edinburgh was the right decision, but let's not fool ourselves into thinking it's the only tool in the educational toolbox to help close the attainment gap.

Imagine it, the new class project has begun. It's 'The Structure of the Earth' and all that talk of tsunamis and exploding volcanoes (you gotta love a baking soda and vinegar concoction!) has captured the interest of learners. Next minute, and without any set homework task, they've headed out the door and straight onto their home devices to carry out some voluntary research.

Cue the morning bell, and they're racing into class to show the teacher their homemade magazines and posters, eager for an opportunity to share with the rest of the class. It's the child led learning you encourage, so that opportunity is given. But there, in that moment, you see the digital divide

in the eyes of some who look on.

Imagine too IT lessons in the computer suite. Observe those who independently race ahead, creating their all singing and dancing powerpoints, movies, or the IT task of the day…and those who quietly raise their hands for help to log on. And this time, you know it's not just down to the school wifi issues.

It's not hard to imagine. It's been happening for some time in classrooms across the city. Two tiny examples that highlight the impact of digital inequality on the attainment gap, and before a lockdown shone a great big torch on where we'd fallen short.

I'm no young thing, I hope it's not evident. I'm old enough though to remember changing the ribbon on my typewriter in secretarial studies, the hum of the modem, and those good old floppy discs.

That all seems like a million years ago in this completely digitalised world, and where so many jobs, if not all, depend on those skills in different ways.

One device for every pupil

Eradicating poverty lies at the heart of what we do in Council, and policy decisions need to be increasingly considered through this lens. In recent years, Edinburgh has won recognition for its One in Five Poverty approach to poverty proofing our school practice, and now this includes maximising on digital for all.

We're preparing our learners for life, learning and work, and lockdown created an urgency to finally address empowering every child in the development of those digital skills. And, over the period of the last year, Scottish Government money helped us to deliver 3,500 devices to households who didn't

have any access and connect 1,200 to the internet.

Now, the budget funding will accelerate a one to one digital strategy to roll out a device for every pupil across P6 to S6 over the next two years, ensuring a stigma free universal approach that fits with our poverty reduction agenda. This will include infrastructure, connectivity and much needed training across our teachers and school staff to build confidence and capacity.

As above though, this is not the only educational tool to help close the attainment gap. Yes, maximising on digital access and learning will benefit attainment, but nothing beats the quality learning and teaching in class with our skilled teaching workforce, and the individualised support that ensures every child's full potential. And in terms of eradicating poverty, it goes hand in hand with nurturing environments, trusted relationships, and a breadth of learning that pulls out every strength and interest.

There are issues to be considered too, from the need of a robust child protection policy to the fact that our children and young people have essentially become avatars in recent times! Much time was already spent online, and remote learning pushed many further into the virtual world…well those who had access to a device.

As well a focus on literacy, numeracy and digital in the recovery process, wellbeing needs to be at the forefront. So, much more play, outdoor learning, social interactions, and equitable access to those wider achievements which grow confidence and opportunity.

For now though, ending digital poverty was the right thing to do!