

Dr Tess Ridge, University of Bath UK - “Children’s experiences of poverty and exclusion”

Presentation to Child Poverty Action Group NZ, Annual General Meeting July 28 2008.

Scope of talk:

- ◆ Current research
- ◆ a child-centred perspective
- ◆ other research – study of children in families receiving income support
- ◆ with Prof. Jane Millar (University of Bath) a longitudinal qualitative study – interviewing children where mothers go into paid employment.

Methodology: Interviews

Interviews were carried out with children and young people ages 4 – 18, in groups, pairs and as individuals. In-depth research is Dr Ridge’s speciality. There is a need for ongoing examination of methodology in order for it to effectively treat what is a very sensitive area of children’s experience and protect them from outside gaze or interests. The work is demanding but very rewarding and points to the necessity of engaging directly with children if we are to understand what goes on in children’s lives and what concerns them.

Having all been children themselves, adults often think they know all about childhood and can serve as proxies for children today. However what we as adults actually know about are *our* childhoods – not so much about childhoods that might be different to ours including childhood as it is experienced now. For policy to make things better for children, the policy process needs to be informed by their direct experience. Having trained in social policy, Ridge works to get research into government processes, including giving seminars to departments. Aim is not to give children a voice, but to give them a *hearing*.

Findings:

There is a tremendous body of work around the statistics relating to children in disadvantage. We know which children, where, how etc. Although often controversial the body of work is substantial and important. However behind the statistics are things we can’t always gauge from the figures – eg why children fail in school; what the ‘pinch points’ are and how relationships play out.

There are now also some very robust findings, which have been frequently and closely duplicated, around what children living with disadvantage identify as concerns. The following are strong childhood themes in findings from research across Europe. The findings draw on Ridge's project focusing on children living in families on income support and correlate to the findings of other studies as well.

There are three main areas of concern which children point to:

- 1) Economic and material resources
- 2) Social participation and relationships
- 3) School concerns

Other areas of concern include those around sense of self and personal wellbeing.

1) Economic and material resources

Children are very anxious about their families having enough money – enough for them but also enough for bills and so on. Children experiencing poverty or low incomes have very particular forms of knowledge: they know and understand about the cost of everything, for example food and petrol, and that having enough of them can be a problem. They have a lot of understanding of when there isn't enough money, and that is a weighty thing for them to carry around in life.

Unlike most children in the Western world today, these children seldom have access to spending money - pocket money or allowances. Yet this is one of our ways of teaching children how to manage money in what is an increasingly sophisticated economic environment. A lot of children in these studies don't have access to pocket money at all. Sometimes they talk about how 'my mum will give me money if I ask for it.' But one of the things that researchers find is that children don't ask for it, because they are trying to protect their parents from financial pressures. This also means that when children experience money it comes in quite erratic ways, and this is a further big disadvantage in children learning how to manage economically.

Lack of money in the family often leads to children and young people going into employment earlier, for spending money but also to contribute to the family's resources whether in kind (by buying their own clothes for example) or with direct financial contributions.

It also leads to a lack of the general possessions which other children take for granted. For example, a family might have owned a bike, but when it gets broken or wears out it is not replaced. Children identify very clearly with not having the things which other people have – toys, games and what is considered to be appropriate clothing. This should not be interpreted as low-income children wanting luxuries - designer clothing, for instance. What they think about is really not that big: what they think about is just something a little bit better than what they have, or something new instead of second-hand.

2) Social participation and relationships

Children in poverty are particularly fearful about being singled out, being seen as different – what academics would call ‘othering’: being ‘other’ and not part of the group. That is such a great anxiety for them they go to enormous lengths to try and stop that from happening – including devising elaborate strategies about ‘not going to something because...’ They may say they have something else to do, for example, rather than concede that they can’t take part in something because the family can’t afford it. Children are always having to make those quite important adjustments.

But they are very worried about being able to fit in and join in with what others are doing, and that means participation in clubs, in games and so on. In the UK sufficient support is still not available to make activities fair, and where support is sufficient it tends to be too stigmatizing. Children and parents pick up stigma so fast – their sensitivity is because the stigma will apply directly to them personally. As a result they are very careful about what they will agree to take part in, even if they are able to do so. So a whole spectrum applies to children’s participation in activities, from being completely unable to take part, to being able to take part perhaps only on very dodgy grounds.

Participation is not only about joining in, it is about reciprocity. For example if a parent can’t take their young football player to an ‘away’ game one weekend, they will need to be able to take them and their friends one other weekend. This can be a problem where there is not much transport or it is too expensive to run that transport, for example. For those on low incomes, needless to say, these kinds of costs are not the top priority.

Children talk about these things affecting their social networks. They have friends of course – it is just very hard for them to meet after school or on weekends, and to make friends with a large number or wide range of people. Research about adults in poverty shows the importance of contact with people who are not in that situation, and those findings are likely to apply to children as well. Lack of such contacts closes down avenues out of poverty.

Aside from the things the state might provide, or churches, more and more things in childhood are becoming commodified, meaning they cost money – for example going to the cinema, going to the leisure centre. And none of them are set up to facilitate access for low income children. Things are in some ways getting harder. A typical experience in the life of a low income person is that by the time you become able to do something, everyone has moved on and you are left lurching along behind everyone. Paying to get into places is one issue, but others include paying for equipment or uniforms and extra costs such as for camps or trips. Money may even be available at some times, but not at others; that in itself poses a problem for maintaining participation in group activities.

Transport is a big issue which children always mention, and it is an area where they have no control at all. They generally can’t drive or use public transport on their own, and what transport is available from low-income areas to where things happen is often very poor. Yet transport problems are often overlooked. For example facilities may appear to

provide good access for all, by being free of charge, but if there is no affordable or available transport there is effectively little access for many people. Overlooking the transport issue can lead to providers wrongly concluding that they 'shouldn't have bothered' or that 'poor people can't be bothered' or that there is not enough demand for what is being offered.

Without access to all these things children often talked about feeling bored, or feeling trapped in their neighbourhoods. When these children hang around in groups if the police are called in a range of further troublesome issues often arise. This often happens in small villages full of 'early-retirees' who want a quiet life without noise or trouble of any kind – people wanting to live in Hamlin after the piper had been, as it were. These same villages are often places where all children are invisible because they go out to activities (rather like their parents) – except of course those who cannot afford to and who thus become unfairly targeted for their additional visibility, which is related to their exclusion from the broader life of the community.

Nicole on life without enough money: *“You can't do as much, and I don't like my clothes and that. So I don't really get to do much, or do stuff like my friends are doing. So I'm worried about what people think of me, like they think I'm sad or something.”*

There are repercussions for children like Nicole. They express a lot of anxiety about the future: will they have friends, will they have jobs, will they be alright – because things feel very uncertain.

3) School concerns

School is potentially one area where the broader community can make a big difference to improving the lives of vulnerable children. This is because it is one place where everybody comes together, and that could happen with a lot more equity than it does now. School takes up a large part of children's day and as things stand they are under considerable social and emotional pressure there, as well as material pressure.

Children experiencing poverty are very anxious about the cost of going on school trips, having the right shoes, the right bag, the right books – some of the same things as other children, plus extras. In the UK the number of school trips has really been ratcheted up, as trips become a core part of the curriculum. Likewise with certain books: one girl before her GCSE subject exam was told by her teacher “this is the book you need to pass this exam.” But she couldn't afford the book and it wasn't provided. And she said “What am I supposed to do?” What are children supposed to do, when these situations are occurring on an everyday basis, as indeed they are?

The other problem is where support is available but is stigmatized, as is often the case with the UK's free school meal system. In a country where no free school meals are available any meal system sounds attractive perhaps – and it would indeed be a good thing if it were done properly, in a non-stigmatising way.

One of the things Ridge sometimes asks children is “What is your favourite thing?” One little boy replied that it was his school meal ticket, and that is a pretty sad thing to be your favourite thing in life, growing up in a wealthy country. But the ticket is also a problem that children often talk about. They often have separate tickets, they have separate lines sometimes; sometimes they have to get their meals after other people, or before. There are lists of names, sometimes your name’s called out. It’s like researching into different forms of torture sometimes. And sometimes the parents of these children have gone through that themselves, and they say ‘no, I don’t want my child to have to experience that.’ Increasingly, swipe cards are coming in, and they are ideal because nobody knows who’s got what. But it’s taken such a long time.

What children identify is exclusion within school, not feeling part of things - not exclusion from school entirely, which is where attention is often directed.

Sole parents going into work: a longitudinal qualitative study - tracking children’s experiences over time

This was a collaborative project with Jane Millar, designed to test the assumption that employment for sole parents was undoubtedly a good thing, both for parents and children, and as an anti-poverty measure. A sample was drawn from Inland Revenue tax credit records, where parents had moved into low-income employment.

The UK has rising numbers of children in poverty, a lot of sole parents who are considered to be ‘work-less’ under the UK definition of work – who were obviously working at home, in their capacity as parents, but not getting paid for it. A main policy thrust continues to be towards getting 70% of sole parents into employment. The assumption is that if this is achieved, everything will be fine – largely ignoring the UK’s working poverty problem...

In this policy environment children are seen as passive beings, as well as being in need of ‘sorting out’ because ‘they are the problem’, as ‘obstacles’ to parental employment without which (if they could only be ‘resolved’ somehow) all parents could go to work and everything would be fine. However Ridge’s social policy analysis draws on childhood sociology, where children are seen as much more active, rather than ‘passive, movable lumps’.

This longitudinal study came out of the fact that there was not a body of evidence describing what this target of mass movement into work means for children and mothers, particularly, at all. The only body of evidence was confined to the area of childcare for young children. There was a need for evidence about what entry to low-paid work means for sole parent families in poverty, and the extent to which it does or does not help them.

So far, Ridge and Millar have been following their cohort of families for five years. There have been three waves of interviews with both children and mothers. Initially there

were 50 mothers and 61 children, and at last contact 34 mothers and 37 children remained. Most of those dropping out were due to researchers' inability to locate them, as is often the case with this very mobile population – and people are more likely to be mobile when things don't work out, including work itself. The remainder still constitute a very good sample.

One of the first things Ridge got children in the study to do was to reflect back on what their lives were like before their mothers had started work. What they reported was not different at all to the results of the studies described above, from families where parents were on income support.

When children were asked about their lives at the time, after parents had gained work, their responses usually allowed them to be placed into two main groupings. The first group was made up of children whose parents were able to maintain some degree of stability in employment.

Those children generally felt more financially secure. They tended to be able to do more things, they were quite buoyant, they had increases in spending, more access to money and material goods. Following the move into employment there was also a phase of what might be called a 'treat peak' – of catch-up spending and spending beyond the barest necessities. This was partly linked also to the leap of faith required of parents in going to work; they were prepared to spend their money because they needed to believe that the work situation was going to last and be sustainable.

Children in this group also saw social benefits, for example being able to take part in more activities – but it must be remembered that this increase came from a very low base of no or very little activity previously. So the study typically showed children joining a sports club, or another after-school activity.

Employment was not sustainable for all parents however, and by the time Ridge made a trip around the country to interview all 50 'newly-working parents' who had signed up for the study, seven of them were in fact already unemployed. The following trip found that a further seven were unemployed. The study revealed just how much movement and fluidity there is, all the time, in this area of the labour market.

So children found themselves in families where work was not sustainable for a number of reasons. One of these was that it didn't pay enough to make a difference to the family's income level. Sometimes reactivation of old debt, following exit from the benefit system, was a factor in that. Debt was a highly significant factor overall in the study, not only old debt but new debt, as credit card companies solicited for new business. Participants in the study were dealing with so much income instability that debt was not only highly attractive but also incredibly difficult to service, once taken on.

In families where work was not sustainable, children had a renewed, high level of fear and anxiety about poverty and social exclusion. They felt very financially insecure and some of them felt very uncertain about the value of employment. It seemed that the

promise of a better situation through employment had been broken, and it was harder for children to believe in that promise afterwards. Even those children who were better off with parents in work faced significant difficulties and hardships, but they were prepared to put up with them because the alternatives were quite dire. When things didn't work out work-wise despite their sacrifices, the prospect of again giving up time with their parent or dealing with a difficult childcare situation became much more overwhelming. The other difficulty faced by these children was a loss of status, corresponding to the increase in status gained by children with parents in employment.

Louise: What happened was I felt, like, poor. Coz I didn't dare tell my friends, because it would be embarrassing. Coz, like, all my friends have got money – I wouldn't say they're rich but they've got quite a lot of money compared to us.

It was difficult for Louise for quite a while because she didn't want to tell anyone that her mother was no longer working. Laura Edelman and Sue Middleton have shown that some of the poorest children are those in families cycling in and out of employment. [ref?]

Other factors affected how children felt about their parents working. Age made a difference: older children managed better, did a lot of self-care and often quite enjoyed the increase in autonomy, brandishing their house-keys confidently and so on. Children like time away from the adult gaze, for doing things independently. How much money was coming in made a difference to how well the situation worked, as did family time. Almost all children talked about loss of time with their parents being a concern, or changes to family practices for spending time together – for example when school holidays no longer coincided with being able to spend time together, because parents had to work.

Childcare was a big issue for the children and is something which the UK hasn't 'cracked', at all. Too much formal childcare provision is not based on what is best for children or what children identify as appropriate, and is designed too much around work and servicing the labour market. In terms of informal care, at the beginning of the study there was quite a lot of care work being done by grandparents – both grandmothers and grandfathers doing amazing amounts of care. As the study wore on, however, researchers found that grandparents not only were able to do less care work, as they got older, but in many cases became sick and needed to be on the receiving end of parents' care. Relationships with ageing or dying parents, for the younger parents involved in the study, was a key factor in some of the depression and stress they experienced.

Children's perceptions of maternal wellbeing constituted a really strong theme, as well. Even if children were themselves having a terrific time, they were often quite worried about their mothers' wellbeing.

All these factors tended to overlap to some degree, and to be managed to some extent by children themselves. They actively managed the situation because a return to poverty was not to be entertained, really. A family 'project work' was established, whereby members worked together to try and keep things on the rails. Children's role involved taking on new chores – cooking, cleaning and looking after brothers and sisters and so on. This

insight further undermines the erroneous ‘children as barrier to work’ idea. Children are playing a very active part in keeping the employment situation going, and moderating their needs in order to do so: being careful not to ask for things, not to rock the boat. Some children would go to school when they were unwell, as missing a day of school would have meant their parents missing a day of pay, which they knew was unaffordable. And that’s a judgment call the children took on themselves; their mothers didn’t know they were doing that. Children are doing all these things and others – eg going to a childcare facility they don’t like because it’s too important to say no to – and it’s not necessarily good that they’re doing them.

Conclusion:

It’s very important that we hear what children are saying, and respect their accounts of their lives. Children experience poverty in their individual lives and amongst their peers and we must recognize and value that experience and try to facilitate it better than we do. We must recognize that poverty damages and disrupts childhood in very significant ways. We need to take on board children’s experience of poverty and exclusion within schools. What is often overlooked, too, in policy and research is the impact, intended or unintended, that wider policies can have on children’s lives. We need to test policy to see what its effects actually are and challenge inequity. We need to recognize that children will try to manage change and uncertainty in their lives. The result can be that children seek to, or indeed actually do, absorb some of the negative costs associated with ‘welfare to work’ or other policies.