

# Listening to children

## Developing a child-centred approach to childhood poverty in the UK

**A recent UK study looked at the impact of childhood poverty and social exclusion on the lives of children – from their own perspectives**



In the United Kingdom the Labour government's focus on eradicating child poverty within the next 20 years has meant that the interests of children and their families have become more central to the policy agenda. The government's intention has been to address the issue of child poverty across a broad range of policy areas including education, health and employment (Cm 4445; Millar 2001).

However, although the new policy focus on children is a welcome development, the needs and concerns of low-income children are not easily identified or met. We know from previous studies in the UK that the outcomes of childhood poverty for children can be severe (Gregg et al. 1999; Hoberaft 1998; Bradshaw 2001; Ermisch et al. 2001). Yet, although there is a large body of quantitative research that focuses on the outcomes of poverty for children when they reach adulthood, we have considerably less understanding of the impact that poverty can have in childhood itself. In particular, the social, economic and relational repercussions of poverty for children's everyday lives and wellbeing are poorly understood.

This article reports the research findings from the *Child-centred Approach to Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion Study* (throughout this article abbreviated to the *Listening to Children study*). This is a study of low-income children in the UK (Ridge 2002) that attempted to address some of these issues by engaging directly with children.

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Using qualitative in-depth interviews to explore the issues and concerns that low-income children themselves identified as meaningful, the study provides valuable insights into the everyday challenges faced by children who are poor and disadvantaged.

The article begins by looking at the rationale behind the study and the value of conducting child-centred research with children. It goes on to explore in depth some of the findings from the study, concentrating on three main areas of interest: children's economic and material lives; school and social relationships; and children's self-reflections on their lives and experiences. The article concludes with some overarching themes that have emerged from the study.

### *Child poverty in the UK*

In 1997, the incoming government inherited one of the poorest records of child poverty in the developed world (Bradbury and Jäntti 2001). During the 1980s and 1990s, UK children had borne the brunt of changes in economic conditions, demographic structures and free market economic policies. As a result there had been a three-fold increase in the numbers of children in poverty (Oppenheim and Harker 1996; Walker and Walker 1997). In 1998, when Prime Minister Tony Blair made his historic pledge to eradicate child poverty within 20 years, there were about



***A better understanding of poverty as a lived experience in childhood is needed if policies aimed at eradicating child poverty are to succeed.***

Overall, there has been little acknowledgement that children in poverty may experience very particular social needs in their everyday lives which current welfare provision may be doing little to remedy. Therefore, without a research agenda that is open to understanding and acknowledging children's different perceptions and meanings, we run the risk of overlooking or obscuring the very real and subjective experience of what it is like to be poor as a child.

It is only relatively recently that researchers and policy makers have sought the views and experiences of children and young people across a range of policy areas. To engage in research and consultation with children requires that children be recognised as not merely adults-in-waiting, but active social agents in their own right, with their own issues and concerns (James et al. 1998). Equally, childhood has to be valued as a social experience in and of itself, with its own norms and customs, where the demands of participation and inclusion may be considerable – and likewise the costs of exclusion (Ridge and Millar 2000).

***The Listening to Children study***

In this study of child poverty, child-centred research methods were used which put children's own meanings and interests at the centre of the research process to gain an insight into their lives and the issues that concern them. Child-centred research practice requires an informed and considered approach at every stage of the research process, developing skill and sensitivity – not just in the practical methodological techniques of establishing rapport, openness and trust, but also in acknowledging and addressing ethical considerations and issues of power and control (see Alderson 1995; Morrow and Richards 1996; Hogan and Gilligan 1998).

The *Listening to Children* study involved in-depth interviews with a group of 40 children and young people who were living in families in receipt of Income Support (the lowest level of means-tested social assistance in the UK). They were drawn from both urban and rural backgrounds and were from two different family types: lone-parent families; and couple families where there was an adult or a child with a disability. Both of these family types are likely to experience long durations of poverty and reliance on low-income, means-tested benefits (DWP 2001). The children ranged in age from 10 to 17 years, with the majority of the sample being aged between 10 and 15, and over half the sample between 10 and 12 years.

The impact of poverty can be felt across all areas of children's lives, affecting their mental and physical health, their social relationships, and their perceptions of the opportunities and choices open to them. To examine some of these issues, the study explored with children their economic and material environments, their social relationships at home and at school, and their own perceptions of how poverty had affected their lives. The interviews were carried out within children's homes and were designed to be as child-centred as possible. A flexible, unstructured interview schedule was chosen which was open at all times to incorporating new

4.5 million children (35 per cent of all children in the UK) living below 50 per cent of mean household income after housing costs (DSS 2000).

To fulfil their commitment to address child poverty, the government undertook a radical program of welfare reform. Policies directed at alleviating child poverty focused in general on three main areas: support for children, primarily through the education system; support for parents, mainly directed at making work pay, child care and parenting initiatives; and changes in fiscal support for children and their families through the tax and benefit system (Cm 4445). These policies have been welcomed, and overall children and their families have benefited from a greater transfer of resources to them and their increased visibility within the policy process (Millar and Ridge 2002).

However, many of the policies reflect adult concerns, and the main policy thrust has been towards addressing adult worklessness through welfare-to-work measures. The dangers of social exclusion and poverty for children during childhood have appeared less often on the policy agenda, and when they have, the focus has invariably been on children as "adults-to-be", as future investments. As Prout (2000) argues, the government has drawn heavily on poverty studies that link childhood poverty with poor adult outcomes to inform its child poverty strategies. The central focus of its policies is "on the better adult lives that will, it is predicted, emerge from reducing child poverty. It is not on the better lives that children will lead as children" (Prout 2000: 305).

areas of interest and concern as they were identified by children in the study.

This article focuses first on children's economic and material environments, by looking at the issue of pocket money and children's employment. This is followed by an examination of children's social relationships, with a particular focus on their social lives at school. Finally, some reflections are presented on children's personal and family lives.

### **Children's access to pocket money as an autonomous resource**

Children experience the realities of their economic world within their families, but they are also exposed to different economic realities through interactions with their peers, and through their engagement with the wider world and the media. For children in low-income families, where financial resources and material goods may be in short supply, access to pocket money may play a very particular role in their lives. We live in an economically sophisticated society where children's experience of managing their own pocket money is now considered an essential part of developing economic socialisation (Lewis et al. 1995). For most children in the UK, pocket money is regularly forthcoming and something that they take for granted in their lives. However, for the low-income children in the study, opportunities for managing money and developing a competent and confident approach to spending and budgeting were severely constrained by their families' restricted economic circumstances. Only a quarter of the children in the study were receiving any regular pocket money, and the rest received little or nothing.

Those children who did receive pocket money used it as a vital resource allowing them some small measure of economic control within a tight economic environment. Children receiving pocket money were using it not just for sweets and treats but also to sustain their social lives, paying for bus fares, buying clothes, and securing essential items for school. Grandparents, and in the case of children in lone-parent households, their non-resident parents, provided possible alternative sources of irregular income. By giving money on occasions they appeared to alleviate some of the pressures between children and their parents, particularly when special events cropped up.

*"Sometimes – like, if I haven't got any money to go on a weekend, I won't ask Mum 'cos I don't want to ask her ... But I'd, like, try and get some money somehow. I dunno, my Nan might give me some money, a pound or something." (Laura, 15 years)*

Some children also did work around the home for money although this was rarely forthcoming and clearly mediated by their parent's capacity to pay.

*"I help Mum around the house and she gives me a couple of pound now and then, so it's whatever she can afford, you know." (Clarke, 15 years)*

Children without regular pocket money experienced great uncertainty about whether or not they would be able to gain access to sufficient funds to go out with their friends and share in their activities. For these children and young people, paid work appeared to be a necessary objective, and it was apparent that where pocket money was not forthcoming, work was playing a major role in sustaining many children's financial needs. Children who were without pocket money or work appeared to be particularly disadvantaged, having neither the small measure of freedom and social viability that comes with pocket money, nor the capacity to access their own autonomous resources from work.

### **Children and work**

Although we know that a high percentage of children and young people in the UK work, the situation of children on a low income is less clear (Mizen et al. 2001). There is some evidence that when children in poorer families do work they may take on more jobs and work for longer hours than their more affluent counterparts (Middleton et al. 1997). In the *Listening to Children* study many of the children who were not receiving pocket money were working at part-time jobs out of school hours and at weekends. These included children both above and below the legal age for child employment in the UK (13 years).

In general, children in the study indicated that they were motivated towards work by a need to share in the consumer culture of their more affluent peers, and the social and cultural demands of childhood were shown to be exerting very heavy pressures on them. When children were working it played an essential role in providing them with a measure of autonomy and security. Money earned was used to participate with other children and young people, to share in social events, and to save and purchase important signifiers of childhood social status, such as clothes or "trainers". Paradoxically, work was also shown to have a negative impact on children's lives, through low pay, loss of time for social interaction, and tensions between work and the demands of school, which had caused several children and young people to leave their employment.

The following quotes illustrate some of the tensions inherent in children working. Kevin was below the legal age of employment but he had found that work could make a considerable difference to his life.

*"Before, I didn't have much money and I couldn't buy anything that I wanted ... Now I get £9 a week and I can buy what I want with that basically, and if I want anything for my bike I've got to save up for it." (Kevin, 12 years)*

Andy had been working since he was 14 years old and using the money to pay for his needs at home and at school. But he recognised that it is a complex juggling act for him to achieve a balance between work, school and friends, and he was afraid that he might be compromising his schoolwork at a critical time.

*"I work quite a few hours more than they advise and plus I know people who don't. If they want to go out they do their schoolwork while I am working for money, and then they want to go out when I've just finished working, which doesn't give me much time to do my schoolwork in." (Andy, 16 years)*

Many children showed great resourcefulness in accessing work and attempting to alleviate their disadvantage. They also showed considerable understanding for their family's financial situation. In some families, children's wages were playing an important role in sustaining their families' economies, either by helping out directly with money, or by freeing household money to meet other pressing demands by contributing towards their own needs. However, although children had access to their own resources through work, these were rarely sufficient to sustain them in the increasingly demanding consumer culture of their peers.

### **Making and sustaining friendships and social networks**

The development of friendships and wider social networks play an important role in the development of children's human and social capital (James et al. 1998). In an

increasingly complex and demanding social environment, friendships and informal relationships can act as “social glue”, and are increasingly recognised as powerful social assets playing an important role in the development and maintenance of social capital (Silva and Smart 1999; Pahl 2000).

The importance of friendships for children lies not just in the growth and development of social skills and social identity, but also in learning to understand and accept others. Children need to learn not just how to make friends but also how to *be* a friend (Furnham 1989). Friendships for children also create an entry-point into wider social relationships; they play a role as a social asset – a source of social capital – both in childhood and in the future. Conversely, difficulties in making and sustaining social relationships can leave children vulnerable to social exclusion (see Ridge and Millar 2000).

The *Listening to Children* study provides an exploration of the meaning and values of friendships for low-income children, and gives some insight into the role of friendships for children’s wellbeing and social integration. As previous research has shown (Brannen et al. 2000), friendships can have diverse meanings for children, and this was reflected

“I would like to do more things with my friends, when they go out down the town and that. But we can’t always afford it. So I got to stay in and that, and just in here it’s just boring – I can’t do anything.” (Mike, 12 years)

Making and sustaining friendships was an area where these children clearly struggled particularly hard to maintain their social status and stay connected with their peers. Simple things that adults may not perceive as important often inform children’s relationships, such as clothing expectations and participation in shared leisure activities (Middleton et al. 1997; Miles 2000). Having the right clothes appeared to be a critical signifier of belonging, and children indicated a high degree of anxiety about maintaining their social status against the perils of being seen as different or poor.

“If you haven’t got the right clothes and all your friends have got all the nice clothes you feel left out like. Cos you think to yourself ‘Oh they’ve got all the good clothes and they’ve got all the money to buy them’ and that, and you feel left out . . . I sometimes get really worried if, like, I’ve got all these old-fashioned clothes and I don’t like them and everyone else has fashionable ones.” (Sue, 11 years)



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in the richness of children’s responses about why they valued friendships. However, as well as the more obvious reasons for children valuing friendships (for example, for play and sociability), they also identified considerably more complex reasons. Critically, children’s accounts revealed that friendship had an important protective effect, safeguarding children from isolation and bullying.

Children like Jim showed a keen sense of the values of maintaining secure friendships:

“If you don’t have any friends you won’t be able to go out and play without being bullied.” (Jim, 10 years)

Although children’s idealised notions of friendship involved feeling happy, secure and supported, their social realities were very different. Nearly half of the children in the study talked about being bullied at some time. This had a marked effect on how they felt about their schools and, in some cases, about themselves. As well as the fears and realities of experiencing bullying, many children reported experiencing difficulties in making and sustaining their friendships. Transport costs and participation costs all conspired to leave children feeling on the periphery of many of the social and leisure experiences that their peers in general took for granted. Lack of affordable and accessible transport intersected with the experience of restricted social space and resources of children’s home environments to affect the everyday reciprocity of friendships, and the exchange of lifts and favours that make up much of children’s social lives.

The following quote illustrates some of the frustrations expressed by children who often felt trapped and bored in their home environment:

Given children’s evident fears of experiencing stigma and difference associated with poverty and disadvantage the significance of opportunities to develop and sustain strong and supportive social networks assumes a particular salience.

### **Children’s social lives at school**

School is a particularly important milieu for children academically but also socially. It is within the school environment that children meet with a wider and more diverse group of their peers than they would in their home and neighbourhoods. The experience of meeting children from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds enhances children’s capacity for developing wider social networks. Thus the value of school for developing social and human capital should not be underestimated.

The UK government has shown a strong commitment to improving literacy and numeracy standards, and reducing the incidence of school exclusions and truancy of children at school in the UK. However, welcome though these initiatives are, they do not address many of the key issues and concerns about school life identified by children in the study.

Children’s accounts of their school lives indicated that they were experiencing considerable disadvantage within their schools, with many reporting feeling bullied, isolated and left out at critical stages of their academic careers. The costs of maintaining an adequate school profile and acquiring appropriate materials for examinations and school activities were described by many children as prohibitive. Brad was in his final year at school and had struggled to find an affordable project for his Design Technology GCSE

exam. He was acutely aware that other boys had been able to spend more on their projects and he was afraid that he would be disadvantaged in relation to the others when the work was marked.

"Like, we are now doing this thing for my design technology GCSE, and you've got to design something and make it. And there's people designing things that will cost them like £300, and things like that. And mine cost £12.99 to build." (Brad, 15 years)

A particular area of disadvantage identified by children was participation in school trips. These are increasingly seen as playing an important role in enhancing the school curriculum, but over half of the children in the study were unable to afford to go on school trips with any regularity. Children like Bella felt excluded from the opportunities that many of their peers were enjoying.

"I wanted to go to Germany and it was about a hundred odd quid and Mum goes 'No'. It's like we go on a ferry, coach, really posh ferry, hotel, we get to meet friends there. And Mum she said 'No'. So I missed that . . . I always miss out on the school trips and everything." (Bella, 12 years)

Of particular concern were children like Martin who were clearly excluding themselves from school activities. Disillusioned with the process, they did not take home the letters asking for money for trips and other activities, because they knew their parents would not be able to afford them.

"I don't usually go on trips 'cos they are expensive and that . . . At our school they do loads of activities and they go to loads of different places . . . I don't bother asking." (Martin, 11 years)

Children's fears of social detachment and social difference were very real, and they were acutely sensitive to the dangers of being excluded from the activities of their friends and social groups.

"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 . . . I'm worried about what people will think of me, like they think I am sad [pathetic] or something." (Nicole, 13 years)

We leave the final word from the study with Lisa who was reflecting on what she would change if she could. Here she explains why she would like a bit more money in her life so that she could go to the shops with her friends and feel more confident.

"I would be able to get things myself. I don't know, I feel like there is something in me waiting to come out when I've got the money to do it . . . For instance, shopping. When I am trying on stuff, you know, I can try it on and say I'm going to take this home." (Lisa, 15 years)

### **Overarching themes that emerged from the study**

Several key overarching themes emerged from the study that help to enrich our understanding of children's experiences of poverty. Three of them – children's protectiveness of their parents, the active social agency of children, and the importance of addressing children's school exclusion – are discussed below.

#### **Children protect their parents**

We know from research in the UK that low-income parents tend to strive to protect their children as far as they can from the worst effects of poverty (Kempson et al. 1994; Middleton

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Overall, children's accounts of their school lives highlighted some fundamental inequalities that exist within the UK school system, raising concerns about the degree of social and academic parity and inclusion experienced by children from low-income families.

### **Life at home with family and friends**

In talking about their lives at home and in their communities, children highlighted their inner worries and their fears of social difference and stigma. They reported feeling that their experiences of poverty were affecting their self-esteem, confidence and personal security. These are difficult areas for children to reflect on as difficulties with friendships and worries about social acceptance can be particularly hard for children to articulate. However, children were keenly aware of the impact of poverty on their lives and on the lives of their parents.

"I worry about my Mum and if she's, like, unhappy and stuff like that. Sometimes I worry about if we haven't got enough money. I worry about that." (Carrie, 15 years)

et al. 1997; Goode et al. 1998). In particular, mothers, especially lone mothers, may go without items or activities to provide things for their children (Middleton et al. 1997). However, what is strikingly apparent from the *Listening to Children* study is the way the urge to protect is reciprocal.

Children were also clearly struggling to protect their parents from the realities of the social and emotional costs of childhood poverty on their lives. This can take many forms – self-denial of needs and wants, moderation of demands, and self-exclusion from social activities and school trips and activities. In some cases parents were aware of their children's strategies and reluctantly accepted them in the face of severely constrained alternatives. In others, children were regulating their needs more covertly.

In the main it was girls who were most likely to express concern and a desire to protect their parents, although some boys in lone-mother families were also highly protective. In the case of girls, there must be concern that they are learning the gendered patterns of self-denial that are revealed in previous studies of low-income mothers (Goode et al. 1998).

## Children are active social agents

Our understanding and perceptions of poor children are often ill informed and stereotyped. Whereas children's lives are very diverse and poor children are not a homogeneous group, their experiences of poverty are mediated by many other factors including gender, ethnicity and age. Children in different circumstances have their own experiences and concerns to relate, and their own perceptions of how poverty has affected their lives.

However, it is clear from the findings that the children in the study were active social agents; they were not passive victims of their poverty or their environment. They engaged with their lives and their circumstances, developing ways and means of participating where and when they could, and used alternative strategies of survival and social involvement through work and play.

At the same time they were also engaged in an intense social and personal endeavour to maintain social acceptance and social inclusion within the accepted cultural demands of childhood – a struggle that was defined and circumscribed by the material and social realities of their lives. To truly understand the complex dynamics of poverty on children's lives and their capacity for self-realisation, we need to develop a greater understanding of children's discourse and agency, and the meanings and interpretations they give to their lives and experiences in the context of a restricted social, material and structural environment.

## School exclusion

Education is a key area of intervention in children's lives, and statistical data provide the basis for much of that intervention. The use of qualitative data gives us some insight into what lies behind the statistical data and the outcome measures. Qualitative data can help to reveal how children who are poor might be experiencing school, and provide an understanding of the social and relational dynamics between low-income children and their teachers, and low-income children and their peers. It can also help to provide an insight into how the structural and institutional practices of schools might impact upon children's welfare.

It was clear from the study that for these particular children their schools were manifestly failing to provide them with an inclusive and enriching social or academic environment within which to thrive. What children identified was not exclusion from school but exclusion *within* school.

## Conclusions

Overall, the *Listening to Children* study found that poverty and disadvantage permeated every aspect of children's lives, from the material and more quantifiable aspects of their needs, to the social and emotional requirements so important for children, in childhood and beyond. The study shows that it is possible to bring a child's perspective to the analysis of childhood poverty and social exclusion and gain valuable insights into children's lives and the issues that matter to them.

An understanding of childhood poverty that is grounded in the lives and experiences of children is an essential part of addressing the intractable nature of child poverty and has the potential to add considerably to our capacity for addressing social and structural inequalities within childhood. This can occur not least through a more informed awareness of the processes and factors that militate against low-income children as well as those

that may serve to protect and support them. Without this more holistic approach to understanding children's lives, policies directed towards the alleviation of child poverty may run the risk of failing to respond adequately to those children's needs.

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