

assertive communication, anger management and understanding, and taking constructive action over issues relating to violence. Links were also made between parents and schools, and parent behaviours were reported to be positively changed.

The evaluation highlighted a number of positive aspects of the project including the importance of using a collaborative approach between the domestic violence organisation and school communities. EASE was aware that in order for the project to be effective, it could not be imposed on school communities. It was also important that the expertise of school staff be utilised in determining the program content. This collaboration was seen as a real strength of the project as it resulted in the schools involved being linked to outside agencies and receiving access to the specialist knowledge of staff working in the family violence sector.

Another positive aspect of the project is its long-term nature. This was considered essential to establishing a trusting relationship between the facilitator and the students, and enabled the creation of an intimate and secure environment where sensitive and personal issues could be discussed. The involvement of parents in the project both formally, in conjunction with targeted programs for the 'at risk' students, or informally, through involvement with student homework tasks or through the regular newsletter, was also seen as a positive element of the project.

The project found the use of co-facilitation extremely beneficial. Project workers took a central role in the development of resources and operational aspects, but classroom teachers were invited to participate as well. Teachers began by playing a fairly minimal role, but within a few weeks became more involved and provided assistance during the group work sessions, in particular.



EASE was aware that in order for the project to be effective, it could not be imposed on school communities.

Solving the Jigsaw has been embraced by school communities in the Loddon Mallee Region. Due to its perceived success, an increasing number of schools in the area have asked EASE to run *Solving the Jigsaw* in their schools. Commitment of schools to the project is evidenced by the fact that the schools themselves contribute significantly (60%) to program funding, and the Loddon Mallee Department of Education and Training further provided support to teachers to undertake the *Solving the Jigsaw* facilitator training course. The project also receives funding support from the Victorian Department of Human Services, R.E. Ross Trust and The William Buckland Foundation.

The *Solving the Jigsaw* program has been acknowledged for good practice through many awards including the Australian Violence Prevention Award, The National Australian Drug Foundation Award, Victorian Community Safety and Crime Prevention Award, National Association for Loss and Grief Award and the Victorian Public Health Award.

For more information about this project, a copy of the report Supporting Children and Young People Affected by Family Violence can be downloaded from www.padv.dpmc.gov.au/publications/publicat.htm

Children Front and Centre

An Interview with Dr Tess Ridge



DR TESS RIDGE, Lecturer in Social and Policy Science, University of Bath, United Kingdom is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Her research focuses on child poverty and social exclusion. Dr Janet Stanley, Senior Research Officer at the National Child Protection Clearinghouse takes the opportunity to ask her some questions about her work.

Can you tell me the purpose of your visit?

I'm here to conduct some comparative research between the UK and Australia. I am chiefly interested in how the state in each country has supported children and their families through the tax and benefit system, and through measures such as the Child Support Scheme.

I try to look at issues that relate to children from what is called a child-centred perspective. This means that I try to put the interests and concerns of the child central to any research and analysis I might undertake. I am particularly interested in children's experiences of poverty and social exclusion in childhood. Using child-centred methods means talking to low-income and disadvantaged children and listening to their experiences and the issues that matter to them. This provides an opportunity to explore some of the social processes and the relational dynamics that lie behind statistical data. In the past adults have often been used as proxies for children, to speak about the children's lives and experiences. However, children's perceptions can differ from adults. Adults views of children and children's views of themselves can differ greatly. For example, issues perceived by adults as relevant to children might not be those identified by the children themselves. Using child-centred research and inquiry means that we gain a richer and more informed understanding of children and their lives.

How is your work relevant to the child welfare, and particularly the child protection, fields?

I do not work directly in a child protection field, but my research does have some important relevance to the broader field of child protection work. My most recent study involved in-depth interviews with 40 children who were living in families that were poor. The study focused very much on children's everyday lives and experiences and was, above all, open to incorporating issues that children identified as important. The interviews explored children's experiences at school, at home and with their families, and it focused on their economic and material environment, their social relationships and their own understandings of

the impact poverty has made on their lives. The findings showed that the experience of poverty had permeated every area of these children's lives. In particular, children were very fearful that they would be seen as different or isolated in any way from their peers. They were worried about the stigma associated with being poor in an affluent society, and they were concerned that they were not able to participate and enjoy the opportunities available to more affluent children.

School was singled out by children as an area where they felt they were not easily able to share in the accepted social and academic opportunities. Children reported that they were unable to go on school trips, were concerned about not being able to afford school books, appropriate school clothes and uniforms, and materials for exams. Children, especially girls, were also struggling to protect their parents from realising how badly poverty was affecting their lives, and they did this through self denial of needs and wants and through excluding themselves from school and leisure activities they thought their parents would not be able to afford. The research provides a better understanding of the everyday challenges that poor children face in their lives, and presents an opportunity to develop policies which can address some of the issues that children themselves identify as important for their lives and well-being.

What is your view on the association between children living in poverty and child abuse and neglect?

Most of the research I have done has found no clear link between children living in poverty and children experiencing abuse and neglect. In the UK there are several million children living below the poverty line and in general their parent or parents are struggling hard to manage on insufficient resources while protecting their children from the worst effects of their poverty. Children in my studies have tended to show great tenderness and concern for their parents and great resilience in the face of extremely challenging circumstances. One thing that many children are fearful of is the public perception linking them as poor and abused children. This is a powerful stereotype, which has a damaging impact on these children's lives. I think it is important to realise that there is no homogeneous group of poor children. They are very diverse, and experience different cultural, social and familial lives. Some of these children will, of course, be experiencing abuse and neglect, but many more will not.

Your work seems to be grounded in a strong children's rights philosophy. Is this a common stance in the UK, or is your work unique?

The movement for children's rights is gaining in strength across the world. In the UK children's rights is an important issue, but in general there has tended to be little research that has directly engaged with children and tried to understand different issues from a child-centred perspective. In that respect, particularly in relation to children in poverty, my work is at present relatively unique. However, there is a growing interest in understanding children's lives, and the government in the UK has started to engage with children in consultation exercises in a range of areas including the public care system. This is an important step forward for children's rights and interests in the UK.

In your short time in Australia, have you formed any view as to whether children are being placed in a more central position in child welfare practice in the UK or Australia?

I have found it very interesting to look at the Australian welfare system from a child-centred perspective. You do have

some important developments including Children's Commissioners and a fairly sound social transfer system. However, as it has been in the UK, it appears that children themselves are not really being engaged yet in a productive way in much of the policy and practice that affects them. In the UK there has been a considerable policy effort directed towards children which was launched to fulfil Tony Blair's pledge to eradicate child poverty in 20 years. This has meant that children have moved from the periphery to the centre of the policy agenda and this has resulted in an increased interest in the well-being of children and a major redistribution of resources towards them. A significant policy push such as this provides an opportunity to open the debate about children and develop new ways of thinking about them and working with them. An important part of this process has been the acknowledgement that children themselves have something valuable to contribute.

Can you outline what you believe are currently the major issues for children in the UK and globally?

I think child poverty is the major issue for children in the UK as well as on a global scale. Children always bear the brunt of economic and social changes. And whilst much of our concern has traditionally been on child poverty outcomes and the impact of poverty on the adult the child will become, I think we need to direct our attention much more closely to addressing children's experiences in the immediacy of childhood.

In Australia, researchers tend to avoid undertaking research directly with children because of the difficulties associated with, and length of time involved in, gaining permission to interview children. These difficulties are particularly associated with research ethics committees. Is this a factor in the UK?

Child-centred research is challenging. It raises practical and methodological issues about establishing trust and rapport but also, in acknowledging and addressing ethical considerations, issues of power and control and, of course, more practical issues of gaining access and ensuring informed consent. Even so, I think it is essential that we start to take time to listen to children. In the UK there are ethics committees, but mainly in the area of psychology. In my own practice I use ethical research guidelines developed especially for work with children. I also try to continually reflect on my own practice. It is a difficult and challenging field, but it is also a rewarding one not just for research and practice, but also for children themselves who learn that their issues and concerns are of interest and will be listened to and respected.

Dr Tess Ridge has recently published the following work:

- Ridge, T. (2003), 'Benefiting Children?: The challenge of social security support for children', in J. Millar (ed.), *Understanding Social Security: Issues for Policy and Practice* Bristol, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Ridge, T. (2002), *Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a Child's Perspective*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Millar, J. & Ridge, T. (2002), 'Parents, children, families and new Labour: developing family policy?', in M. Powell, *Evaluating New Labour's Welfare Reforms*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp.85-106.
- Millar, J. & Ridge, T. (2001), *Families, Poverty, Work and Care. A Review of the Literature on Lone Parents and Low-Income Couple Families with Children*, Research Report No.153, Department for Work and Pensions, Leeds: Corporate Document Services.