Tackling child poverty: Implications for children’s services
A think piece
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What is Child Poverty?

Children are assumed to be in poverty if they live in a household where the income is less than 60% of median household income for that financial year (see Figure 1). The poverty gap is defined as the gap between this median income and actual income. In March 1999, the Labour Government announced a target to eradicate child poverty by 2020. As a result of a number of tax and benefit reforms there was a significant drop in the numbers of children in poverty, as defined by this measure, between 1999 and 2005, but this progress has now stalled. In 2011, the Coalition Government introduced a new strategy ‘A new Approach to Child Poverty’ which has set a target for less than 10% of children to be in poverty by 2020, broadening out the definition to include other measures.

Poverty has been referred to by a number of authors as intergenerational in its effects. A recent NfER report challenges the implication that poverty transmits through generations and preferring to use the term persistent poverty, defined as people experiencing poverty over an extended period of time e.g. at least two to three years. They state that, “There is clear evidence that the life outcomes for those experiencing chronic or persistent poverty in their youth... are considerably worse than for those experiencing recurrent or transient poverty.”

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1 Brewer, Mike; Browne, James; Joyce, Robert; Sibieta, Luke (2010): Child poverty in the UK since 1998-99: Lessons from the past decade, IFS working papers, No. 10,23
2 A new approach to child poverty HM Government 2011
What is the impact of poverty on UK children?

Numerous studies have documented the impact of poverty on children. A major study of over 8000 children born in the year 2000 found children who have experienced persistent poverty (16 per cent) were over 4 times as likely to exhibit poorer cognitive development as children who had not experienced poverty, and children in persistently poor families were substantially more likely to have behavioural problems than those in non-poor families. Frank Field's report *The Foundation Years* summarises the impact of poverty on children's life chances as follows, “Compared to other children, those from households with low income or lower socio-economic status are: more likely to suffer infant mortality; more likely to have pre school conduct and behavioural problems; more likely to experience bullying and take part in risky behaviours as teenagers; less likely to do well at school; less likely to stay on at school after 16; and more likely to grow up to be poor themselves.”

Poverty is a multifaceted concept and definitions take into account a wide range of resources, also called forms of capital that people may have to do without. The seven capitals framework refers to 7 areas of capital that people experiencing persistent poverty may lack at various times. These include:

- financial capital
- built capital or fixed assets that facilitate well-being;
- social capital both bonding with friends and bridging which reaches wider networks
- human capital – people's health, emotional intelligence, knowledge, skills and motivation
- natural capital – local landscape and natural resources
- cultural capital which shaping values and identity
- political capital – the ability of a community to influence decisions and distribution of resources.

Children in poverty are affected by many more challenges than not having enough money.

What are the key causes of poverty?

Individual, structural and cultural causes of poverty are often identified, and it is very clear that these interact.

**Individual:** The characteristics of individuals matter in terms of their risk of being in poverty, for example low educational attainment, ill health, addiction, having a disability and being a lone parent increase the risk of being in poverty. However, it is clear that many of these individual characteristics may be themselves affected by structural issues. For example, women are less inclined to marry when men have no employment opportunities.

Despite a lack of research evidence, the discourse of individual blame and responsibility for poverty is becoming more prevalent. Individual causes are often depicted in features in the press where characteristics such as laziness, irresponsibility, dependency and wanting an easy life are identified as traits associated with poverty. A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation looking at public attitudes to poverty between 1886 and 2010 shows that public attitudes to poverty in the UK are hardening. “Specifically, the explanation that living in need is due to the individual’s own characteristics and behaviour (“laziness or lack of willpower”) has gained popularity at the expense of a societal explanation (“injustice in our society”).”

**Structural:** The consensus of academic research points to many causes, which are structural in nature, relating to weak labour markets, poor resources, discrimination, and failing services. Poverty in young people is increasingly being affected by lack of employment. Moore highlights the following key structural factors as causes of poverty:

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Causes of poverty
(taken from Moore, 2005)

1. **Weak economic growth** – few opportunities for poor people to raise their incomes and accumulate assets.

2. **Social exclusion** – discrimination and stigma force people to engage in economic activities and social relations that keep them poor – poorly paid, insecure work; low and declining assets; minimal access to social protection and basic services; or dependence on a patroon.

3. **Poor natural resources** (in disadvantaged geographical regions) – weak infrastructure and basic services, and poor economic integration impact negatively on wellbeing.

4. **Weak, failing or failed states** – reduced economic opportunity and a lack of basic services and social protection mean that people can easily fall into desperate poverty. Violence destroys assets and discourages investment; and poor people have few means of asserting their rights.

5. **High and persistent capability deprivation**, especially during childhood – poor nutrition, untreated illness and a lack of access to education can diminish human development in ways that are often irreversible.

Standing in his book *The Precariat, the new dangerous class* describes the growth of a new distinctive social economic group who lack the normal forms of work related security eg long term contracts and employment protection. They may lack both a regular guaranteed income and lack community support. “When employed they are in career-less jobs, without traditions of social memory, a feeling that they belong to an occupational community steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity.” Standing claims this group lives with four negative emotions – anger, anomie (defined as “a passivity born of despair”), anxiety and alienation. Standing believes that more people are moving from what he refers to as “the salariat” into the precariat. He claims their lack of a political voice constitutes a long-term threat to stability in societies.

**Is there a culture of poverty?**

Most contemporary social scientists would reject the notion that culture in terms of values eg lack of willpower, or lack of aspiration, has any role in perpetuating poverty. Low studied excluded neighbourhoods in detail and found that, “most excluded neighbourhoods may be characterised by acute tensions and problems, but they are not ‘broken’ or ‘dislocated’. Most residents living there share values and aspirations similar to the rest of us: fairness, hard work and responsibility.”

However, more recently culture has been looked at in a more systemic way in terms of how living in a particular environment created by certain socio-cultural conditions, affects your thinking and behaviour. Recent research in *Science* has found that the experience of being poor and the struggles to cope with the experience use up considerable cognitive resources, which may not be available for other functions. The researchers in this study identify that the cognitive impact of coping with financial challenges may be the equivalent of the loss of cognitive function that occurs after a night without sleep.

Being poor reduces the resources that you have available to you and this has a range of impacts. Ruby Payne has defined poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” and she defines these resources as financial, mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships and role models, knowledge of hidden rules and formal language register. One of her key messages is that the rules and expectations, which dominate the public realm in schools and children’s services privilege middle class pupils. Her analysis is that these hidden rules and formal language must be explicitly taught for children from poverty to learn to negotiate the rules of the middle-class community, because this is the arena in which economic success is most likely.

An interesting feature of Payne’s analysis is that she describes how, when you are in survival mode, and having to struggle to get by each day, your priorities are those things that help you most to survive - these are relationships, because your support network is vital, and entertainment, because life is hard and you need to have fun, you need access to a range of good TV, programmes, films and opportunities to socialize with others. The middle class on the other hand tend to prioritise achievement and material things, and have been known to sacrifice relationships for attainment - eg the long hours work culture which deprives many middle class professionals from seeing much of their spouses and children. The middle class may experience more security and stability, but Payne is not suggesting that their culture is superior.

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Reay\(^\text{14}\) points out that this difference in culture privileges children and families who do speak the language and understand the hidden rules and this may lead to discrimination against children who are perceived as outsiders or ‘other’ because they do not understand and conform to these rules. Learning the rules and the language is not straightforward for children and young people from poor backgrounds, particularly as they become more conscious of the differences between themselves and others. Reay has documented the feelings of working class students as they negotiate middle class schools and universities and describes the struggles they have in undergoing a transformation through education in a context where they recognize that “people like them have historically been, and are currently positioned as, ‘other’ to the educated, cultured subject.” So that in becoming educated and part of the middle class world, they are in some way losing their identities and betraying their heritage.

In her work with both secondary age and mature students, Reay shows how children perceive that they have to be different from their class roots to succeed. Furthermore, she argues, that the values and pride in being working class substantially diminished in the latter half of the 20\(^\text{th}\) Century, influenced by the reinvention of New Labour, where the working classes have been increasingly left without political champions, so children from poverty have fewer role models of educated working class people, and believe they need to transform themselves if they are to become educated – and they both consciously and unconsciously resist this due to a loss of feelings of identity and authenticity.

Rather than problematise the working class and those from poverty by blaming them for their circumstances attributing it to lack of aspiration, laziness or commitment, Reay suggests that we might want to consider problematising the middle class instead. In fact she suggests that the loss of social mobility and the divisiveness in the schooling system is less caused by the failure of children from poverty, but instead by:

> “the level of terror about failure that lies behind the numerous strategies which many middle-class parents have for ensuring educational advantage for their children, strategies such as: insisting that the primary school curriculum prepare children for selective entrance exams; campaigning for setting and streaming to be introduced; employing private tutors; and buying properties within catchment areas of high-achieving secondary schools (and when that latter strategy is too expensive, lying about addresses).”

Reay’s analysis would imply that working class children need a far greater exposure to adults from the educated working class, so they can believe that success in a middle class world is achievable for them and that they can build a future story that does not involve a rejection of their roots.

**What works in intervention to reduce poverty?**

There is clear evidence that interventions at a whole system level work. The substantial drop in child poverty between 1998 and 2004 was a direct result of wage, tax and benefit changes that increased income to poorer families. A recent study by NFER\(^\text{15}\) identified a range of structural interventions open to governments that have been shown to have an impact on child poverty. These include:

- adequate social protection for families for example when they move in and out of work, or to keep young people in education
- reducing the complexity of the benefits system to ensure that those living in, or on the margins of poverty, receive all the benefits to which they are entitled
- increase in the National Minimum Wage
- support for community economic development initiatives (such as local credit unions)
- supporting families into work, and supporting employment stability
- ensuring that childcare is affordable and of good quality
- supporting access to health care and wider services
- improvements in the accessibility of universal services
- work with local employers to ensure an adequate supply of suitable employment
- protect families from debt.

Strategies that can be implemented at local government level include:

- Implementation of a living wage policy for the Council and key partners
- Working with the voluntary sector to set up local credit unions
- Community development and community organising
- Regeneration of key areas to improve housing and increase diversity of housing
- Family friendly services to support families into work including skills development and job clubs


Targeted support for young people including mentoring

Early intervention programmes.

In delivering services to support families into work, to develop new skills and use higher quality child care, research has highlighted the importance of the sensitivity of key service staff who engage with families and the implications for the trust that families place in them. A report by Save the Children highlights this issue:

“The picture gained from this research is of a group of parents who are expected to discuss very personal information, admit failure and take significant risks with their families’ welfare, with a bureaucracy that they are not always convinced has their best interests at heart and which they believe often fails its ‘clients’. Many parents did not view services as recognising this important perspective on their lives; they felt that their interests were not sufficiently championed and that they were often judged by standards that were not relevant to their lives.”

Their key recommendations have implications for any service provider who wants to support children in poverty as many of these families did their best to avoid using services that might have helped them, because they worried that a bad decision could leave them in a crisis. The one successful service provider (Working for Families) which the families identified and which achieved change in 66% of the parents it worked with, had the following key principles:

- start from where parents are
- support parents over the long term
- use a multidisciplinary approach
- work to soft outcomes
- take a key worker approach
- deliver services in a personalized and customer focused way.

A crucial point for influencing the discourse is to challenge the phrase ‘hard to reach’. This makes being hard to reach a characteristic of the families, rather than a reflection on the services that have not persisted in overcoming the barriers families are facing.

They also highlighted the need to:

- Maximise the use of trusted individuals within the community eg health visitors and community organisations to deliver services
- Communicate more widely the impact of this engagement when it delivers positive outcomes

A separate think piece in this series considers the power of community development and community organising as a significant strategy in transforming poor neighbourhoods.17

**What early intervention strategies are effective in tackling child poverty?**

A crucial issue for Directors of children’s services is how to invest scarce funding for early intervention to achieve maximum impact. The Washington State Institute which has been an advocate of the implementation of evidence based programmes for decades gives the following advice to children’s service leaders:

- Avoid spending money on programmes where there is little evidence of programme effectiveness. Shift these funds into successful programmes
- Keep abreast of the latest research-based findings
- Pay close attention to quality control and adherence to original programme designs
- The highest return on investment comes from:
  - Effective programs for young offenders
  - Home visiting programs that target high-risk and/or low-income mothers
  - Early childhood education for low income 3- and 4-year-olds.

The most comprehensive mapping of a whole system prevention strategy has been carried out by Tony Biglan and his colleagues at The Oregon Research Institute and can be found at this link. This is a developmentally informed, science-based framework to guide efforts to promote health and wellbeing among children living within high-poverty neighbourhoods. The framework identifies the programmes that have had the biggest impact on poverty as shown by research evidence, and also a range of smaller strategies or ‘kernels’ that are very low cost but have a significant impact. The recent report by Graham Allen, *Early intervention: the next steps*, also lists a number of promising programmes which have an impact. In the context of diminishing resources, it is vital that local authority investment in early intervention is able to demonstrate its value for money through sound evaluation.

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16 Claire Telfer and Gill Scott assisted by William Reid and Kiel Stewart (2011) Hopes and Expectations: How families living in severe poverty engage with anti-poverty services, by Danny Phillips, Save the Children

17 Wright, A (2013) Building resilience through community development A Think Piece. Virtual Staff College
How can we help children from poverty in school?

Pedagogy refers to the art or science of teaching. Bob Lingard\(^{18}\) in his article Pedagogies of indifference states that ‘the quality of pedagogies is a social justice issue’. The way in which children are taught in schools has a significant impact on their learning.

Lawrence Angus\(^{19}\) emphasizes this point in his work with young people who perceive themselves to have been identified as outsiders to the middle class:

“The point is that education, if it is to be socially responsible and equitable, must be sufficiently inclusive of the lives and cultures of ‘others’, those outside the circle of privilege, including the most disadvantaged students and their communities, in order to make a positive difference in their lives. The shocking reality is that, in too many cases, the level of cultural dissonance in many schools is such that many students feel so alienated that they are unlikely to make the active choice of staying on and trying to succeed in school. For too many working-class and marginalised students, the school seems somewhat like a foreign country in which they, their families and the people they know seem like outsiders who are not valued and respected”

Angus argues that teachers need to see students as active constructors of knowledge, engaging with students on their own terms rather than as ‘others’. Teachers need to explore the funds of knowledge and cultural understanding that children bring into the classroom.

A key issue in teaching is how teachers respond to children who do not learn at an expected rate.

(a) Are the children assigned some form of deficit, and when this occurs, is practice to counteract the perceived deficit seen as something additional to or burdensome to normal practice?

(b) Or, is the pedagogy, or the perspective of the teacher, which has resulted in a slower rate of learning, challenged?

Allison Anders\(^{20}\) argues that all too often, children who do not make expected progress with whitestream middle class standards are labeled as “deficient.” This avoids the need to examine the extent to which curriculum and instructional practices may be ineffective, racist and classist.

A key task for leadership is to encourage the view that all children can learn if teachers get the pedagogy right. Does the leader help teachers to think about the perspective brought to the classroom from the average teacher: raced - white and privileged; gendered – female; and classed - with material wealth and status through education? A key issue is the extent to which teachers are aware of the subtle ways in which children may receive messages that success is not for them, or that they have some kind of deficit in learning. Ruby Payne (ibid) directly addresses this through activities that make teachers more aware of the hidden rules of their class – as opposed to the hidden rules of wealth or poverty. A key issue is for teachers to be come much more self aware, and also more aware of what Hill\(^{21}\) refers to as the ‘social and political contexts of the curriculum, of pedagogy, of educational purposes, of the structures of schooling and education, and the effects these have on reproducing and widening racialised, gendered, social class-based inequalities.’

It is not surprising that research into effective education for children from poverty highlights leadership as one of the crucial variables. Strong leadership is needed to challenge deficit approaches to children who do not learn as quickly as hoped. Research\(^{22, 23}\) looking at schools in poor areas, which have high achievement, shows that effective leaders:

- Have an orientation towards social justice and confront mindsets, structures, policies and practice that perpetuate inequalities
- Positively impact student achievement, share leadership responsibilities with others, facilitate change and focus on instructional improvements for all students drawing on evidence based instruction, particularly in reading and mathematics
- Have substantial investment in professional development on instructional approaches based on psychological principles, that work
- Maintain a systematic school-wide focus on instruction in reading and mathematics and high expectations, with continuous progress monitoring, adjusting instruction on the basis of student progress and holding professionals to account for progress

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23 Parrett, W. H. and Budge, K. M. (2012) Turning high poverty schools into high performing schools ASCD. Alexandria USA
- Respecting students’ linguistic and cultural heritage, encouraging them to build on their knowledge and making explicit the underlying assumptions of the middle class culture that children need to know to be successful
- Develop multiple support systems for students with varying needs, including a strong commitment to student well-being, ensuring students get what they need to succeed
- Are in tune with the communities that they serve, know the community, its economic structure, history and its aspirations and fears. They actively and successfully engage with parents to help accomplish their mission.

How can leaders in children’s services help children in poverty?

A crucial task for directors and assistant directors is to become more self-aware of the stance they take and the discourse they use with respect to children starting with a reflexive understanding of their own raced, gendered and classed position. There are a range of practical activities senior leaders can engage in, but the starting point is to sit on the balcony and become more aware of the discourse being used within their services and start to challenge it.

This think piece suggests three leadership tasks in particular although there are many more that could be undertaken.

1. Assets or strengths based approaches in service delivery

Senior leaders in children’s services can have the greatest impact on their own staff and the services they commission. Leading training on an assets or strengths based approach to service delivery is one mechanism for this. A starting point could be the undertaking of some ethnographic work with families in poverty in the patch by front line staff and managers. The aim is to visit families without an agenda to find out more about their lives. An example of ethnographic work is given in Annex 1. These interviews have considerable impact on staff as they come away with a heightened respect for the families and how they cope with the challenges they face. The next step is providing training in assets and strengths based working. There are often already small groups of staff with these skills such as those running family group conferences, working with solution focused methods, with youth counseling or using strengths based approaches in social care. The issue is how to value, recognise and spread that culture throughout the wider service so that the service has a much greater reach to families that trust local authority staff.

2. Leading for more nuanced approaches to gender, race and class in schools

An assistant director for education could be leading the debate and learning on what children do and do not succeed in achieving in the authority and how the authority can encourage schools to work together on what would make the greatest difference to outcomes. A key challenge is to awaken people’s sense of injustice and concern about the waste of children’s potential through the use of data, the mobilizing of those already aware of the issues and through using some of the research on children’s stories, which exposes the classism and racism that affects them. Then when school leaders are interested, to suggest some collaboration. Ainscow et al describes a project where he worked with a group of schools to answer the following three research questions:

- Which of our learners are most vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation or exclusion?
- What changes in policy and practice need to be made in order to reach out to these students?
- How can these changes be introduced effectively and evaluated in respect to student outcomes?

Staff inquiry groups were set up in a number of schools, which conducted action research leading to changes in practices, beliefs, assumptions and processes, which were then shared with other schools in the project. This led to significant improvement in results.

Leading across the Council to reduce child poverty

A key task of senior leaders in children’s services is to get involved in systems leadership to work on changing the nature and fabric of communities in collaboration with those in the communities. This collaboration is vital.

The evidence suggests that if Councils are serious about tackling poverty they should set up a taskforce made up of those with current direct experience of poverty and those with experience of participatory ways of working, to draw up recommendations for services on ways to ensure that people experiencing poverty can participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives and influence the strategies deployed in the area to tackle child poverty. This should include developing the forms of capital that are important to people in the community including, and most importantly, their economic capital through access to work and all the benefits they are entitled to but also social, built, human, natural cultural and political. In some ways, the political capital is the most important.

24 Mel Ainscow, Alan Dyson, Sue Goldrick & Mel West (2012) Making schools effective for all: rethinking the task, School Leadership & Management 32:3, 197-213
The American Community Organiser, Saul Alinsky\textsuperscript{25}, in his article on The War on Poverty-Political Pornography starts his article by saying:

"First, I would have serious doubts about any really meaningful program to help and work with the poor until such time as the poor through their own organized power would be able to provide bona fide legitimate representatives of their interests who would sit at the programming table and have a strong voice in both the formulation and the carrying on of the program. This means an organized poor possessed of sufficient power to threaten the status quo with disturbing alternatives so that it would induce the status quo to come through with a genuine decent meaningful poverty program."

In terms of being real rather than superficial, focusing on structural rather than just individual and cultural change, the most important legacy senior leaders in children’s services could leave behind them, is to work with their councilors and community to deliver a stronger political voice for the children and families who live in poverty in their area.

Annex: Examples of ethnographic questions

Ethnographic research is carried out in a natural setting such as people’s home or a coffee bar they frequent, it involves intimate face to face interaction and seeks to gather an objective and accurate reflection of participants perspectives and behaviours. It frames behaviour within a social, political and historical context. It also expects researchers to reflect on the lens through which they are viewing participants. There are a number of organisations that can offer training in ethnographic research methods.

Examples of questions for families;

- Tell me the story of your life in two minutes
- Tell me about your typical week (with a sheet showing Monday to Sunday as an aid)
- What do you most look forward to? What do you most enjoy?
- What are your strengths and the strengths of your family?
- What do you most dread?
- Tell me about your community, (and with a map of the area as an aid) which are the places you most like going to, which not?
- Who are the most important people in your life and how often do you see them?
- What did you most enjoy doing in the last year?
- What did you least enjoy doing?
- What TV, magazines, newspapers or books do you look at and why do you like them?
- What are the services for children you have come across? Which were most / least helpful and why?
- What will you be doing in 3 years time?
- What are your hopes and fears?

For teenagers:

- How would you describe your parents when you were growing up?
- What were some of the best and worst things about them?
- What do you think you inherited from them?
- What is your earliest memory?
- What was growing up in your house or neighborhood like?
- What do you remember most about growing up with, or without brothers and sisters?
- What were some of your struggles as a child? What was the saddest time for you?
- How was discipline handled in your family?
- What would you say was the most significant event in your life up to age 12?
- What pressures did you feel as a teenager and where did they come from?
- What did you do for fun and entertainment?
- What was the most trouble you were ever in as a teenager?
- What was the most significant event of your teenage years?
- What was being a teenager like? The best part? The worst part?
- What was your first experience of leaving home like?
- What are your hopes and fears for the future
- What are your strengths, what do you most enjoy doing?