

A child's eye view

The Government has pledged to end child poverty by 2020, and acknowledges that low income and disadvantage in childhood impacts on children's life chances throughout their lives. It has introduced a raft of policies to counteract the long-term effects of child poverty, and to improve the opportunities and life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, little is known about how children from different socio-economic groups perceive and experience social difference. Liz Sutton describes a recent project by the Centre for Research in Social Policy that sought to find out.



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Introduction

Research previously undertaken with children who experience poverty has predominantly drawn them from a pre-existing sample of families living on a low income,¹ or through charitable organisations,² and has focused directly on asking children – in one-to-one interviews – about life on a low income. This research project was different in that it focused directly on what children from contrasting backgrounds felt to be most important to them *per se*, how they identified themselves, and whether – and how – themes associated with income inequality and social exclusion emerged in their own world views.

The children

Forty-two children, aged 8 to 13 from two contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, took part in a series of group discussions. Nineteen came from a disadvantaged housing association estate and participated in services provided by Save the Children and Groundwork. The children were allocated into four groups on the basis of age and gender with separate groups of older (11–13-year-olds) and younger (8–10-year-olds) boys and girls. Each of these groups participated in five research sessions over a year (2005 to 2006) with each session lasting between two and four hours.

Interviews with parents suggested that most of the children were living in low-income households and had experience of material hardship. Most of the children had lived on, or around, the estate since birth, and many had large, local extended families who, for example, provided childcare and helped their families financially. Most of the children lived in households with more than one sibling and many shared bedrooms. The children attended a range of local primary and secondary state schools. Some children reported that they 'wagged' or played truant from school, and a few of the older boys in particular talked of getting into trouble at school, at home and with their neighbours. Several children had special educational needs and a few had parents with long-term disabilities.

Twenty-three children were recruited to the research from a fee-paying independent school. The school fees ranged from £2,300 to over £5,000 per term. The groups of children were divided in the same way as the estate children, with separate groups of younger (8–10-year-olds) boys and girls and older (11–13-year-olds) boys and girls. Each group was visited four times over the year.

The private school children were a mixture of day students and boarders. Day students mainly lived in the surrounding villages and some had previously attended state schools. Several children's families owned more than one home in the UK. Many had moved house several times during their lives, often having lived in different locations in the UK and abroad. Few of the children saw each other outside school.

Nearly all the children were driven to and collected from school by their parents. They tended to have long school days, staying at school until up to 6.15pm doing 'prep' or homework. They also took part in a wide range of after-school clubs and activities, and a few of the children (mainly girls) kept ponies.

Methodological approach

The research was participatory in approach and design. The aim was to enable children to have input into what issues to research and how best to research them. It therefore focused on exploring the topics that children themselves deemed important from their own perspectives. The children also chose or suggested the methods they wanted to use in follow-up sessions. We began by asking the children what they thought was most important in their lives. Each group of children then constructed a list of their most important things.

All the children (from both backgrounds) identified the same four areas of education, their favourite things, free time, and their family and friends. However, different groups included additional items in their lists. For example, the estate girls identified health and safety as an important issue, and followed this up by designing questions and recording interviews with their peers about health and personal safety. The younger estate boys wanted to explore certain aspects of school life further by conducting role plays about a good and bad day at school. Other groups followed a similar pattern so that we worked through the lists of important issues, exploring topics through using 'draw and write' methods, games, role play, mapping and photography.

The direction and focus of the research sessions was organised by enabling reflexivity between the groups. That is, the themes and findings arising from a session with children in one group were fed back in the next session to the other group of children to inform the focus for that session. This 'bouncing' back of findings between groups ensured that the children themselves generated a coherent agenda, drawing from their own interests and 'real life' experiences.

At times, the sessions could only be described as organised chaos, with children involved in other activities going on outside our designated rooms. We also had to contend and compete with various exciting youth centre activities such as drumming, a visit by police dogs, and the impromptu arrival of a fire engine because of a fire in the vicinity. However, all the children were very enthusiastic and it was particularly rewarding for us to see how much they appreciated having their own views valued and listened to. Indeed, some told us that they felt that we were the only people who listened to them.

Similarities between the children

We found some key similarities between the children. For example, although there were differences in the number and size of the material possessions owned by each group, both the estate and private school children owned and valued a similar core of possessions. These included their pets, toys and games. None of the children identified themselves as poor or rich. They considered themselves as 'average' along a continuum of poverty through to affluence.

The children's desire to avoid differentiating themselves from others was reflected in how they presented their circumstances. The estate children tended to 'talk up' what they owned; as one estate boy said, 'I've got all the stuff I want'. The private school children sometimes 'talked down' their material possessions and, particularly, played down their relative economic status.

'We live in a nice big house with a drive, but I wouldn't say I was more highly put than anybody else really. We are moving in to a big house with a drive, but I wouldn't really be like that to anybody else. There are some children who get, like, absolutely everything they ask for, but like I don't get everything I ask for...'

(Older private school girl)

Having too much or too little, therefore, was viewed by the children in a group setting as something to distance themselves from. Their desire to avoid standing out as being different

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highlights how important it is to children to fit in with their own peer group.

The 'otherness' of poverty and affluence. Terms such as 'poor' and 'rich' were rather alien to the children and applied to 'others', particularly those who lived in extreme and absolute circumstances. Poverty was viewed by both groups of children, for example, as either belonging to those in the Third World or, in the UK, to homeless beggars referring to people who were homeless and hungry. During role play sessions with the estate children, poor people were always represented as beggars living on the streets and desperate for food and money. Being rich was associated with having larger material possessions, and more of them, by both groups of children. For example, the rich were perceived to own very large houses and lots of cars. Their houses would have numerous bathrooms, 'golden baths' and spacious rooms. They would have an enormous garden, usually complemented with a swimming pool, a conservatory and invariably a huge trampoline.

The children presented a richer and more in-depth discussion about social difference through their references to 'chavs' and 'posh people'. These terms were associated with lower and higher socio-economic circumstances respectively. The children's perceptions of both these groups were often antagonistic. For example, the estate children perceived being rich to equate with 'poshness'. Being rich and posh meant having few friends, being 'snobby', spoilt, mean and greedy. Estate children also believed that 'posh' children would have little fun in their lives, whilst they were able to have lots. This was primarily because the estate children perceived richer children to be required to work hard. They were also perceived as having few friends mainly because they would 'show off' with their money and have to stay in and do their homework.

By contrast, private school children often perceived children who lived in council estates to be 'chavs', who they considered to be badly behaved and had parents that did not care about them.

'Their parents would be a bad example, they would smoke in front of them and they would swear and drink, you know.'

'The parents wouldn't care about them, would they? They wouldn't care what they do and just let them go off.'

(Older private school boys)

The private school children also perceived poorer children to attend what they considered to be 'rougher' schools.

There were some stark contrasts in the lived experiences between the private school and estate children. For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to focus on their play or free-time activities.

Play and free time

The estate children's free time was dominated by street play and socialising with friends unsupervised in open public spaces within their estate. They enjoyed and valued street play tremendously. Their games were played communally, were physical, and were predominantly based around hiding and chasing.

'With Kickstone, someone is at a lamppost and you have all got to hide and you have to count to 30 and you go and look for them and they kick them if they are caught. Manhunt is where there are two teams and you have to catch each other and then when they have caught all of them they have to catch the other team.'

(Older estate girl)

The younger estate boys also enjoyed building 'dens'. Although unsupervised, the estate children's street play was governed by rules set down by their parents. Parents warned their children about which areas in the estate to avoid and set times for their return. This allowed the children the responsibility to make decisions for themselves, and enabled them to be 'street-wise'. The estate children also talked about the range of parental sanctions they received if they got into trouble in the wider community. These generally involved being sent to bed early or being 'grounded'.

Open space was vitally important to the estate children and they expressed real sense of anger at the loss of some of their land to local developers. The loss of this land made it harder for them to congregate and play with their friends in the relative safety of being near home and off roads. The children's frustration was evident on our 'walkabouts' in the estate with the older boys who heckled and abused the builders on site and placed obstacles in the paths of construction machinery. The loss of their land highlights the tension between developing on and maintaining public space, with direct consequences for how children live their lives.

Street play was all the more important to the estate children owing to a lack of space and

resources within the home, and limited opportunities to access more organised activities, which were perceived to be too costly to parents. Street play made the children visible and liable to be perceived as trouble within their estate.

'There's only one park and no one goes on anything because the 18-year-olds go on and vandalise everything. There's a playground near the shops and if the police catch you they take you back to your house. You're not allowed to go in.'

(Younger estate girl)

The private school children, on the other hand, led more 'chaperoned' lives than the estate children. They spent more of their free time indoors at home, or involved in organised activities which were accompanied by adults. They were often driven to and from friends' houses, clubs and activities.

'I do quite a lot of riding lessons, I have tennis lessons, I have gymnastics lessons.'

(Older private school girl)

'Well I have riding lessons and I sometimes have fishing lessons, I go with my dad on fishing lessons... and I go for shooting lessons.'

(Older private school girl)

They also emphasised the importance of their own personal space within their homes and tended to play with their friends more at home than the estate children did. They took part in a wide variety of organised activities which frequently emphasised learning. These included: riding, shooting, fishing, tennis and gymnastic lessons.

The private school children's parenting styles differed from the estate children's in that they were based on perceptions of latent risks to their children's safety. The private school children explained that their parents worried about them getting attacked or 'mugged' when out and about. Their perceptions appeared to be heightened by incidents in the media of anti-social behaviour, gun crime and 'rough' hooded youths picking on other children to 'mug' them for their mobile phones. This fear for their safety was transmitted to the children, making them wary of other children when out and about.

Subsequently private school children perceived their parents to 'baby' them, allowing them less freedom to go out unaccompanied than they sometimes would have liked.

'I am allowed down to the post box at the bottom of our close but I am not allowed past there and I am set times so like if you are not back within ten minutes they'll call the police.'

['How does this make you feel?']

'Strange, my friend, who lives in the village next to the graveyard she has been able to walk the dog as far as she wants since she was 5 or 10 and I am not allowed to go further than the post box.'

(Older private school girl)

Conclusion

One overarching finding from this research was the extent to which both groups of children prioritised issues of importance to them. For example, both the estate and private school children identified relationships and activities as more important to them than their material circumstances. Both, despite their different backgrounds, also emphasised the importance of education, free time, favourite things, and friends and family in their lives. The similarities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds serve as a reminder of the everyday experience of being a child. This is especially important when children from low-income households are often regarded as problematic and different. They are first and foremost children.

A unique strength of this project is the participation of children from contrasting backgrounds and the research clearly identifies the dimensions of social difference from the perspective of children themselves. It therefore helps us to develop a child-centred view of the themes and issues which are associated with, and result from, social disparity and relative disadvantage in childhood. ■

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The implications and observations for policy arising from this research will be discussed in detail in the final research report, which is due to be published in May 2007 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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- 1 T Ridge, *Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion*, The Policy Press, 2002 and D Roker, *Worth More Than This: young people growing up in family poverty*, The Children's Society, 1998
- 2 M Daly and M Leonard, *Against all Odds: family life on a low income in Ireland*, Combat Poverty Agency, 2002

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