**The poverty paradox – poor practitioners supporting families in poverty**

**Introduction**

I am a lecturer at the University of Chichester and for many years I have run workshops about poverty for Early Childhood undergraduate students. During our discussions, I have been struck by how we can understand poverty in very different ways. This paper explores the ‘poverty paradox’, how early years practitioners working in a sector which is under paid, undervalued and struggling to survive can be part of a solution to alleviate poverty for children and families. Drawing on my doctoral research I explore how early years practitioners' understandings of poverty and how these might challenge inequalities or sustain negative stereotypes.

**Poverty in the UK**

Despite being the fifth richest country in the world, poverty is a problem in the UK. Everyone is vulnerable to poverty, but children are particularly at risk. The latest government statistics suggest there are 4.3 million children (31%) living in relative low-income poverty, after housing costs (Francis-Devine, 2021). In-work poverty is at a record high with nearly 1 in 5 working families experiencing poverty due to low pay, high rents, and inadequate benefit payments. The UK has the third most expensive childcare system in the world, with costs largely being met by parents and settings. The recent report parent survey by Mumsnet and other leading organisations reported that 96% parents find childcare costs too expensive and that the government is not doing enough to support childcare (Mumsnet, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has added to the challenges faced by many low-income families and widened the gap between rich and poor. Many families have experienced significant reductions in their earnings due to redundancy, furlough, and higher living costs (Howes et al., 2020). During the lock down mothers absorbed the majority of childcare, resulting financial and mental strain. The rapid rise in food bank use during the pandemic reflects how families are struggling to provide their children with the basics (The Trussell Trust, 2020).

**Poverty in Early Childhood**

Poverty affects every aspect of children’s lives including:

* friendships and relationships with other children
* wellbeing and mental health
* experience at school and educational outcomes
* physical health
* family life
* material resources and goods
* food and nutrition
* adequate housing
* access to safe spaces to play outside the home
* access to local amenities

**Shaming poor parents**

Poor parents get blamed for their circumstances and those of their children, with lone parents mostly to be vilified in the media. Lone parents are mostly women and have the highest poverty rate of all working-age adults due to gender inequality at work, low pay, and exorbitant childcare costs. However, these factors are rarely acknowledged. Government initiatives, such as the ‘Troubled Families Programme’, aimed at turning the lives of families who ‘have problems and cause problems to the community around them’ has been criticised for stigmatising families, many of whom are on low incomes (DCLG, 2014). The term ‘troubled families’ is problematic, singling out poor families as ‘causing’ trouble, whilst other factors such as poor housing, ill health and low incomes are ignored. Blaming individuals for their own circumstances leads to ‘othering’, shaming and stigmatisation. Consequently, poor families get blamed for their own and societies problems. It is yet to be seen whether the government’s renaming of the programme as ‘Supporting Families’, will make a difference to the lives of families who are struggling.

**Early Childhood Education and Care and addressing poverty**

Supporting children and families in the early years is crucial to addressing poverty and making a difference to children’s life chances. Sure Start Children Centres [SSCCs], working together with the voluntary, private, and independent sector, played a central role in providing a range of services to reduce the gap between children living in poverty and their peers. Over the last ten years the budget for children’s services has decreased significantly and local authorities have struggled to fund SSCCs. Consequently, many centres have closed or experienced a significant reduction in services. Earlier this year the government published ‘The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days’ (HM Government, 2021), with a promise to ‘level up’ economic opportunity for families in England. This was followed by a pledge to invest 20 million pounds to help more ‘vulnerable families’, including funding ‘Local Family Hubs’, which provide integrated education, health, and care services. However, whilst investment in in early childhood education and care is welcome, it does beg the question why funding for SSCCs was cut in the first place.

Most ECEC is provided by the private, voluntary, and independent [PVI] sector. Many PVI settings are struggling to survive due to a lack of funding and difficulties with recruiting and retaining staff. The early years workforce is heavily gendered, 98% of early years practitioners are female. The average wage of an early years practitioner is well below that of the national minimum wage. Attempts to professionalise and strengthen the role of the early years practitioner through the introduction of higher qualifications, such as Early Years Teacher Status, have been met with limited success. A survey by Nursery World in 2019 found that more than 10% of practitioners are living in poverty and unable to afford the basics (Crown, 2019). The combination of low wages, long hours and lack of progression has resulted in many practitioners leaving the sector for less demanding and better paid jobs.

In 2017 the government introduced extended hours for children aged 3 to 4 years old. The policy is designed to support parents into work as well as increasing the number of hours they can work. However, government funding for the scheme is inadequate. Since the policy was introduced, the number of nurseries which have closed has increased by 153%, a third of which were in the most deprived areas. Research suggests that highly qualified early years practitioners are integral to improving outcomes for children from low-income families (Solvason et al., 2020). Many settings that are offering the extended hours are finding it difficult to employ and retain higher qualified staff on the current funding levels. A research report by The Sutton Trust and The Sylvia Adams Charitable Trust (2021) found that most children who are eligible for the 30 hours are from more affluent families, with 70% of those eligible in the top half of the earners distribution. As a result, these children are ‘double advantaged’, receiving double the number of hours than many poorer children. The policy has been described as nothing short of a ‘national scandal’.

**The ‘poverty paradox’**

Highly qualified early years practitioners make a difference to improving outcomes for children in poverty. However, they are underpaid, underfunded, work long hours, with little opportunity to progress. Here in lies the ‘poverty paradox’. On the one hand the government suggests that early years practitioners are integral to addressing poverty in early childhood. On the other hand, early years practitioners are under paid, undervalued and under resourced. This begs the question, how can the government expect early years practitioners to address poverty for others, when it fails to recognise that many practitioners are struggling with poverty themselves?

**How do early years practitioners understand poverty?**

In 2015 I conducted a qualitative narrative study with early years practitioners to investigate how they understood poverty in early childhood (Lyndon, 2019a; Lyndon, 2019b; Lyndon, 2020). The study was located in two maintained nursery schools in the South-East of England. There were 38 participants, including teachers (with qualified teacher status), nursery nurses, nursery assistants, family support workers and managers. All participants took part in one of six focus groups and 16 took part in a one-to-one interview. Written consent was gained from all participants and ethical approval was gained from the two participating universities before the research started. The next section discusses some of my findings from the study.

**Deserving and undeserving parents**

When the practitioners were asked about poverty in early childhood, many talked about the parents and families they worked with. Overall poverty was understood in moral terms, with some parents considered more ‘deserving’ than others. For example, Heather talked about parents who prioritise the ‘wrong things’:

“But they don’t see it like that. They see it as their priority. It’s a priority to have a brand new phone […] It’s a priority to have the internet and to have Sky TV.”

Parents on low incomes who were not working were more likely to be judged than those who experienced in-work poverty. For example, Chloe talked about a mother who was in receipt of benefits:

[She said] “I don’t need to work, I’m getting six hundred pound to pay towards the flat” […] she’s so laid back, she’s not panicking about anything, the child’s in brand new Adidas clothes.”

In contrast, parents who were working were constructed more favourably. For example, Jackie talked about the lack of opportunity for parents who are experiencing in-work poverty:

“Politicians talk about getting parents back to work as though they’re all going to go into a lovely career on a good salary […] but most of them to into crap jobs with low pay and horrible hours.”

In this example, Jackie blames the government for failing to recognise the difficulties that parents face trying to find work that pays.

**Being a mother**

Over half of the early years practitioners who took part in my study were parents. They talked about the tensions they had experienced between their role as a mother and their role as an early years practitioner. Many were living on low incomes and at different times had struggled financially. To overcome their struggles some became more qualified and gained a higher paid job; others worked longer hours; and some decided to ‘do without’ for example, going without a car. Diana decided to keep her family stable by making the decision to have only one chid:

“I only have one child […] we made that decision to keep our family stable [...] I then see families with lots and lots of children and really struggling and I […] can understand why […] the joy that they bring is incredible […] I suppose there is part of me that just thinks **maybe** you could have made slightly different choices.”

Diana’s story highlights the tensions between her personal life as a mother and her professional role as an early years practitioner. On the one hand she positions herself as a responsible mother making the choice to have only one child, whilst on the other hand she positions herself as a professional caring for the multiple children of a mother who made a different choice.

**Shame**

Research suggests that to avoid judgement and shame, those on low incomes avoid using the term ‘poverty’ (Chase and Walker, 2012). Although practitioners spoke openly about times when they had struggled financially, no one used the term ‘poverty’ to describe their personal circumstances. Audrey talked about her experience of homelessness and extreme financial restraint, however, she made it clear that her children were not ‘poverty stricken’, preferring to use the term ‘disadvantaged’. She talked about the shame and stigma of poverty and how she tried to avoid this:

“When we were on benefits I paid for all my kids school trips and you know [they] all say, ‘Well if you’re struggling come and see the teacher’ … I’m not seeing the teacher, I don’t want the thinking I can’t do things for my kids’.”

Later in the interview Audrey explains why parents on low incomes buy high status goods:

[They say] “My child’s going to school with an iPhone […] No one can say I’m not a good mum.”

In this example the parent is not judged, instead Audrey demonstrates empathy and reveals why a parent who is struggling financially might choose to buy the latest mobile phone.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the research revealed how early years practitioners understood poverty in complex ways. Practitioners’ understandings intersected with their personal and professional experiences as well as negative media and political discourses about parents and families in poverty. Whilst some families were ‘othered’ for making the ‘wrong choices’, others were judged more favourably. Many of the early years practitioners in the study had experienced similar issues to working parents on low incomes, such as low pay, and high childcare costs. This perhaps explains why more understanding for working parents was demonstrated. However, despite the practitioners’ personal struggles with poverty they were strongly committed to supporting for the children and families they worked with.

So how can the ‘poverty paradox’ be addressed? How can the government expect early years practitioners to address poverty for others, when it fails to recognise that many practitioners are facing issues with poverty themselves? Firstly, we need to listen to those who have experienced poverty (Solvason et al., 2020). Listening to and involving those who have experienced poverty in training and development will help to ensure that our practice is ‘shame proofed’. Secondly, if the government is serious about ‘levelling up’ and reducing the gap between rich and poor, changes in policy and adequate funding for ECEC is needed. The Sutton Trust and The Sylvia Adams Trust (2021) suggest that making the 30 hours entitlement available for all 3- to 4-year-olds would help to narrow the attainment gap between children from low-income families and their peers. However, this will not be achieved unless ECECs are properly funded and able to deliver quality education and care. Lastly, to improve and maintain quality within the ECEC sector, the work of early years practitioners needs to both recognised and rewarded. To improve issues of retention and recruitment within the sector, issues of low pay; progression routes; affordable and accessible training; must be addressed. Only when we take a wholistic approach to tackling issues will we see positive changes for children, families, and practitioners.

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