

Discourses and narratives of poverty in early childhood

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Aims of the presentation

- To present an analysis of the dominant discourses of poverty in the UK with reference to government policy and the media.
- To present the findings of a study with early years practitioners working in the south-east of England
- To discuss how practitioners' narratives were shaped by dominant discourses of poverty and their professional and personal lives.

Child poverty in the UK

- Despite the UK being the fifth largest economy in the world, 30% of children live in relative low-income poverty (DWP, 2019).
- Under current government policies child poverty is predicted to rise to 40% by 2022 (Hood and Waters, 2017).
- Ridge (2011) concludes that poverty is pervasive and affects every aspect of children's lives causing isolation and exclusion from society.
- Children living in areas of disadvantage have an increased risk of health issues and a shorter life expectancy (ONS, 2014).
- By the age of five there is a significant gap in children's educational attainments - with children living in less affluent areas underperforming compared to those living in other areas (DfE, 2014).

Discourses of poverty

- Discourses of redistribution
- Discourses of work and welfare
- Discourses of poverty shaming and troubled families

Discourses of redistribution

- A redistributionist discourse addresses poverty through the more equal distribution of power and material resources (Townsend, 1979).
- Income inequality in the UK is amongst the highest levels in the Europe (McGuinness and Harari, 2019).
- In the UK there has been a sharp increase in income for those in the top 1% (McGuinness, 2018).
- Inequality is further esabated by gender, class, disability and ethnicity and race.

- The Guardian (Neate, 2019) reports that **‘More people to join “ultra-rich” than finish London Marathon’**.



Discourses of work and welfare

- **Universal Credit** combined several benefits into one with the aim of ‘tackl[ing] poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency’ (DWP, 2010, p. 2).
 - A less generous system for lone parents and families with young children
 - Initial 5 week waiting time
 - Increased debt, rent arrears and use of food banks(CPAG, 2017; DWP, 2019; HCCPA, 2018).
- **Childcare** – 30 hours free childcare:
 - Benefited those already in work
 - lack of financial viability for education and care settings(Paull et al., 2017)
- **In-work poverty** - 69% of children in poverty live in families where at least one person is working (DWP, 2019).

‘Food bank warning about universal credit pilot’ (BBC News, July, 2019).



Volunteers at the Harrogate food bank say they've seen a 20% increase in the number of requests for food in the past year

Discourses of poverty othering, shaming and troubled families

- Increasingly those in poverty have become more stigmatized - “workers and strivers” versus “shirkers and skivers” (Lansley and Mack, 2015).
- Poverty shaming in the media and popular culture – such as the ‘chav mum’ – welfare dependent, poor at parenting, promiscuous, ‘bad’ or ‘vulgar’ taste (Tyler, 2008).



Vicky Pollard (played by Matt Lucas)
from ‘Little Britain’ (BBC, 2003 - 2005)

Research Study

Aims:

- How do early years practitioners understand poverty in early childhood?
 - ‘How do dominant discourses of poverty shape early years practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’
 - ‘How does the personal and professional shape early years practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’

Research Design

- 38 participants from two maintained nursery schools with onsite children's centres and daycare provision in south-east of England.
- A wide range of roles were represented which included:
 - 6 teachers (with qualified teacher status)
 - 9 nursery nurses
 - 10 nursery assistants
 - 8 family support/outreach workers
 - 5 managers
- A narrative approach was taken and practitioners took part in qualitative focus groups and interviews.

Findings

- Practitioners' narratives about poverty were complex and nuanced revealing a complexity of interconnections between morality, motherhood (and fatherhood), parenting, work, welfare and 'curve balls' (unexpected events).

Narratives of:

- Othering
- Work and welfare
- Curveballs

Othering

- Heather: But I think for some lifestyle choice, it's like they – a lot of parents live beyond their means. [...] And it's like actually, is that a necessity? [...] 'Is it a priority to have Sky?' 'Well yes, I want to watch all my programmes.' 'But have you got enough food – enough money to pay your rent?' 'Er – no.' [...] It's materialistic, isn't it? [...] Actually, is it needed? Do you need it? No. [...] But they don't see it like that. [...] They see it as their priority.

‘Fitting in’

Audrey: And it's not 'cause, you know, they're on the fiddle or because benefits is the life of... [...] It's because they feel the need to fit in with everybody else. Because people talk to them like they're crap and people look down on them. It's almost that having the need to have things to represent their family. 'Well look, my child's not gonna be left out. My child's going to school with an iPhone.' [...] No-one can say I'm not a good mum' [...] 'But that fam- that mum might go without food to pay that bill.

Work and welfare

- Jackie: And the annoying thing is that politicians talk about getting parents back to work as though they're all going to go into a lovely career on a good salary that they're all professionals but most of them go into crap jobs with low pay and horrible hours you know and they just never mention that do they?
- Iris: Things like zero hour contracts ...but you can't turn round to the nursery school and say, 'Oh I know I've paid for daycare but actually McDonalds isn't busy today so they've sent me home so actually I don't want to pay you', because the nursery school would say, "Terribly sorry you've got a contract with us and you've got to pay us".

Curveballs

- Betty: Recently the family have been thrown another serious curveball [...] and their second child was born with a serious medical condition. [...] [Dad] had to leave from his job [...] and they were trying to manage the care of the older child here and at the same time try and see their very poorly new born baby [who was in hospital many miles away] [...] Transportation, things like that, costs were huge. [...] This family have had to come in for local area network loans [...] support for gas and electricity [...] getting foodbank vouchers [...] But my gosh they did their best [...] they're a young family [...] and your heart goes out to them because [...] this family is doing the absolute utmost that they can.

Concluding thoughts

- Frameworks Institute's (2018, p. 3) report states that a new moral narrative is needed to shift thinking about poverty – one which helps 'people interpret rising poverty levels as an indication that we are not living up to our moral obligations to support one another'.
- 'Poverty proofing the school' was a project developed by Children North East (nd) and provides a toolkit to help schools reduce the stigma and barriers to learning associated with poverty.
- Findings from the project evaluation (Mazzoli-Smith and Trodd, 2016) found that poverty proofing improves
 - children's attendance and attainment,
 - facilitates more effective use of pupil premium funding
 - increases take up of school meals.

Thank you for listening

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