

# **Pulling the threads together – Consultations, conversations and contemplations on child poverty in Australia**

**A summary paper from the ARACY Collaborative team undertaking the *Children’s Lived Experience of Poverty Project*, including Professor Catherine McDonald (RMIT University), the NSW Commission for Children and Young People<sup>1</sup> and The Benevolent Society<sup>2</sup>.**

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

Current debate on policy surrounding child poverty in Australia fails to include the perspective of children themselves. If our policies and services are to be successful in supporting children we need to understand what poverty is for them. Invariably in research and policy in this area, children’s experience is obscured; subsumed within the overarching perspective of other social groups experiencing similar circumstances. Because of limited research in this area we cannot be sure whether our current understandings of what it means to be poor are meaningful for children. Without this we cannot be sure that our policies and services meet their needs. Children need a voice in the debate and we need to obtain a clear picture from them so that their views can be included when developing policy, services, and monitoring frameworks in this area.

In 2006, the *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) ARC/NHMRC Research Network – Future Generation Program of Support for New Collaborators* provided funding for a collaborative project to explore children’s understanding of poverty. The collaboration was led by Professor Catherine McDonald, RMIT University Melbourne, joined by The Benevolent Society and the NSW Commission for Children and Young People. The project was undertaken with a view to developing an ARC research grant application.

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## 1.2 Context

Child poverty continues to be a persistent problem worldwide. Most research on poverty is undertaken at the level of population cohort of interest; the results tend to be aggregated, the methods positivist and often derived from economic and other forms of statistical modelling. Currently we know that poor economic circumstances have the potential to impact on children's lives in a number of ways, such as on their family relationships and circumstances, schooling and educational achievements, access to developmental, recreational opportunities, and on their health (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan & Maritato, 1997; Fincher & Saunders, 2001). We also know that the timing, depth and duration of poverty are significant in the effect of poverty on children's lives (Bradshaw, Williams, Levitas, Pantazis et al., 2000; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Phipps & Lethbridge, 2006).

However, with some notable exceptions (see for example Ridge, 2002; Taylor & Fraser, 2003), children's perspectives on poverty, their experience of poverty, their insights, and their interpretations, have rarely been the subject for research. As a result our appreciation of the impact of poverty on children is both blunted and inadequate. Understanding children's experience of poverty, their day-to-day struggles and the meaning they make of these, plus the impact on their hopes and expectations, is crucial if we want to fully appreciate both the material and emotional impact.

Children's experience of poverty is usually subsumed into the experience of families. This practice assumes that the findings for families translate to known impacts on children. It also assumes that parents and other adults' interpretations of children's experience of poverty is the same as those of children and young people themselves.

Research movements such as the *new sociology of childhood* challenge such assumptions by arguing that children's perspectives are unique to children and filtered through fundamentally different views of, and responses to, the social world (Corsaro, 2003; Qvortrup, 1994). Children are themselves competent interpreters of the social world in which they are located. Research approaches which are 'with' rather than 'on' children allow us to appreciate how children constitute their lives, and

recognise children as having unique social identities (Corsaro, 1997; James, 1993; Wyn & White, 1997). In recent years there has been a growing body of research carried out into children's experience of poverty in response to researchers' recognition that children's perspectives on their experience of poverty have the capacity to inform policies developed to address child poverty.

### **1.3 Aims**

The focus of this project was to develop a better understanding of the issues surrounding children's experience of poverty, and the strengths and limitations of current policy in responding to child poverty in Australia. It was also to explore appropriate methods and approaches to use with children and young people themselves in order to develop an understanding of their experience of poverty.

Questions for the project included:

1. How is poverty defined?
2. How are children constructed in policies addressing poverty?
3. What are children's understandings and experiences of poverty?
4. Are we meeting the needs of children in poverty in Australia?

### **1.4 Methods**

To address the aims, three methods were used. These included:

1. Completing a literature review.
2. Holding a roundtable discussion with national experts from a range of disciplines and perspectives.
3. Talking with children and young people about taking part in research.

The remainder of this paper will provide a summary of the findings, and the overall conclusions reached on completion of the project.

## **2. Constructions of poverty**

Poverty in Australia today is approached by most as a multi-dimensional construct, albeit one with no widely-shared understanding. Poverty is generally approached as a relative concept, considered in relation to standards of living deemed acceptable for children in our society. Poverty is seen as a dynamic state, with children moving

into and out of poverty during the course of their lives. Poverty can persist however, and intergenerational cycles are evident. Different cultures are noted to have different understandings of poverty in Australia.

Three broad approaches for conceptualising child poverty are evident in the literature: income and material deprivation, social exclusion and inclusion, and well-being. Each of these will be discussed briefly.

## **2.1 Income poverty and material deprivation: Strengths and limitations**

Historically, poverty has been approached from an economic-resource perspective. When people do not have sufficient money or material resources to meet their needs (e.g. for food, housing, fuel, medical care), they are likely to experience poverty. Their standard of living, in either absolute or relative terms, is likely to be low.

Child poverty is most commonly measured using relative family or household income. Such measures are important in providing the basis for support programs and research, and have been useful in examining the impact of government policy and expenditure in countries internationally.

The dominant policy strategies adopted in Australia and internationally to address poverty are 'tax and benefit' strategies (which aim to provide all families with some level of guaranteed income and access to services) and 'work' strategies (which aim to reduce the level of joblessness among families) (Whiteford & Adema, 2007). In Australia, tax and benefit strategies have been largely effective, lifting 60% of families with children out of poverty. Work strategies have not been entirely successful however, with around 1 in 5 families with children in poverty having one or both parents in employment (Whiteford & Adema, 2007).

A snap-shot taken at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century using relative income measures reveals between 12 and 15 per cent of Australian children live in poverty, placing Australia in the bottom half of league tables for OECD countries (UNICEF, 2007; Whiteford & Adema, 2007; Wooden & Headey, 2005). In a study which looked at income mobility and financial disadvantage in Australia across a three year period,

Abello and Harding (2006) found that 28 per cent of Australian children experienced a stint in poverty over a three year period, while 12% faced persistent poverty and one per cent lived in severe and persistent income poverty.

While pointing to the size of the problem, the shortcomings of income measures constructed at a family or household level to assess poverty among children are well documented (Adelman, Middleton & Ashworth, 2003; Feeny & Boyden, 2004; Mickelwright, 2002). From a measurement perspective, such measures are often difficult to understand, arbitrary in terms of the standard set (e.g. 50% versus 60% of the median income), fail to reflect living standards, and underestimate the costs of children. They have also been criticised as hiding the situation of children, by assuming that income/expenditure is equitably shared among the family, revealing little about the welfare of the children within these families. Further, they tell us nothing about what it is that poor children go without relative to their non-poor peers. They also ignore the role of community in child-rearing, which in some societies may be the cultural norm (Feeny & Boyden, 2004).

The need for more direct measures of child poverty has been recognised in Australia, with emerging work attempting to address this (Senate Community Affairs References Committee Secretariat, 2004; Saunders, Naidoo & Griffiths, 2007). Approaching poverty as an “enforced lack of items and activities that the majority of the population deem to be necessary” (Adelman et al., 2003, p.16), deprivation measures have the potential to overcome several of the criticisms of income measures, in that they can be applied directly to children to examine what it is poor children go without, and can be used to compare children directly with other children, rather than subsuming them into families and households (Adelman et al., 2003).

## **2.2 Social exclusion and inclusion: Strengths and limitations**

Social exclusion represents a multi-dimensional approach to poverty, which recognises that people may be poor or excluded not only in economic terms, but also socially, culturally and politically. Social inclusion is the counter aim in response to the recognition of the potential for social exclusion. Supporting social inclusion

requires both addressing the potential for social exclusion and supporting social inclusion through the provision of facilities and services within communities.

One of the main strengths of a social exclusion/inclusion approach is the recognition that poverty goes beyond material deprivation to include participation in social and community life. While measures of social exclusion vary, for children, factors associated with social exclusion (or the risk of social exclusion) can be conceptualised both at the level of the child themselves and at a parent/family/household level (Adelman et al., 2003). Personally the child may experience exclusion from social activities, local services and education. At the family level the child may also experience poor quality housing, poor neighbourhood environment, and financial exclusion due to parental low-income or unemployment (Adelman et al., 2003). Research from the United Kingdom suggests that there is a relationship between income poverty and social exclusion among children, with severe and persistent poverty being strongly associated with social exclusion (Adelman et al., 2003).

In reviewing the Australian literature on social exclusion, Daly (2006) argues that research has focused on exclusion within specific fields of activity, making it difficult to report on children's exclusion generally. Daly and Smith (2003) report greater risk of social exclusion among Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal children, due to parental and household exclusion from participation in the mainstream economy. This can also impact on Aboriginal children's inclusion in indigenous culturally-based systems (Daly & Smith, 2003). Differences in the risk of social exclusion for children have also been reported across geographical locations (Harding, McNamara, Tanton, Daly et al., 2006). However, even in affluent areas, children can experience social exclusion (Stanley, Ng & Mestan, 2007).

One of the dangers inherent in a social exclusion/inclusion approach is the potential for it to lead to category-based interventions. For example, the identification and targeting of a number of (potentially overlapping) minority groups as being at risk of exclusion (e.g. refugee/migrant groups; disability groups; teenage parents; lone parents), may draw attention away from identifying and addressing common underlying factors, which are shared by broader populations (Nevile, 2005).

### **2.3 Well-being approaches: Strengths and limitations**

A third approach to poverty is to consider it from the perspective of child well-being. A well-being perspective broadens the focus beyond income and material deprivation, and social exclusion to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing children's lives (Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson, 2006). In contrast to income and social exclusion approaches, well-being offers a strengths-based approach to child poverty. Such an approach suggests that rather than responding to vulnerability and crises, policy and services should promote positive standards for children throughout their lives (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2007).

Well-being approaches have grown in response to the growth of the child rights and participation movements which culminated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Using a rights-based framework, poverty is framed as an issue of rights rather than an issue of resources, with children having the right to survival, development, protection, participation and well-being (White, Levy & Masters, 2002). In such an approach, poverty is seen as a denial of children's rights because it impacts the conditions that children encounter in society which influence their participation, development, and well-being.

Well-being and rights-based approaches to child poverty have a dual focus. They are focused not only on children's developmental outcomes and their future life chances, but they are also focused on the present life for children as children (Bradshaw et al., 2006). Domains examined in the latest UNICEF report (2007) include both conditions for well-being, and outcomes for children. Conditions for well-being include economic conditions, neighbourhood conditions, living conditions, relationships, safety, and access to childcare and education. Outcomes for children are examined in domains of health, health behaviour, subjective well-being, educational achievement, employment outcomes, civic participation and peer relationships.

The challenge of well-being approaches lies in the limited consensus that exists between frameworks for measuring child well-being. Most concepts of child well-

being are inherently multi-dimensional, recognising children's civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights (Bradshaw et al., 2006). Most frameworks adopt an ecological approach, in recognition that the child is socially situated, interacting with their family and broader social structures (Bradshaw et al., 2006). However there is currently limited consensus on the domains and indicators that can be used to measure child well-being.

### **3. Constructions of childhood and children's identity within the discourse on child poverty**

#### **3.1 Children as dependents or social agents**

Two predominant constructions of children are evident within different approaches to child poverty. These include: the dependent child who is an adult in the making; and the competent child, who has rights, and is an agent in their own lives. Each of these constructions is reflected in the major approaches to child poverty and in the policy discourses that surround child poverty.

##### *Children as future adults*

Developmental perspectives construct children as being on a developmental trajectory toward becoming adults. Children are viewed as immature adults in the making: physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially. In this construction childhood is a stage in the process in which the goal is becoming adult. As a consequence children and childhood have a lesser status than adults and adulthood (McDonald, 2007b; Prout & Hallett, 2003; Qvortrup, 1994).

##### *Children as competent social actors*

With the growth of the child rights movement, the status of childhood has changed. Childhood has become recognised as a distinct social and cultural institution, and children as competent social actors within it (Corsaro, 2003; Qvortrup, 1994).

### **3.2 Constructions of childhood evident in different approaches to child poverty and policy**

The research and rhetoric evident within an income approach to poverty tends to construct children as adults in the making. Children in poverty are of interest to governments and policy because of the potential for poor outcomes and because poverty and disadvantage is often transmitted across generation (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; d'Addio, 2007).

Constructed as human capital, we invest in these children out of concern for what their adult outcomes will mean for our society in future (McDonald, 2007b). Children are also generally constructed as passive beings, dependent upon the family to meet their needs and to provide them a voice (McDonald, 2007a). Such an approach fails to recognise that children in poverty are active agents, engaged in the struggle of their daily lives, making a real contribution to ease their own situation and to help their families “get by” and “get out” of poverty (Ridge, 2002, 2003).

Social exclusion approaches in contrast, do not offer a consistent conceptualisation of children. Well-being approaches recognise children are active in their lives and that they have a voice and have a right to be heard. Well-being approaches ascribe children agency, recognising they are active agents in dealing with poverty in their daily lives.

In Australia, the dominant conceptualisation of children within policy discourses appears to be that of adult in the making. We are concerned for children for what they, and our society, may become. We assume the child's experience is the same as the family, not allowing for it to differ across children or families, and generally failing to recognise children's competence and rights as a child.

In this paper, we argue that to address poverty for children, we need to understand how policy promotes identities and the extent to which the identities it promotes are those valued by children (McDonald, 2007a, 2007b). Where children do feature in policies developed about and for children, the identities promoted may or may not reflect those taken up by, or valued by, children. In this sense, policy “may miss the

point of who children think they are and what they want” (McDonald, 2007b, p3) and thus fail to engage with children. Policy may also misread children, in terms of their competence and agency, leading to children not being afforded voice and always constructed as dependent upon adults around them (Prout & Hallett, 2003).

Failing to understand how policy discourses shape identity also contributes to a failure to understand how policy shapes the materiality of children’s lives (Williams, 1996). For children in poverty, this can lead to them being inappropriately lumped together as one single category, constraining our capacity to acknowledge and respond to difference in their lives and experience (McDonald, 2007b).

Traditional measures of child poverty and traditional conceptualisations of children and childhood reveal little about children’s own experience and their own perception of that experience. Recent social changes which have placed greater value on the uniqueness of childhood and the agency of children in their own lives have led to research which provides much greater insight into children’s experience of poverty.

#### **4. Children’s experience of poverty**

Until recently children’s perspectives on poverty had rarely been the subject for research. In response to the child rights and participation movements there has been an increase in research in this area in recent years (Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley & Davis, 2003; Bottrell, 2007; Daly & Leonard, 2002; Davis & Ridge, 1997; Middleton, Ashworth & Walker, 1994; Morrow, 2001; Percy, 2003; Ridge, 2002, 2003; Ridge & Millar, 2000; Roker, 1998; Shropshire & Middleton, 1999; Taylor & Fraser, 2003; Van der Hoek, 2005; Weinger, 2000; Willow, 2002).

Mostly this body of research examines what life is like for children living on a low-income. Limited access to economic resources is a defining feature of poverty for these children. They experience material deprivations associated with this, including impacts on their home and neighbourhood environments. However, the impacts of poverty are most keenly felt by children in relation to their social relationships and ability to participate in social activities, and find social acceptance in their lives such as at school or in their community.

#### **4.1 Income and material deprivation**

One of the most difficult things reported by children living in poverty is having everything decided by money across all areas of their lives (Roker, 1998). Children appear to have a fairly accurate picture of family income, and are aware when their families do not have enough money for things (e.g. school costs, bills, food, clothing, buying a house) (Shropshire & Middleton, 1999; Taylor & Fraser, 2003). They rarely receive pocket money on a regular basis (Ridge, 2007; Roker, 1998; Shropshire & Middleton, 1999). Older children with an independent income often contribute money to family income. They pay bills or buy things when their families are struggling financially, and buy their own clothes, or pay for their own activities (Daly & Leonard, 2002; Roker, 1998).

#### **4.2 Social relationships and participation**

Overwhelmingly, the experience of poverty is described by children in terms of its impact on their social relationships (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003). Children living in poverty experience a lot of pressure to keep up with their peers. They describe problems keeping up appearances, instances of shame associated with poverty, and some report bullying (Daly & Leonard, 2002; Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2007; Middleton et al., 1994; Morrow, 2001; Willow, 2002).

The constraints on their social participation are both practical and material for children in poverty (Attree, 2004). Their interaction with others is constrained by a lack of space at home to have a friend play or stay the night, and parents' inability to afford hospitality (Attree, 2004). A lack of transport and not having a phone also make it difficult to maintain good relationships with friends (Davis & Ridge, 1997; Morrow, 2001; Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998). In combination, these factors mean children do not get to see their friends as often as they would like, leaving some feeling isolated. The impact of poverty on friendships and social lives is felt most acutely by older children (Roker, 1998).

Not being able to participate in organised out-of-school activities is a recurring theme in research with children in poverty (Daly & Leonard, 2002; Middleton et al., 1994; Ridge, 2007; Sutton, Smith, Dearden & Middleton, 2007; Taylor & Fraser, 2003; Van der Hoek, 2005; Willow, 2002). The growing commercialisation of childhood,

reflected in the increasing availability of organised leisure activities for children, is having particular impacts on children from low-income families (Ridge, 2007).

#### **4.3 Influence of environment**

Neighbourhood environments and safety are other key concerns for children and young people growing up in poverty (Daly & Leonard, 2002; Morrow, 2001; Roker, 1998; Sutton et al., 2007; Taylor & Fraser, 2003). Research from the UK indicates that outdoor space is highly valued by children in disadvantaged areas, for whom the street is a site for leisure activities (Ridge, 2007; Morrow, 2001; Sutton et al., 2007). Poor, unsafe areas with increased rates of crime, violence, unemployment, drug use and high levels of deprivation create unsafe environments for children and can restrict children's activities (Morrow, 2001; Roker, 1998).

Children and young people are also aware of the stereotypes of their neighbourhoods. They know if they live in a 'bad place', and may feel stigmatised by this (Bottrell, 2007). Not living in a 'bad area' is one factor that such children think would make a difference in their lives (Roker, 1998).

#### **4.4 Emotional well-being and support**

Social support is key in buffering children from the impacts of poverty (Bottrell, 2007; Van der Hoek, 2005). Such support may come through relationships with family and/or friends, or local youth and community networks (Attree, 2004; Bottrell, 2007). Strong and supportive relationships with family and friends act as buffers against the impacts of poverty. Those without such supports appear the most depressed and pessimistic (Roker, 1998).

The importance of friends in providing both social and material resources should not be underestimated. Friends can provide practical assistance through helping with homework, passing on clothes or household items, and providing somewhere to sleep. They also help with obtaining information and accessing services, and provide emotional support (Bottrell, 2007).

#### **4.5 Limitations of research on children's experience of poverty**

We argue that there are three primary limitations within existing research on children's experience of poverty in Australia. Firstly, the diversity of the experience of poverty amongst different groups of children is not well understood (Attree, 2004; Roker, 1998). Children are not a homogenous group and the lived experience of poverty will likely vary across different social circumstances. Issues such as geographical location, cultural and ethnic background, disability status, family type, age and gender will impact on the experience of poverty for children.

Secondly, recognising that poverty is a dynamic state, there is a gap in our understanding of how transitions into and out of poverty are experienced by children. There is also a gap in our understanding of children's experience of chronic poverty (Roker, 1998), and we have a limited understanding of both the risk and protective factors which mediate children's experience of poverty (Van der Hoek, 2005).

Thirdly, our understanding of children's perceptions of poverty and socio-economic difference is also underdeveloped. With widening inequality, the way children perceive their own and others relative economic position may have important implications for the development both of their own and others identities (McDonald, 2007a, 2007b; Sutton et al., 2007).

### **5. Conceptualising poverty in Australia**

A national roundtable was held at the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, to examine how poverty for children is conceptualised in Australia and the strengths and weaknesses of our current approaches. Fourteen professionals from across Australia in the areas of policy development, service delivery/ programme management, and research participated. Participants came from different sectors, including health, education, welfare, juvenile justice, and multi-cultural services, as well as government, non-government and academic institutions. The roundtable brought together those in the earlier stages of their careers with 'veterans' in the field. This next section reports on the major issues identified during the day's discussion, and the resulting suggestions for the way forward made by the group.

## 5.1 Key issues surrounding child poverty in Australia

### *Poor assumptions and limited understanding of children's experience*

- A limited understanding of children's experience of poverty contributes to our policies missing the mark and limiting the capacity to intervene in a meaningful way in children's lives.
- Children are commonly viewed as 'future-adults', with concern expressed for children in poverty because of what this means for their capacity to develop and reach their potential – as adults. The impact of poverty on childhood itself and children's experience as children is not recognised.
- Children's experience is assumed to be the same as that of the family in Australian policy. Policy initiatives aimed at addressing poverty assume that meeting the needs of families in poverty – in particular mothers, will meet children's needs.
- Children are subsumed within social institutions in Australia, with the needs of children in poverty addressed through schools, health programs or programs run by charities as well as their families. The poverty debate is focused on institutional issues (e.g. funding, workforce issues), little attention is paid to children themselves.
- Children are afforded little agency in efforts to address their needs. Their active engagement with their life circumstances, and their own efforts in trying to bring about change is not recognised or supported.
- Despite the rhetoric around children's participation, policy makers rarely acknowledge the importance and value of children's views.

### *Institutional Failure*

- A failure to address the needs of particular groups (e.g. disrupted families and some minority groups require additional resources beyond income to support them).
- A failure to address issues for older children living in poverty. They appear to be viewed as something of a 'lost cause'.
- The inaccessibility and lack of affordability of services (e.g. dental care and allied health services are not always affordable and not covered by Medicare).

- The increase in the privatisation of services such as childcare, health, education and immigration undermines the accessibility of these services for some groups.
- Fragmented approaches to service provision and intervention for children in poverty remain, with limited evidence of cooperation between agencies.
- The challenge of creating a child focus across different sectors is not met.

#### *The limitations of policy responses*

- The issue of child poverty is not consistently on the political agenda, either at the federal or state level.
- Private responsibility is being emphasised over public responsibility. This is evident in discourse surrounding poverty in recent years focused on ‘shared-responsibility’ and ‘mutual obligation’ and ‘choice’. The emphasis on ‘choice’ belies the fact that families in poverty have in reality very little choice about their situation.
- Policy responses to child poverty in Australia suggest limited consideration of the impact of policy on children and families.
- Policy reflects a limited appreciation of children’s rights.
- By using an economic framework to understand child poverty, Australia gives limited consideration of the impact of policy on children beyond their economic situation.

## **5.2 Suggestions for a way forward**

- The issue of child poverty and disadvantage needs to remain on the political agenda at both state and federal levels.
- Children’s rights need to be given greater recognition.
- Need to support evidence-informed policy and practice therefore we need to understand children’s perceptions and lived experiences of poverty in Australia so that policies more accurately address their needs.
- Models of service delivery and intervention need to provide greater coordination in service provision and delivery.

## 6. Finding out what kids think

### 6.1 Discussing children's lives with children

As already discussed, children's views are traditionally not included or considered important in the development of policy responses to child poverty. The challenge is in discovering how to talk with kids about such a potentially sensitive topic. Twenty nine children including both secondary and primary school students helped us explore this in small groups or individually.

During our conversations, children and young people clearly demonstrated their competence in talking about their daily lives. These discussions were facilitated by the use of a number of tools such as filling in 'my week' and 'my weekend' diagrams (Christensen & James, 2000), and responding to a series of likely scenarios in children's experience such as going to a birthday party, on a school excursion or going shopping.

Questions concerning children's preferences, opinions, and experiences with family, friends, and daily activities were easily answered. The conversations not only provided descriptions of their lives, but also how they felt and what they valued. The excerpts below illustrate children's competence to talk about their lives and what matters to them:

Child 1: I'm moving to a normal house.

*Interviewer:* Okay, a normal house. And what is a normal house?

Child 1: No factories, a quiet place where you sleep. Somewhere that my Mum doesn't have to work much...and I can have more fun and have my own bedroom (Girl, Year 5)

Child 2: Yeah cause our house is heaps, heaps full of people. We've got me and my two sisters. I have to share a room with them. And that is crazy. Because they hate me. And my sisters, my Mum, my Grandma and my Uncle's now staying here because he's just got a new job in Sydney...and you can't do anything around because it is so small, like and if you come to my house my Grandma will start to get really angry...My sisters get their

friends allowed to come over but none of my friends get to come over (Boy, Year 9).

*Interviewer:* *What do you do on the weekend at the moment?*

Child 3: Well firstly I wake up and I do nothing. Then I go to bed....

*Interviewer:* *If you had your choice what would you do?*

Child 3: I'd like to go to the movies. I never get to do any like, we don't get to go out because my parents are divorced...so when it's my mum's weekend we don't really do anything but when it is my dad's weekend we do like the drive-in movies and stuff....cause like she doesn't have much money and stuff...she is unemployed (Boy, Year 9)

In our consultations, children also demonstrated a willingness to talk about topics researchers anticipated could be difficult. For example, children were not asked directly about family income and money, a potentially sensitive topic, but children and young people raised this as an issue. In the excerpt below a child explains her family's financial situation:

Child: My dad only [earns] \$100 a day, so \$700 a week. But it is not enough for me cause we have to pay for electricity and the phone and the TV and for the house cause we are renting it and so we have to rent it \$250 a for a day I guess or a week and then yeah by, Dad pays \$700 so he still has the same money so the people that rent our house give us money and my Mum she, but the teacher in our house has to pay us \$80 but we, it goes down to \$50 because she is going to teach us... (Girl, Year 5).

Other subjects which children struggled to talk about included family breakdown, relationships with particular family members, and for primary children, hypothetical situations. In the excerpt below children identify the topic areas they had least and most difficulty talking about.

*Interviewer:* Were there other things that were hard to talk about today? Or a little bit more difficult or a little bit more upsetting?

Child 1: Um, Yeah, I guess like talking about my Mum and the money and that. Yeah, I guess it was a little bit upsetting, some of it about my family....But I was alright to talk about it, I didn't mind.  
(Boy, Year 9)

*Interviewer:* What have been some of the easiest things to talk to me about?

Child 2: Like about my house, and the clothing I wear and....my family members.

*Interviewer:* And what makes them easy to talk about?

Child 2: I know more about them...and I know what they like and everything.

*Interviewer:* Yeah

Child 2: The hardest bit was the bit that you asked me how many like asked me if my Mum has more time and everything. It was really hard because I wouldn't know, I don't know if that will happen or not. ....I've never heard, felt before. I'd never seen my Mum without doing anything.

*Interviewer:* You haven't experienced that before so you can't say?

Child 2: Yeah and I haven't experienced having a new house, that I have fun in with my Mum (Girl, Year 5)

Issues about poverty raised by children in their discussions which need to be addressed in research include:

- the adequacy of children's immediate living environments and the impact of these on relationships with family and friends
- children's participation in activities, including informal peer group and family activities, organised out-of-school activities, and constraints on participation, including income and access to transport

- neighbourhood environments, including personal safety and safe places for play
- the role of social resources, including family, friends and others, in supporting children and young people
- recognition of children's active engagement in seeking to manage or change their circumstances through education and work

## **6.2 Children's responses to the consultation process**

Children also provided feedback about the consultation exercise and information on ways to involve children in research.

Both primary and secondary students expressed a preference for group consultations involving their friends as opposed to individual interviews because of the capacity to brainstorm ideas, have fun, feel more confident and learn about others.

Child 1: It is good to have a friend right next to you. It gives you confidence (Girl, Year 5)

Child 2: Like, yes, before when I met you that big circle, the weekend where we told you everything, got to know your friends more...I liked that (Boy, Year 5)

Child 3: It is easier to open up when you are with a group

Child 4: It is less intimidating (Girls, Year 9)

Child 5: I like it with my friends here, to be able to talk about it

Child 6: Like with your mates (Boys, Year 9)

Primary aged children did not think there was anything they would not want to discuss in a group. Secondary students felt that personal or sensitive topics should generally not be discussed in a group (e.g. bullying, loss in the family). Children also thought it was important not to feel pressured to discuss things, and to have the

option to be interviewed individually, stop the interview, or retract anything they had said.

Primary aged students preferred a range of tools and tasks in order to convey their views, as opposed to only talking. Secondary students enjoyed the opportunity to talk with a researcher and peers. Most children also expressed a preference for taking part in research face to face rather than over the internet or another more impersonal method. The excerpts below reflect these discussions.

Child 1:           The things I like doing better was when we had to, when we had to do the big circles and we did the week and the weekend....because like most of that was like drawing and things like that and you put all your opinions down before like they go away otherwise (Girl, Year 5)

Child 2:           Because I like to talk to, not to a person and not on the internet because it is like you are just talking to the computer. I like to know the person one on one (Girl, Year 5).

For children, developing a relationship with the researcher was also important. Children appreciated meeting the researcher before deciding to take part in the consultation. As one secondary student stated, it was important to know “that the person researching us would be like nice and stuff”. Establishing a relationship with the researcher in a group interview also increased children’s confidence to then take part in an individual interview with the same researcher. The excerpt below captures this sentiment.

Child:             I felt confident because I know you now and then I know you are going to come back next time and when someone else comes back and (friend) is not next to me and another person you get all shy and don’t know what to say and that. (Girl, Year 5)

Students discussed the merits of having young people and children versus adults consulting them about their views. Most primary students expressed a preference for

taking part in research with adults, because they were more confident that adults knew what they were doing. Secondary students recognised a generation gap between them and adult researchers, however they felt that the personality of the person conducting the consultation and their capacity to be respectful of young people and their views, and to build a rapport with the young people, was more important than their age. These sentiments are reflected in the excerpts below.

Child 1: Yeah 'cause they [somebody younger] sort of know where we are coming from

Child 2: It depends on the personality though. Like if they are say, like you [indicating the researcher] then you're like up front, it is fine it will be easy to talk to them

Child 1: Yeah and it also depends on the person. Who they are, the way they act (Boy & girl, Year 9)

Child 3: I rather like an adult to do it because, cause maybe they are older and also they know what they are doing. Sometimes other kids maybe just go psycho and just do anything. (Girl, Year 5)

Overall students thought that it was good to find out about what children like, and what they like doing. They also felt that they should be involved in the development of research which concerned the lives of children because they have an insider's perspective on childhood. This sentiment is captured in the excerpt below.

Child: Yeah 'cause like we are a child and we know what the other child likes so we could give our opinions to you. (Girl, year 5)

## **7. Overall conclusions**

This collaborative project developed in response to our recognising the current limitations of policy surrounding child poverty in Australia. These limitations occur on two particular levels. The first of these include the traditional conceptualisations and measures of child poverty which are most commonly based on economic models and which subsume children's experience within other social institutions such as their

families. Using economic models to conceptualise the experience of poverty provides little insight into the social, emotional and cultural implications of being poor, and reveals very little about the nature of children's experience of poverty.

The second level of limitation is in the representation of children themselves within policy and approaches to child poverty. Traditionally, children have been depicted as dependents who are passive in their experience, and childhood has been understood as a stage on the way to adulthood. Not recognising children's agency in their own lives fails to acknowledge the potential of children and young people to inform policy which will impact on their lives. In doing so, the capacity of policy to influence the experience of poverty for children as children is not recognised.

Our review of the literature and consultations with national experts and children and young people, all indicate the importance and need for a greater understanding of children's experience of poverty and their perspectives on that experience. A broader and deeper understanding and definition, which incorporates an appreciation of what it means to be poor from children's perspectives is needed. This entails both reconceptualising the experience and definition of poverty, and the conceptualisation of children's identity within that experience.

Children play an active and critical role in helping manage theirs' and their families' experience. Taking children's views seriously in both poverty research and policy development recognises children's agency in their own lives, and affords children a place in solutions to poverty which they are currently denied. The increased understanding of children's experience will inform both further research and policy. In this way policies developed to address the needs of children in poverty are more likely to meet children's needs.

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