" A series of doors "

Young people talking about the experience of poverty

" The more problems people have, the less likely they are to be supported out of poverty. It is like a series of doors. One door is being poor, another door is being autistic, another door is being a young carer, another door is living in a bad area… The more doors there are, the more keys are needed to open them and people don't care enough to make the effort to open them all. "

A Breslin Public Policy paper published in collaboration with the Office of the Children's Commissioner, July 2013

This paper is based on a report on a participative event for children and young people, held in London, February 2013.

Introduction and context

In our work on poverty we have been struck by the extent to which the voices of children and young people continue to be excluded from debate about their experience. Much of the extensive current literature on child and family poverty is of high quality, pertinent and incisive, but comparatively little of it presents the voices of first hand experience; it is an expert literature, rather than an experiential one.

In winter 2012-2013, Breslin Public Policy was commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (OCC) to organise a participative event for children and young people in poverty. This was part of the OCC's work on child poverty and was planned with the support of the Child Poverty Unit (CPU) to listen to, and learn from, children and young people talking about what poverty means to them.

The event took place in February 2013. Thirty-seven children and young people attended from various parts of the country, aged between eight and 22 years. Together with OCC we were able to recruit a group of participants with wide-ranging experiences of poverty, and give them the opportunity to reflect on the issues. They were thoughtful, articulate, provocative and insightful. We submitted a report to the OCC from this event and this contributed to the OCC's submission to government on the measurement of child poverty.[1] Our full report provides more detail and context, and explains the methodology.[2]

This paper has been funded by Breslin Public Policy and is based on the work undertaken for OCC. It is not, however, part of any formal consultation process. Rather, it delivers on our commitment to the young people, and the supporting adults who accompanied them, to place their views and comments in the public domain. We have tried to do this authentically. To this end, while we are responsible for the section headings (Money, Access to services, Education, Employment, Community and home life, Aspirations, Access to transport, Networks), we have minimised the level of editorial comment and resisted the temptation to offer recommendations.

We have used direct quotations as recorded by stewards at each table during the event, together with some statements collectively agreed during plenary. In addition, we include written contributions made by the participants during a specially designed workshop activity on the day. The exercise required the participants to invent a character who faced a crisis, and to describe what happened to the individual as a consequence. The comments are not any less valid or powerful for being fictionalised. In several cases it would seem that real fears, and even perhaps personal experiences, were expressed which might not have emerged in straightforward conversation.

We wish to thank the staff at the OCC for their tireless support throughout this project. Our chief debt of course is to the young people who contributed to the process in an inspiringly positive and participative spirit: it was a privilege to work with them. Their energy and honesty deserves close and sincere support from all who have the power to help make a difference to their lives.

Tony Breslin, Kevin Harris, Mike Moores

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[1] http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_650

[2] http://www.breslinpublicpolicy.com/images//YoungPeopleTalkingAboutPoverty.pdf

Money

Child poverty is multi-dimensional, but lack of money has an unavoidably profound effect. Some of the recent public debate has sought to diminish the significance of income and money in the experience of poverty. The young people made it clear that money is not the *only* issue but it remains, for them, an important and prevailing one:

'Living in poverty without much money, you are more vulnerable to discrimination, bullying, stigma, stereotyping…'

'Even with free school meals, I have to choose: can I have the main, pudding and drink today? I can't have all three things.'

And as another participant put it, each of them needs '…enough money to support yourself as a young person.' As might be expected, they showed clear awareness of the potential impact of loss of benefits in the household. The circumstances of one of the invented characters were described thus:

'Losing the house because their parents got a job, lost benefits so can't afford it.'

Many of the young people focused on access to training and employment as a route to income rather than on, for instance, benefit levels. They were resentful of anything that smacked of exploitation, arguing that there needs to be:

'a "living" wage rather than just the minimum wage.'

In practical terms, lack of money limited their ability to participate in after-school or curriculum enrichment activities, to use public transport to access facilities, finding or taking up employment opportunities, participating in friendship groups beyond their immediate locality, or participating in social activities with their more affluent friends on an equal footing:

'Those activities you have to pay for – school trips etc – you cannot have. You are very limited about what you can do.'

'You need money even to get a job - transport and a good suit for the interview.'

These concerns about income and money were especially pertinent amongst care leavers -

'If you are in care, when you leave, you cannot afford to look after yourself.'

This point was reiterated by one of the supporting adults who accompanied the young people to the consultation event:

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'One thing children and young people bring out is about leaving care – it can be really difficult if you are half way through your A levels – and suddenly you're in a flat alone with £54 a week.'

It is also worth recording the experience of those children and young people who have 'fallen into' poverty, perhaps because of family fracture or parental unemployment. One participant said:

'It makes me sad – the things we could have but can't now - clothes and stuff.'

The young people expressed concern that some children were going without clothes, shoes and heating in the home. It is apparent that they are highly sensitive to their vulnerability to sudden financial poverty. In the creative exercise, the crisis faced by one of the characters, called Eric, was heightened by ramifications consequent on his mother's actions:

'She stocked up with goods because it was snowing, so she became bankrupt. Eric and sister have to move school. They move to a small stone hut.'

This might seem like the stuff of comic irony, but it almost certainly isn't. Fears of having to downsize are very real. For a young person living in impoverished conditions, it's not hard to envisage a small stone hut as the next step down.

Access to services

" I'm like a ball that is kicked out of a field. "

Children and young people need expert support and reliable access to appropriate services if they are to escape from poverty. The young people were very clear about the need for support at particular points in their life journey. These include, for example:

- The transition points between schools and into further or higher education;

- Transitions into training or employment; and

- Changes arising from a change in carer, or when leaving the care or youth justice systems.

They also pointed to the need for support in relation to particular themes, such as disability, health and well-being, bullying, and career pathways. Too often, those providing support appear insufficiently informed, trained, accessible or resourced to offer effective assistance. When provision is patchy, subject to local authority cutbacks, or suddenly withdrawn, the impact on children and young people can be profound; it is especially problematic for young people coping with bereavement, disability or learning difficulties, and for those in, or leaving, care:

'Local authorities are reducing funding – for example for care leavers. People who have a mum and dad may get money but children in care can't.'

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'When you are 18 you get treated differently. It makes everything difficult - being over 18. I'm the same person.'

'When I was 14, I got some support. They used to come and ask me how I was doing. Now I'm 18, I'm like a ball that is kicked out of a field. Now I'm 18 I'm on my own. I'm in a house with others (but) no one comes to help.'

Children and young people picked up on the effect of reductions in support and on the need for more 'joined-up' and longer-term provision:

'Youth clubs that offer good services would help reduce crime.'

They were critical about frequent changes in support workers, and the plethora of agencies they had to see. They questioned the expertise of those providing the support, whether the issue was careers advice, support in leaving the criminal justice system, or special needs support in the classroom or beyond. This issue fed through to this policy statement:

'Service providers must ensure that the right people are available to support young people in various settings, for instance in providing careers guidance, housing advice or support for those who have offended.'

In particular, the young people expressed concern about the inauthenticity or insensitivity of some of the support provided and called for the recruitment of workers who had had relevant experiences. They called for:

'support that is individualised, meets specific needs, is provided at the right time with the right people, well trained and with good understanding.'

'greater involvement of those with criminal records in work with young offenders and those at risk of offending.'

This lack of expertise in support is all the more telling where regulatory regimes are onerous yet vital to navigate, as is the case with regard to young asylum seekers for instance:

'Without papers about your history, names etc. people cannot go to school, apply for jobs, get benefits. They are therefore disadvantaged for a long time because they come from somewhere different.'

Education   " If you are poorer your "
                                                    school is worse.

The participants consistently placed a strikingly high value on education. Some of the invented characters were condemned in this respect:

'Drops out of education, doesn't listen.'

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> 'Missed school a lot - he does not go to school so he don't have a good education.'

Children and young people in poverty are more likely to struggle in the education system and this affects their subsequent ability to access employment. Some had found that their experience of education served to compound rather than ameliorate their experience of poverty. Those in the care system, or about to leave it, felt especially strongly about this:

> 'If you are in care, the most important time in your schooling is immediately disturbed. You are studying for your A-levels at 18, when you officially become an adult and you lose (your care) support. This is very stressful, people do not complete their education, and their chances are damaged.'

Some felt that those from poorer backgrounds were likely to be stereotyped within the education system:

> 'You can be judged by the area you live in or by your past. You can get put in lower streams at school.'

Participants expressed a concern that the current focus on more traditional styles of school examination would confirm their exclusion and failure rather than build their inclusion and achievement. One of the discussion stewards summarised:

> 'Children and young people were concerned about changes to the education system having a negative impact on the lives of those from poorer backgrounds.'

Some clearly felt threatened by what they saw as an increasingly exclusive focus on examinations and on grades:

> 'If you don't have the grades or education - that stops you getting a job.'

They suggested that policymakers should instigate a revamp of the education system 'to make it better for those who can't do exams:'

> 'let them do exams in isolation with support to help them because the (examination) hall can be rather daunting to these people.'

They argued that young people living in challenging circumstances need 'a broader curriculum with more vocational options' and 'access to work experience and work shadowing'. A related point was captured at one of the table discussions:

> 'The young people wanted more and better access to apprenticeships and vocational training and the chance to undertake meaningful work experience.'

The children and young people argued for a curriculum that 'has a stronger focus on education for personal safety' and that enables them to avoid the 'big problems':

> '…such as bullying, drugs and crime, from an early age, and certainly in primary school, with the focus being on resistance and resilience.'

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It was noted that children in poverty are especially likely to experience bullying:

> '…because of the way they look and not having the "right" clothes. Those who are bullied are less likely to go to school.'

This helps to clarify the relationship between bullying, achievement and attendance, and poverty.

Young people in poverty are often less able, or feel less able, to access school trips or after-school clubs. They miss out in terms of the experience itself and its contribution to educational attainment, and in terms of the social value of the opportunity. The participants called for financial support to enable young people from less affluent backgrounds:

> '…to participate in curriculum enrichment extra-curricular activities, including after-school clubs and school trips, and to access work experience and work shadowing placements.'

The participants were passionate in their concern for strong Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision, and a better understanding of such needs, calling for:

> '…better public understanding about the range of behaviours displayed by young people with Special Educational Needs (for instance, poor literacy skills), particular conditions (for instance, autism) or disabilities (for instance, some form of physical impairment)'

> '…better SEN training for teachers, whether they are SEN specialists or not.'

They also noted that:

> 'There needs to be more training for teachers in schools to understand young people with Special Educational Needs. There also needs to be clearer criteria for those seeking access to an SEN school.'

> 'Education for those with disabilities is worse, either because they do not qualify to go to an SEN school or because they are lost in a mainstream school, or because teachers are not trained properly to cope with their needs.'

> 'There are plenty of after-school clubs but these are not aimed at young people who may require additional support.'

The children and young people had the self-awareness to recognise that they often struggled to make their way through the educational maze. There was also a sense that the provision being experienced could be doing as much to keep them in poverty as to help them escape it:

> 'If you are poorer your school is worse; if you have a disability, you are not supported enough; if you live in a rural area with few schools, you do not have a choice of where to go.'

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Employment

A particular focus of discussion - especially among one group of young people who had previously been convicted for offending behaviour and another group with a range of special needs - was the real or perceived absence of genuine equality of opportunity:

> 'Policymakers and employers need to ensure that there are more employment opportunities for young people with criminal records.'

> 'Care leavers do not get as good jobs (as non-care leavers). People leaving care can't look after themselves as well.'

> 'Your past, your poverty, should not dictate your opportunities.'

> 'Discrimination is a notable barrier.'

Issues of social justice also came through in discussions about exploitation and fair pay. They were concerned about the limited employment opportunities available, and the dearth of training opportunities and apprenticeships, concluding with this policy statement:

> 'There needs to be more apprenticeship and employment opportunities for all young people.'

Finally, what has been described as a 'culture of worklessness' came through in some of the discussions. Some of the young people were growing up in neighbourhoods where unemployment was widespread, and as one adult put it:

> 'Children in poverty don't have aspirations in the first place – they get messages about youth unemployment, and they're living in families that don't work.'

The children and young people acknowledged that this kind of experience could have an impact on aspirations and had done so amongst some of their peers. They talked frequently about 'dreams' and the risk or reality of having these 'crushed'.

Based on research commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner

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Community and home life

The children and young people consistently made the point that the status typically ascribed to them was often not of their making. An extreme example emerged in one of the accounts of invented characters in the creative exercise:

> '…parents were drunk (again). House catches fire because parents left the oven on whilst they were drunk.'

Participants were keenly aware of the connection between the local context of their life, including the home, and their experience of an impoverished lifestyle with a poverty of opportunity.

Discussions about crime, community and personal safety revolved around the 'double-whammy' of negative peer group pressure (for instance, around the use of drugs or carrying weapons) and low trust in the police. Through a discussion steward they acknowledged that:

> '…young people living in poverty were more likely to commit crime. This was associated with having little money, living in poorer areas and having limited hopes and aspirations.'

Participants reported that in some neighbourhoods, there are 'no safe places to go' and the description of one of the fictional characters included:

> 'Fears: not being able to leave the estate.'

Where there was distrust of the police, this was either because young people felt they were viewed primarily as 'suspects', or because the police were seen as either unapproachable or unresponsive.

We heard about environmental poverty in low-income neighbourhoods: a lack of facilities for young people specifically (open spaces, sports fields, youth clubs) and for the wider community (good quality housing, desirable shops, demonstrably safe streets, low crime rates):

> '(You're) stuck in a rotating door - because of where you live, you are stuck with limited options and doing what other people do around the same area. You cannot break-out.'

> 'If you grow up in a council estate, you think you will not push yourself. You will stay safe and not move on.'

A third comment highlighted the impact of having to move home frequently on a young person's ability to become established in a locality, perhaps as their parents seek employment or where adult relationships in the family are fluid:

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'If you have moved around a lot, you can't put your name down for things.'

The young people spoke about the quality and quantity of the physical space in the home. The desirability of 'a room of my own' figured strongly, especially in terms of its perceived impact on educational engagement. As one of the discussion stewards summarized:

'Some children and young people talked about how over-crowdedness has a negative impact on children's lives. Children and young people talked about needing "your own room when at secondary school because you need space to study." '

Children and young people growing up in poverty are less likely to have access to their own room and to a space in which they can study, to have a wide range of books and similar resources in the home, or to have opportunities to acquire cultural capital. In this respect, the position of homeless young people is particularly acute. This needs to be related to the difficulties experienced in accessing support, curriculum-enrichment activities and after-school and homework clubs.

The comments about having to move home, and needing their own room, play into current policy discussion about the 'bedroom tax' or 'spare room subsidy'Certain factors in the lives of the young people clearly had an effect on family structure and stability, which in turn create a need for support from the wider society. It was striking how frequently death was mentioned, especially in the fictionalised scenarios that the children and young people developed collectively:

'(After 2 yrs) goes to live with his granma; when she dies he goes back into care.'

'Fire. In her foster home… step sister gets killed.'

'She becomes so ill and suffers too much. Luckily someone adopts her but she is so ill that she dies.'

'Sometimes gets very upset because her father has died.'

'(After 5 yrs) Dies from drug abuse.'

In low income families, death can be familiar but particularly devastating in both emotional and economic terms - the more so if young people are dealing with unusual frequencies of death among relatives and family friends alongside the other disruptions that arise.

Aspirations

" You don't dream as much or aim as high "

The participants were sensitive to the reality of poverty of opportunity, and the fact that they often miss out on the kind of chances for self-development that are commonplace for more

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privileged young people. The following quotes are references to the invented characters in the creative exercise:

'Feels alone and scared … loss of faith in any person'

'Doesn't listen… No life. Goes into foster home and runs away.'

'He can't be what he wants to be in future.'

There is a direct relationship between living in poverty and reduced aspirations:

'You don't dream as much or aim as high. If you set a goal you need to be motivated to achieve that goal.'

'Young people (in poverty) don't set the bar as high.'

'You don't dream as much – you don't bother to dream.'

'You, yourself, can talk yourself out of being able to do things.'

Against this, there was a profound sense of resilience and hope, which we summarise in a subsequent section. We note also that aspirations can be expensive, which is one reason why they are kept in check. One mother present on the day told us: 'My 11 year-old daughter has aspirations. But she's only 11 and she's already asking how much university will cost.'

And living in poverty can be stressful at the best of times:

'If you need something and your parents say they haven't got enough, you worry about asking.'

Access to transport   " no way out "

Access to transport was a significant and recurring theme in the discussions. There was extensive reflection on the cost of public transport and inconsistent charging, and the availability of transport, especially in rural areas:

'Public transport needs to be available and, especially in cost terms, accessible to all young people, with provision being re-nationalized if this is necessary to achieve this.'

'Consistency should exist as to when adult fares should be paid and when adult rights extend to young people.'

Poor service provision and high fares restrict young people in terms of maintaining friendships with those who live further away, and by limiting their education, training and employment options.

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For young people living in poorer areas, on isolated estates and in rural settings, this is likely to compound the sense of isolation associated with poverty. It contributes to their entrapment in social settings that offer 'no way out'. Fatalism thrives in such settings:

> 'If you grow up in a setting where all your friends just stay in bed, you're more likely to do the same.'

Conversations about transport with young people often include reference to the high cost of car insurance. Not with this group. The idea of owning a car, and having access to the independence that it can confer, did not feature in their discussions.

Networks " You can't do this if " you're poor

Lack of access to supportive or useful contacts is a key dimension of the experience of poverty in a network society. Social networks have value: strong ties for emotional and instrumental support ('to get by'); and 'bridging' ties that help people 'to get on'.

There were few references to the value of contacts during discussions, but this is not surprising because network poverty is quite abstract as a concept, and it is precisely the kind of barrier that those lacking such an advantage may not be aware of. However, some of the fictional characters invented by the young people could be seen to be affected by it:

> 'If she does not have many friends because she is anti-social, she may find it hard to work with colleagues at her job when she is older.'

> '(Sharon) loses out on school, and also friends because of poor attendance.'

> '(She's) a bit afraid of new people. Doesn't know what is happening. Doesn't have many friends. Because she is moving around foster carers.'

Compared with relatively affluent young people, this group apparently experienced a great deal of network disruption, for example through being moved or through the deaths or imprisonment of others.

It could be that social technologies might help to overcome some aspects of network poverty, but one participant expressed doubts about the way the world is presented through the lens of fashionable online networks:

> 'Social networking promotes happy perfect lives, designer labels, going out, new clothes. You can't do this if you're poor. I avoid Facebook.'

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Conclusions: vulnerability, resilience and voice

Two general themes ran through all the contributions offered by the children and young people: a sense of vulnerability to events, and a sense of resilience in spite of complex misfortunes.

Poverty is profoundly disempowering, the more so when it is relatively invisible:

'You cannot always *see* poverty.'

To counter this, it is of critical importance that the unmediated voices of young people – and not just those most easily reached - are heard in the policy debate.

Particularly in their comments reflecting service poverty, the children and young people expressed the sense that what happened to them was subject to sometimes trivial or inadequate judgements or actions made by others who were out of reach or influence; and that the quality of these judgements or actions could and should be improved. This articulates a lack of empowerment and control over the forces that influence their lives, and can be devastating, as reflected in this comment on the experience of one of the invented characters:

'…loss of faith in any person. Loss of another place she calls her home. At a loss.'

The fictional narratives gave instances of this sense of vulnerability, where a character's future could easily go one way or the other, depending on a moment of good fortune or bad. The participants were sympathetic towards, and generally not judgemental of, others who experienced exclusion even where that was to some extent through their own fault. Among the characters invented by the young people were Malkie and Stewart:

'Malkie, age 15... Not healthy because he takes drugs. Get(s) caught by cops frequently. ... Interested in dealing, robbing stuff. He has lost all of his love and trust. Not very good at reading. Sometimes gets very upset. Fed up with… being moved about. Missed school a lot.'

'Stewart, age 6… (After 1 yr) Taken into care. Social involved. Abused in care. Bunking school. Mum (and) Dad not allowed to see them. Parents in rehab. Angry at parents. (After 2 yrs) Kills parents – (youth) prison – No one to help him. (After 5 yrs) Turns life around and starts studying in Safe Children's Home. Goes back to school and doesn't get bullied.'

The fictional exercise was also responsible for stimulating a powerful sense of resilience. Each of the invented characters faced a crisis or series of crises, and the participants were asked to consider what happened to them over a five-year period:

'Miracle science development allows him to walk again.'

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'She could leave school with little or no qualifications but later she rebuilds her life and becomes a music teacher or netball player because she is good at music and netball.'

'(After 1 yr) Begging people for money. (After 2 yrs) He found a job (cash in hand) – builder. (After 5 yrs) Finally he got his own business (and) he doesn't do any illegal jobs (now)'

1 yr – lots of support from family. 2 yrs – rehab and courses. 5 yrs – police and youth work, educating others to prevent them doing the same thing.'

'Sharon moves in with her father and the pair try and rebuild their lives for the better. Went to college, made new friends! Her brother joins them and the three try and move forward.'

In conclusion, we want to point to the high level of awareness shown by the participants of the broad reality of the experience of poverty. The extent to which they were ready to reflect upon it and to articulate it for others merits far more sensitive responses from policy makers than they have been receiving. They were well aware that 'people don't care enough':

'The more problems people have, the less likely they are to be supported out of poverty. It is like a series of doors. One door is being poor, another door is being autistic, another door is being a young carer, another door is living in a bad area… The more doors there are, the more keys are needed to open them and people don't care enough to make the effort to open them all.'

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