A UK-US investigation of early education practitioners' opinions about child poverty and its prioritizing within their practice

FINAL REPORT

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners, from both England and the United States of America (USA), who took part in the research and shared their perspectives and experiences with myself and the other academics making up the project team. The project team hopes the outcomes of the research will be of interest to policy influencers both within supranational, national and local organisations. Hopefully the research will provide managers and practitioners within ECEC settings with useful information which allows them to view the situations and issues they face in regard to working with children and families in poverty in a new light. In this way it is hoped the research can contribute to stimulating new forms of choice and robust decision making.

Thank you to the other academics involved in the project team for their continued support in developing and undertaking different aspects of the project. In addition to myself, the project team included Eunice Lumsden (University of Northampton), Rory McDowall Clark (University of Worcester), Sandra Loughran (Dowling College, New York), Philip Mazzocco and Christian Winterbottom (both at The Ohio State University).

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Introduction

In many developed societies, children in poverty make up a significant minority across education sectors – estimated to be 21% of children in the UK and 22% in the USA. Globally, ECEC has been prioritized as a key policy and practice lever to remediate child poverty by reducing the 'outcomes gap' in children's learning and development. Experiencing poverty has a negative effect, particularly for children in the early years range, and children in poverty are disadvantaged in their learning and development by the age of five years. An evidence base suggests quality ECEC provision can address educational and social inequality by improving outcomes for children in poverty. But what constitutes quality early learning provision and environments for children and their families experiencing poverty remains highly contested. With such a significant minority of children experiencing disadvantage, though, for ECEC provision to have 'quality' it needs to be poverty sensitive. So provision should be characterized by poverty sensitivity and it should be poverty proofed – i.e. ECEC practitioners' delivery, practice and decision making will take poverty, social disadvantage and inequality into account in their everyday provision for children from disadvantaged families. Research, though, which has considered early education practitioners' opinions on child poverty is rare and recent small-scale qualitative research completed by members of this research team has suggested poverty sensitivity cannot be assumed (Simpson et al, 2015). The research reported here built upon this previous work to provide a broad-scale and unique exploration of ECEC practitioners' opinions about child poverty.

Within the context described above, the central aim of the research was to develop knowledge of early education practitioners' opinions about child poverty and the extent to which they prioritize it in their practice across several geographic locations in England and the USA. The proposed research hoped to move beyond the restrictions of a country-by-country sui generis approach, allowing for translocal and transnational connections to be made between early education practitioners' opinions and engagement with child poverty and its remediation. There were good reasons for choosing to focus upon England and the USA to explore these issues. Increasingly there are parallels and points of tangency between the two countries in regard to child poverty and policies to remediate its impact in early childhood. For instance, as indicated above, there are currently high levels of child poverty in the UK and the USA in comparison with other developed nations. Convergence includes prioritizing ECEC as a social mechanism to address child poverty across both countries (Nandy and Minujin 2012). In England and the USA, and many other countries, a dominant neo-liberal political discourse emphasizing individualism and limited state involvement pervades this prioritizing. ECEC is delivered via a mixed market model including a significant amount of private for-profit provision, the costs of which are relatively high in both countries and prohibitive for low-income families. Within the US this has necessitated federal and state-level programmes. Across England several national schemes can also be seen to cater for those that are excluded from the ECEC market.

In meeting the aim mentioned above the following objectives were achieved. The first objective was to ascertain and contrast early education practitioners' opinions about child poverty in a selection of geographic locations across England and the USA. The second objective was then to clarify the extent to which these ECEC practitioners engage with (or not) poverty sensitivity in their practice. The third objective was, through the research, to provide a mechanism for bringing

practitioners' opinions to current policy, practice and academic debates around the role of early education in remediating child poverty. A final objective was to draw out wider implications for early education policy and practice including the possible need for poverty proofing toolkits in the early years.

Research Methods

The above aim and objectives entailed a research design which involved two strands of research – 1) a quantitative survey strand and 2) a qualitative phenomenological strand involving semi-structured interviewing of ECEC practitioners.

Data on ECEC practitioners' opinions and perspectives on child poverty and working with children and families in poverty were collected in the following ways. Firstly, via a online questionnaire survey. Participants in both England and the USA completed the questionnaire which included several scales. These scales focused upon poverty beliefs; practitioners' attitudes to children experiencing poverty with which they worked; how practitioners work with children in poverty within the classroom/nursery; and their attitudes towards and engagement with parents of children living in poverty:

- With regard to the quantitative survey strand of the research, we collected data from 335 ECEC practitioners drawn from both the United States (159 from New York and Ohio) and England (179 from North East England, Northamptonshire and Worcestershire) with experience of working with children and families in poverty. The survey questionnaire was distributed to participants via mass emails sent to lists of practitioners undertaking continuing professional development at University in England and lists of schools obtained online or through personal contacts in the USA;

- With regard to the qualitative semi-structured interview strand of the research, in the USA a total of 10 interviews were undertaken within Ohio and 20 interviews were completed in the New York area. Thirty interviews were already completed in the 3 locations in England (North East England, Northamptonshire and Worcestershire) as part of a previous British Academy project which was completed recently and this project extended.

Quantitative data from the survey questionnaire strand of the research was analyzed using SPSS and both descriptive (frequency tables and measures of central tendency and distribution) and inferential statistics (comparison of group means, analysis of variance and correlations). As part of this process, some variable composites were produced meaning variables in some scales were combined to aid and add to the analysis when they were thematically-related and highly correlated – i.e. when a reliability coefficient indicated an acceptable level of inter-item consistency (alpha measure). Qualitative theme analysis is being used to analyze the interview data and this is ongoing. This is a process of working with textual data to identify and interpret key ideas or themes. It involves preliminary analysis and reading of all transcripts and the identification of initial themes. These themes underpinned the main analysis and the segmentation and categorization of data which was completed using Nvivo software. Several node reports were produced and summary charts were also made for interviews in each area within each country. These allowed for data from within one case (interview) to be scrutinized

and were also a way of looking at each initial category (theme) across interviews and across locations and countries. As part of this process linkages (inferences) began to be made between these categories or themes.

Main findings

Findings listed below address the main aim and objectives set for the research:

Practitioners' general beliefs about the causes of child poverty

- With regard to general beliefs about poverty, the survey revealed that the sample of practitioners as a whole (so in both countries) disagreed that the causes of poverty are only rooted in factors relating to individuals. At the same time, it showed as a group they agreed wider factors beyond the individual also contribute to causing poverty – although the survey did not allow for these wider factors to be identified;

- In regard to the importance of wider factors beyond the individual, the composite mean average for the US sample was 5.62. This means it was close to the central scale point of 5 – therefore not strongly agreeing or disagreeing. The English practitioners were more likely to consider factors beyond the individual as important in regard to poverty and this difference was statistically significant;

- Interview data allowed for a greater depth of analysis in regard to these views about the causes of poverty – in particular, in regard to the importance of individual and wider situational factors. The dominant discourse within interviews both in England and the US was a view that poverty is individually rooted. The subjectivities of the poor themselves were mentioned frequently as a cause of poverty. Factors such as lack of education and aspiration etc. were popular. Beyond the individual, a notion of the cultural transmission of negative values etc. across generations within families and consequently the notion of a 'cycle of deprivation' was popular in both countries;

Practitioners' attitudes to engagement with parents in poverty

- Both English and US practitioners responding to the survey questionnaire held negative views of parents in poverty and their attendance at meetings, volunteering in settings, their response to communications and their engagement in their children's learning. The English practitioners responding to the survey were as a group more negative than their US colleagues but the difference between each was only marginally significant.

- General beliefs about poverty were related to engagement with parents in poverty. Previous interviews in England revealed a possible link between beliefs in the root causes of child poverty and engagement with parents in poverty. Engagement with parents is something that is believed to be key to helping children in poverty. We found that the stronger the belief in situational factors the more engaged practitioners indicated they were with parents. The survey data provided evidence of this correlation. Within England (and the US to a lesser extent) there was a relatively strong correlation between practitioners who believed wider

factors are important in determining child poverty and the extent to which they agreed they were engaged with parents. This correlation was statistically significant.

- The survey data also revealed how within England a relationship existed between how strongly practitioners believed individual factors caused poverty and the extent to which they felt they are not engaged with parents in poverty. This was not the case in the US.

Practitioners' attitudes about children in poverty relative to their peers

- Within interviews practitioners in both countries tended to view children as the innocent victims of poverty – unlike some views expressed about their parents. However, the survey revealed, across several factors, in comparison to their peers, practitioners in both countries held relatively negative views about children in poverty. These included a more pessimistic attitude to their cognitive ability, motor skills, emotional development, health, respectfulness and ability to stay on task in the classroom/nursery;

- General poverty beliefs were related to attitudes towards children in poverty. In both countries, the more practitioners attributed poverty to individual factors the more negative were their views of children in terms of social development and respectfulness. Also, it was found relatively negative views of engagement with parents predicted more negative perceptions of the children's developmental progress in both countries. More negative perceptions of parents also corresponded with negative perceptions of the respectfulness and on-task ability of children in both countries;

- A parsimonious explanation of this finding is that the general belief that poverty is due to individual-level factors creates a negative bias against the poor. This bias, in turn, influences not just perceptions of poor parents, but also of their children. To avoid a regressive blame attitude, and in light of the interview data, the claim we are making is that this bias is manifested in an unconscious fashion for most practitioners.

Practitioners, poverty sensitivity and work with children

- While during interviews many practitioners identified that children in poverty have additional needs, one striking finding was how many simultaneously indicated a preference for working with children in poverty in an identical way to other children. This tendency was also evident in the survey data – with the mean finding for practitioners in both countries being close to the neutral mid-point of scales measuring how much practitioners' agreed that they provide extra support, treat children in poverty equally and are extra sensitive to children in poverty.

- The research reveals a concern about levels of poverty sensitivity in the responses of practitioners during interviews and in regard to the survey responses across both countries – so a limitation in the acknowledgement that a sizeable minority of children are entering ECEC settings with needs related to the disadvantage they, and their families, experience. This lack of sensitivity raises a concern that practitioners will miss meeting these needs

through their practice by not providing particularized and sensitive attention for children in poverty.

- From what was said in interviews, it appears the above reluctance to allow a child and their family's poverty status to influence practice was done for several reasons. For instance, in an attempt avoid a possible stigmatization of children in poverty. But, also, several practitioners mentioned requirements upon them stemming from responding to and meeting quality expectations. For instance, in England those attached to OFSTED demands and the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Implications

The findings above are those which have emerged from the analysis to date. Rich sets of data have been gathered and the analysis, therefore, will continue and further insights may be revealed. As such, their implications listed below are interim and likely to be elaborated upon further in the next few months:

Bringing the social into the ECEC setting

Social inequalities arising from poverty need to be adequately addressed within the current policy of 'quality and high returns' (Moss, 2014), practice and training within the early years. The research raises the possibility of potentially harmful effects of ignoring or downplaying the impact of social inequalities in the ECEC domain, such as not providing classroom assistance to children in poverty as well as being insensitive to real challenges (and this does not mean problems) posed by poverty.

Q*uality ECEC and inequality*

The ability of the ECEC sector in both England and the USA to address social inequality can be questioned until contemporary quality perceptions and measures promote greater poverty sensitivity as a relevant concern within ECEC settings. A family of environmental rating scales modeled around child development theory influence practitioners to focus upon measureable features of structure and process. These scales are popular in both countries. What quality measures may miss, though, is important. They can render the child in poverty and the inequalities they experience peripheral. As OFSTED in the English context note – even within outstanding settings children in poverty can become 'invisible' (online 2013). Limited poverty sensitivity and narrowly focused notions of quality potentially close of possibilities and narrow the effectiveness of practice and thinking.

Practice with parents in poverty

Those practitioners indicating they had greater engagement with parents of children in poverty were those that were less negative about these parents. Negative views of parents in poverty identify how they have deficiencies and problems. But for relationships with parents to work they need to be co-constructed with an emphasis on reciprocity rather than hierarchy

Practice with children in poverty

Both within England (early years pupil premium) and the USA (Strong Start for America's Children) additional funding schemes are felt key to improving outcomes for disadvantaged children via the ECEC sector. But how such funding is spent is often left to managers in settings. It can be spent by concentrating on eligible children or by using the funding to support wider activities or interventions. In making such decisions, settings will need to consider amounts available and demographics etc. but evidence shows reducing inequality requires ECEC practices that specifically target the needs of vulnerable children in poverty. Our research revealed a tendency for practitioners to downplay these needs and so it suggests they should be prioritized to a greater extent.

Staff development and professional socialization

Our research findings imply practitioner training provision that focuses on the situational underpinnings of poverty and its effects upon children may have important knock-on effects. Consistent with this notion, for instance, Sun (2001) found that social work student practitioners held more external/situational views of poverty than comparable students in non-social work courses. The potential of such an emphasis within continuing professional development for practitioners working with young children has been recognized (White et al, 2013). Positive findings have also been shown with service learning experiences (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2011). But practitioners need time and space for training – for instance, this might be done through the supervision arrangements attached to the EYFS in England.

Outputs to date

The activities listed below indicate how at this time (June 1st 2015) all the expected outputs listed in the original application to SES have been achieved:

Presentations

- British Early Childhood Education Research Association's Annual Conference, February 2014, at Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, UK. Research team members were invited to put together a conference symposium titled *Working With Poverty in Early Childhood Education Settings*. The symposium involved all collaborators in the research and allowed us to publicise the SES project. The symposium included 3 presentations;

- Organization Mundiale Pour l 'Education Prescolaire (OMEP - World Organization for Early Childhood Education) International Conference July 2014 at University College, Cork, Ireland. I was invited to present a paper titled, *Resisting the caricature within the global 'new politics of parenting': embracing diversity and engaging with parents in poverty to support children's learning;*

- British Early Childhood Education Research Association's Annual Conference, February 2015, at Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, UK. Research team members were again invited to put together a conference symposium again titled *Working With Poverty*;

- Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) Network's Annual International Conference on Diversity, Equality and Social Justice in Early Childhood at Newman University, Birmingham, UK (4th and 5th June 2015). I and Eunice Lumsden have been invited to deliver a paper titled – *'Mind the gap': poverty sensitivity, 'diversity reduction' and quality in early childhood education and care in England.*

Publications

In line with what was indicated in the original application to SES, at this time work towards two academic articles has been completed.

- a general article titled *An investigation comparing early education practitioners' opinions about child poverty and its prioritizing within their practice within the UK and USA* and;

- another article focusing upon dominant global constructions of quality within ECEC and how this plays out (potentially ignores/harms) children in poverty titled *Quality and inequality in the early years – prioritizing poverty as a central concern*.

- These articles shall be sent to academic journals by autumn 2015 – journals to be fully confirmed but will be international in scope.

Funding application

- Drawing upon outcomes from the research, I will make an application to the Education Endowment Foundation's April 2015 call - with the co-applicant being Children North East. This application is about implementing a poverty proofing toolkit developed by Children North East within school nursery settings. The application is titled *Poverty Proofing in School Nurseries: Improving the experience and learning outcomes of disadvantaged children.*

Influencing thinking and shaping practice

- The project team have explored ways of disseminating the emerging findings from this project widely to as many audiences as possible. For instance, the BECERA conference is attended by policy makers and practitioners. Stemming from the BECERA conference presentation 2015 mentioned above, a link is being established with ECEC contacts within Bath and North East Somerset and further research is a possibility.

- As indicated above, the findings have also been used to underpin an application with Children North East for funding to the EEF. The project for which finding is sought would attempt to improve practitioners' poverty sensitivity in practice.

- Eunice Lumsden also indicates how the findings have impacted upon development of an MA module Working With Children and Families at University of Northampton. Her

recent work as an academic consultant with Camden Borough Council was supported partly by insights drawn from this research.

Future steps

- In addition to the two academic articles mentioned above, given the high quality of data gathered I will lead on further articles. Also, other members of the research team want to lead on articles. There is an understanding that the lead(s) on articles produced are named first, but all the team members will actually be listed as authors;

- I am considering applying to Policy Press Shorts – this route provides peer-reviewed booklets ranging from 20-50,000 words designed to deliver cutting-edge research in a concise, easily accessible way. Our research is the first study of its kind focused upon ECEC which itself has become an increasingly important policy area;

- To pursue the research further I will also be making further finding applications;

- Future opportunities to disseminate and maximise the impact of the research on thinking and practice will be sought. These include trying to pursue opportunities for knowledge exchange – for instance, presenting the findings to TACTYC Executive, the Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators.

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