All of these changes not only appear to be producing better outcomes for parents and their children but are also encouraging a new model of practice in the Family Court of Western Australia.

References


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Dr Paul Murphy is seconded to the Family Court of Western Australia from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Western Australia to evaluate the Columbus Pilot. Paul Kerin, who was instrumental in developing and implementing the Columbus Pilot, is the Acting Director of the Family Court Counselling Service in the Family Court of Western Australia. Associate Professor Lisbeth Pike is Head of the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University (Joondalup Campus). The authors acknowledge the assistance of Mr Stephen Thackray, Principal Registrar of the Family Court of Western Australia, in providing feedback on this article.

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Using what she calls “child-centred” research, Ridge then sets out to determine how well current policies are meeting the needs of poor children, and how these children are experiencing poverty. Reporting on in-depth interviews conducted with 40 children aged between 10 and 17 years whose parent/s were in receipt of benefit (income support payments), Ridge explores how children view and experience their everyday lives, including their family relationships, their friendships, and their school and work – in an attempt to place children centre-stage. These qualitative data are supplemented by analysis of large scale survey data collected from young people aged 11 to 15 years.

Central among the findings, the book shows that poor children are suffering from insufficient access to the economic and material resources necessary for adequate social participation and academic parity.

Contrary to arguments espousing the development and transmission of dependency culture, such as adopted by Murray (1994) in the United States, Ridge argues that children are in fact active, responsive and adaptive to the circumstances in which they live.

For example, while previous research has shown that parents act to protect their children from the direct and indirect impacts of poverty, Ridge argues that children, too, act to protect their parents. This includes school-aged children seeking employment of their own, not expecting material goods and, perhaps of most concern, excluding themselves from “expensive” aspects of life, including school excursions and extra curricula activities – some of the very activities that can lead to friendships that can protect children from adversities associated with being poor, or act to increase children’s otherwise limited opportunities.

Related to this, Ridge also points to the fact that children’s experiences in the here and now are important – in contrast with approaches that focus primarily upon children as “the adults of the future”. Her findings highlight the very real concerns children have about their schooling, their friendships, their families and their neighbourhoods, and the way they manage their relationships and environments.

While the study comes out of a specifically British and European tradition of research around poverty and, more recently, social exclusion, it has strong resonance for the Australian context – perhaps all the stronger as it draws attention to issues and methodologies that are not yet central to the Australian research focus on poverty.

Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion reminds us of the importance of first-hand accounts of children’s experiences. The book reinforces the idea that understanding the social and cultural context in which poverty takes place, in addition to material and financial factors, is critical to a full understanding of poverty. It emphasises that there is a place in policy research for qualitative as well as quantitative research, and that this can add meaning to what we already “know”.

Ridge’s work enters a previously underdeveloped field of poverty-related research, and in doing so makes substantive, theoretical and methodological contributions.

This book will be of interest to those involved in the development and evaluation of public policy, researchers concerned with policy and poverty, and those involved in education – as well as to anyone wanting to move toward a rich, contextual understanding of how the world is experienced and negotiated by children.

References


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