

Institution: The University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 23 Education		
Title of case study: Integrating children's perspectives within anti-poverty policy, practice and research		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: October 2016-		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Gill Main	Associate Professor	May 2015-
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research by Gill Main has changed the way that child poverty is measured, understood and acted upon. The inclusion of children's perspectives in academic and co-produced research has led to changes in how a wide array of local and national organisations understand and act on child poverty. The knowledge has led to changes in organisations' internal processes, policy and practice, and in communications about child poverty. In turn these have influenced wider understandings of child poverty among the public. The research has created opportunities for children, young people and parents to develop skills, confidence, and expertise in communicating about their experience to influence positive societal change.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Child poverty is a large and complex problem in the UK. Despite being frequently invoked in debates about poverty, the perspectives of children, young people and parents with lived experience of poverty are overwhelmingly absent from these debates. Those who know most about surviving in poverty are excluded from discussions of how best to eradicate poverty and ameliorate its impacts. Such exclusion reduces the effectiveness of policy interventions, advocacy work, and the accuracy of public understandings.</p> <p>Main has contributed to research to identify the scale of child poverty [1] and the impact of austerity policy on children and families [2]. As with most research into child poverty, these studies drew on adult-centric perspectives – that is, the measures of poverty used adult-identified necessities for children, household resources, and adult reports of children's experiences. Recognising the absence of children's perspectives in relation to poverty, Main established a research programme to elicit children's knowledge and perspectives on what poverty is, how we should measure it, and what we should do about it. This programme comprised a series of related projects underpinned by a rights-based approach to understanding child poverty in relation to protection, provision and participation (UNCRC, 1989):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Fair Shares and Families' (2016-2018), which used surveys and ethnographic methods to investigate the experiences of family sharing for children and parents across the socio-economic spectrum [a]. • 'A Different Take' (2018-19), which developed citizen's panels of children, young people and parents with 'expertise by experience' on child poverty, in Leeds and London [b]. • 'Barriers to Attendance' (2019-20), which investigated poverty-related barriers to secondary school attendance for students in Leeds, using focus groups and a survey. <p>These projects were innovative in the field of child poverty research in combining statistical data with information obtained through participatory methods and co-production. Partners included policy makers, practitioners, children, young people, and parents/carers to ensure the research produced tangible outcomes for people living in poverty.</p> <p>Key findings from the research map onto three strands of impact activity [3]:</p> <p>1) We need to change the story about child poverty. Popular, media and policy narratives position families in poverty as behaving differently from better-off families in ways which</p>		

cause and perpetuate their own disadvantage. This is not supported by the evidence [1]. Children and parents are strongly aware of the hostile rhetoric surrounding them, and this creates a double bind in which they have to negotiate shame and stigma as well as inadequate access to resources [3,5]; and children are often much more aware of their family's deprivation than adults think they are [5].

- 2) We need to **change practice** to make society more accessible to children and families living in poverty. Evidence indicates that children and parents alter their behaviours and hide their needs to avoid being identified as poor, and to avoid placing additional stress on limited family budget and fragile family relationships [1,3]. Such changes are damaging to children's presents and futures [1,2,4] – and include things like missing out on school activities which include overt or hidden costs, and not taking up entitlements such as free school meals because of the associated stigma [3,5].
- 3) We need to **change policy** so that children and families have the resources they need to survive with dignity and take a full role in society. Growing up without adequate household income and personal resources damages child well-being [4] and outcomes [1]. A key ingredient in developing policies which work, and which do not stigmatise those they are purportedly designed to help, is the inclusion of the knowledge of experts by experience – including children, young people and parents – in policy design [5].

These findings challenge adult-focused approaches to understanding and measuring child poverty, and as a result new measures have been developed to capture children's experiences more holistically. This has influenced best practice in research: elements of the programme have been replicated internationally; new measures have been included in large-scale national and international surveys; and international organisations have invited Main to be part of expert advisory panels, for example, for the UNICEF *Innocenti Report Card 16* (2020).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Dermott, E. and Main, G. (2018). *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Volume 1: The nature and extent of the problem*. Bristol: Policy Press. ISBN: 9781447332183.
- [2] Bradshaw, J., Chzhen, Y. and Main, G. (2017). 'Impact of the Recession on Children in the United Kingdom. In Cantillon, B., Chzhen, Y., Handa, S. and Nolan, B. (Eds). *Children of Austerity*. Oxford; OUP. ISBN: 9780198797968.
- [3] Main, G. and Mahony, S. (2018). [Fair Shares and Families: Rhetoric and reality in the lives of children and families in poverty](#). London: The Children's Society. 76-page report.
- [4] Main, G. (2018). Money matters: A nuanced approach to understanding the relationship between household income and child subjective well-being. *Child Indicators Research* 12(4), pp. 1125-1145. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-018-9574-z>.
- [5] Howarth, C., Mansfield, M., McCartney, C. and Main, G. (accepted August 2020). A Different Take: Reflections on an intergenerational participatory research project on child poverty. Invited contribution to special issue of *Social Work and Society*. Supplied on request.

Associated grants:

- [a] ESRC Future Research Leaders 'Fair Shares and Families', (2016-18, GBP155,298, ES/N015916/1).
- [b] ESRC/Leeds Social Sciences Institute Impact Acceleration Account 'A Different Take', (2018-19, GBP15,000).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research has led to impacts nationally and locally on a variety of stakeholders: i) changes in how national and local policy makers, practitioner and advocacy organisations, people in poverty, and the wider public understand child poverty; ii) changes in how local authority and NGO practitioners engage with children and families living in poverty; and iii) changes in local authority anti-poverty policy. This maps onto the three strands of impact activity identified in the 'Fair Shares and Families' (FSAF) report [3]. Impacts relate not only to what people and groups do, but their internal workings and processes, demonstrating that the research is shaping long-term and far-reaching changes.

i) Changing the story relates to challenging pejorative narratives on poverty which the research indicates are inaccurate and harmful [3]. This is relevant to all levels of society, from individuals experiencing poverty and members of the public, to national policy makers. This has been achieved through communicating the key findings of the research to varied audiences and developing action research solutions [5] which can be embedded into organisational practice, as detailed below.

FSAF key findings have led to changes in how organisations such as The Children's Society (TCS), a national charity which works with tens of thousands of children and professionals each year, understand poverty and its impact: *'through the FSAF research... in the Poverty strand of our research work we have sharpened our understanding of and narrative around childhood poverty'* [A]. Specifically, they highlight the value of evidence for a narrative which challenges understandings of poverty which blame those experiencing it: *'Through FSAF we developed a well-evidenced counter narrative to this dominant discourse'* [A]. Similarly, Leeds City Council (LCC), which serves a constituency of 800,000 people, states that: *'Dr Main has sat on the Child Poverty Impact Board since its creation and advises on different projects within the child poverty approach. Dr Main's theories and research around the knowledge of children and young people and the importance of including young people in policies on areas which influence their lives greatly influenced the strategy, and the strategy was co-created with children and young people as a direct result of Dr Main's involvement and research'* [B]. These accounts demonstrate the far-reaching role of Main's research in changing perspectives on child poverty at an institutional level.

The identification in FSAF that children, young people and parents with lived experience of poverty are excluded from debates about poverty in ways which create feelings of exclusion and shame led to the A Different Take (ADT) and Barriers to Attendance (BTA) initiatives. These projects were co-produced with LCC, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG: a national charity who in 2018/19 briefed 313 MPs and 229 local councils; reached 5,296 people through courses, seminars and conferences; and supported 36,000 people via their helpline for advisers) and experts by experience – and led to the development of citizen panels and processes to support people to develop the skills and confidence needed to take advantage of these platforms. People with lived experience of poverty collaborated in the development of reports, videos and resources which they then used in ambassadorial work within their communities, with practitioners, and with policy makers. Individuals who took part in the citizen's panels reported feeling *'heard'* for the first time [C], and highlighted the value in being able to develop and advocate as a group for collective solutions, and a sense of hope that these may be listened to: *'Throughout the project, not only have I had the chance to share my thoughts and experiences, but I have had the invaluable opportunity to listen to the thoughts and experiences of others... I am hopeful that the conclusions... in the report will be acted on with positive effect'* [D]. The marked increase in confidence and skills among these panels is summed up in how the London panel reflected on the establishment of the platform: *'We're used to people talking about us – but it's rare that people talk to us... It's time our expertise was heard and taken seriously. This panel – and this report – are one of the things we're doing to push back'* [E]. These comments reflect deep-seated changes in panel members' sense of their confidence and power – and these changes were also evident in partner organisations; CPAG, which collaborated on the London panel commented: *'It was a new and thought-provoking experience to hear the families' views and priorities, which did not always correspond with our own'* [F].

At a parliamentary level, Lord Moynihan has argued for a national-level change in narratives around poverty, quoting the ADT project and reflecting its key messages in a debate in the House of Lords about the welfare of migrant children in July 2019: *'To shape change, we need to shift our focus from what the poorest in society are doing and how they should change, towards listening to their perspectives on what they need and how society could be more fairly organised'* [G]. These examples – from in-depth changes to a small number of individual's lives, to changes in the attitudes of national-level policy makers, confirm how understandings of child poverty are starting to be changed in line with FSAF's findings.

ii) Changing practice relates to people whose day-to-day work puts them in contact with

children and families who may be experiencing or at risk of poverty; and to the internal practices within organisations whose remit includes child poverty. Impact has been achieved through working with national and local organisations to review their practices, develop resources, and implement processes to ensure that anti-poverty practice is based on sound evidence and centralises the perspectives and expertise of children, young people and parents. This builds on i) through the development of practices and processes which ensure the new story is heard and acted upon. Based on findings from FSAF, TCS reported changes to their organisational practices around communicating research findings: *'it has added to The Children's Society's evidence base for the benefits of a story approach to sharing research findings that emanate from rigorous and thorough data collection and analysis'* [A]. Part of this change has included the development of processes for sharing knowledge between policy- and practice-focused colleagues, starting with a briefing note for TCS practitioners detailing findings about how poverty might impact the children and families they come into contact with, and the strategies for how they can most usefully respond. They note: *'The FSAF research was the inspiration for this series and has, I believe, improved our capacity for internal knowledge transfer'* [A].

Main's research has also informed the development of service provision in Leeds, including informing 'Thriving: a child poverty strategy for Leeds'. Findings have influenced a range of projects overseen by the Child Poverty Impact Board, including food and clothing aid, support for new parents and infants, and revisions to social care practice so that poverty is overtly considered in decisions about child protection concerns. Practice guidance stresses the need for removing barriers and sources of stigma, including language; for example, on Main's advice, terminology such as 'resilience' was removed from documentation due to its implication that an individual's ability to cope with adversity, rather than the root causes of adversity, require attention. LCC note: *'Dr Main's research has changed both structure and practice around child poverty within Leeds, influencing the way that we approach projects, the involvement of children and young people, a focus on changing language, and the participatory process that is now incorporated into the work'* [B]. The 'Thriving' strategy embeds the participatory process developed in ADT into all of LCC's anti-poverty work, putting children's knowledge and perspectives at the centre of policy design, delivery and evaluation. LCC have invested time in developing and using resources produced by ADT to promote conversations about and action on child poverty. In particular, a Snakes and Ladders board game designed by child participants in the citizen's panel, in which snakes represent things which make life in poverty worse while ladders represent things which help, has been extensively used by panel members in partnership with the Council, in events reaching public, private, and charity sector workers. LCC comment: *'the outputs... have been used in training and events that have taken place with several hundred Headteachers, teachers, young people, third sector, private sector and public sector individuals. The training was well received, which demonstrates that Dr Main's research is making a difference at multiple levels, not only at every level of the council, but across the city'* [B].

iii) **Changing policy** relates to national and local policy changes and advocacy work, and to internal organisational policies and decisions about resource allocation. Impacts include the complete overhaul of LCC's child poverty strategy and changing policies within national charity and advocacy partners in relation to resource use and priority setting. This has been achieved by developing processes to include experts by experience in decision making and working with organisations to revise and develop policies in line with evidence.

As a result of collaborations with Main on ADT, LCC and CPAG both invested additional resources in listening to experts by experience to inform policy and practice decisions. CPAG spent an additional GBP5,000 on developing resources relating to the citizen's panel [F], resulting in project reports written by and with panel members being sent to all London MPs, and a video featuring panel members being used at campaigning events and on their website. They have also sought funding to replicate the panel in Scotland. They described the process of partnering on ADT as providing *'a new way for CPAG to engage parents and children living on low income and one we would welcome replicating'* [F]. LCC have also invested additional resources because of the *'positive impact'* [B] of the ADT project, including spending GBP10,000 on BTA. This has contributed to a virtuous cycle of collaboration between

academics, policy makers, practitioners, and experts by experience becoming increasingly deeply embedded into LCC's work.

This cycle of promoting and embedding participatory processes into organisational policies and practices is also evident in the interest shown among networks of existing partner organisations. The End Child Poverty Coalition, a national umbrella body representing over 70 organisations committed to ending child poverty, commissioned Main to support them in developing a participatory process to engage child and youth experts by experience in their campaigning activities, based on their contact with CPAG about the ADT project and its impacts. They remark: *'Dr Main's expertise in talking to young people about their experiences of poverty – and in particular ensuring we understood and met the high ethical standards of working with a potentially vulnerable set of young people – has been invaluable'* [H]. Similarly, ATD Fourth World UK, the national branch of an international anti-poverty charity promoting human rights, has been in regular communication with Main about developing their methodology, previously only used with adults in the UK, of merging experiential, policy, and academic knowledge. While progress been delayed due to COVID-19, Main and ECP worked with ATD to develop and deliver the Messenger Bird campaign, which provided art materials to children as vehicles for them to express their experiences of poverty during the pandemic.

Impact on political debate and policy changes has been achieved through the extensive use made of FSAF findings by TCS, including at a report launch and a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Well-being Economics. TCS comment: *'Through speaking at an event with the APPG for Well-being Economics, Dr Main informed a number of subsequent publications that have all built the case for a more robust approach and understanding of children's subjective well-being nationally. As a result, we have secured a Comprehensive Spending Review Submission on well-being measurement for children which, if successful, will result in a major step forward in the Government's ability to make evidence-based policy for children and young people'* [A]. Following the APPG, TCS were invited to present FSAF findings to senior civil servants in the Department for Work and Pensions: *'This led to some interesting discussions with DWP about the implications of the research for different policy areas, and while this kind of impact is hard (if not impossible) to quantify, it is, in my view, an important part of wider societal/ attitudinal and policy change'* [A]. At the local authority level, LCC note that *'within the council, there has been a paradigm shift in the ways that families who live in poverty are thought about due to this research, which has resulted in changes to policy and new approaches to policy making... Senior policy makers are now advocating for approaches which are based on the knowledge of young people who live in poverty, and are asking for projects and programmes to be developed alongside academic research'* [B].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] Senior Researcher, Poverty and Inequality, The Children's Society, in relation to 4(i), (ii) and (iii). Letter of corroboration dated 14 October 2020.

[B] Chief Officer, Children & Families, Leeds City Council, in relation to 4(i), (ii) and (iii). Letter of corroboration dated 28 September 2020.

[C] Video from A Different Take (ADT) Leeds panel: <https://vimeo.com/353423616>.

[D] Blog by an ADT London panel member, 18 October 2019: <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/pushing-back-take-life-poverty-london>.

[E] 'Pushing Back: Our Take on Life in Poverty in London' (2019). ATD London panel: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/pushing-back-our-take-life-poverty-london>.

[F] Child Poverty Action Group, in relation to 4(i) and (iii). Letter of corroboration dated 21 January 2021.

[G] Hansard transcript of Lord Moynihan's comments: HL Deb (9 July 2019), Vol. 798, Col. 1780: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2019-07-09/debates/a05c74b6-6590-4c11-91ac-f838ed039178/LordsChamber>.

[H] Coordinator, End Child Poverty, in relation to 4(iii). Letter of corroboration dated 4 January 2021.