Female teacher giving a lesson to nursery students (DGLimages/Shutterstock.com, n.d.)

Working with children in poverty

A guide for new Early Years Practitioners

Jennifer Stanley

Profile Picture Illustration - Woman
(Wiktoria Matynia/Shutterstock.com, n.d.)

About the author:

Jennifer Stanley is a final year Early Childhood Studies student, who will be embarking on a teaching training course later this year. Living and working in a deprived area herself, she has first-hand experience of working with children in poverty and recognises the importance of being an advocate for all children. She is passionate about children's rights and understands the value of not letting a child's upbringing negatively impact upon their potential.

Introduction

Congratulations on your new role as an Early Years Practitioner. As you are aware, this setting is located within a deprived area (Walsall is in the top 15% of deprived areas within the UK (Walsall Council, 2015)) and you will be working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds daily. For this reason, you will need to be aware of how to best advocate for children in poverty. Within this booklet, I hope to give you the tools to do this by discussing three issues that I feel can adversely affect the long-term progress of children in poverty, and how you might deal with them both practically and professionally if challenging situations arise.

Issue 1 – The accepted child vs. The stigmatised child (pg. 3-5)

Issue 2 – The carefree child vs. The anxious child (pg. 6-7)

Issue 3 – The competent child vs. The underachieving child (pg. 8-10)

Before we begin, it is important that you are fully aware of what an advocate is. Consider the following definition and keep it in mind as you read this booklet.

Advocacy means standing up for children's rights in a non-judgemental way, and making their voices heard. It means putting the child at the centre of your practice, and campaigning for their rights and needs when they might not be able to. *

(Department of Health, 2002)

*Definition created (not quoted) from: *National Standard's for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services* (Department of Health, 2002)

The accepted child vs. The stigmatised child

Despite our best intentions, forming judgements before knowing someone's full situation is part of human nature (Todorov, 2017). As an advocate, it is your job to see past these initial judgements and provide indiscriminatory, and equal, provision for every child in your care (Department for Education, 2017).

Within society, negative views about children and families experiencing poverty remain prevalent, which can lead to children living in poverty becoming stigmatised (The Children's Society, 2019). Foucault, an influential French philosopher, defined this negative stigmatisation as a dominant discourse; a particular view of a sector of society that overrides others (Mac Naughton, 2005). As well as influencing society's view, dominant discourses can impact the amount of socio-cultural capital a family experiencing poverty has, meaning that they are often viewed as having less of an impact on society than others (Richardson, 1986).

Socio-cultural capital was a term devised by Bourdieu, relating to the influence you feel able to have over others and within society (Richardson, 1986). In your position as an early year's practitioner, you can be, rightly or wrongly, seen as having a larger amount of capital than the children in your care. This gives you increased capacity, meaning you have the ability to make decisions on behalf of others, and the ability to advocate for a stigmatised child and promote their best interests (Federle, 1994). Consider how you would do this.

Example scenario:
The school you work in would now like nursery to wear the same uniform as the rest of the school. A parent of a child in the nursery has discreetly told you that they cannot afford the uniform.

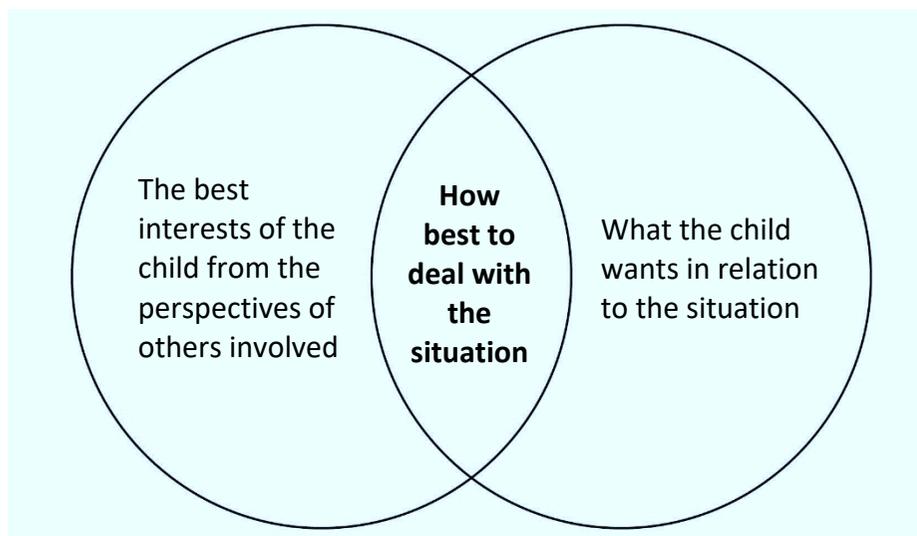**How would you deal with this situation?**

When the parent is disclosing the information to you, it is important that you act in a tactful and unbiased way (Campbell, 2011). Even if your own knowledge disputes the claim, families have a right to privacy (Alderson, 2008) and it is not the time or the place for questioning why the uniform cannot be afforded. Creating a professional and friendly relationship based on trust leaves you in a better position to help and support the family at a later stage if necessary (Campbell, 2011).

When dealing with a situation like this, several issues could materialise. In this case, potential issues could be the exclusion of the child not having the uniform (by other children within the classroom) and other parents becoming aware of the situation. It is your job to face these issues head on, and advocate for the child in need. When considering these issues, it is important to keep in mind two key articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations Human Rights, 1989);

These two articles can provide a natural contradiction and should be considered together. Sometimes, what you see as best for the child might not be what they want (Kuczynski, Pitman and Twigger, 2019). In terms of the scenario considered above the child may be perfectly happy not to wear a uniform, but you can see the embarrassment, and potential stigmatisation of the child, that it might bring about from the parent's point of view. In this case, advocating for the child by considering potential outsiders' perception, in order to protect them in the long term, may be best.

The best interests of the child from the perspectives of others involved

How best to deal with the situation

What the child wants in relation to the situation

*Considering potentially contradicting perspectives
(diagram created by author)*

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*Sad boy outside at schoolyard
(patat/Shutterstock.com, n.d.)*

The carefree child
vs.
The anxious child

Childhood is socially constructed in Western society to appear as the least stressful part of an individual's life (Norozi and Moen, 2016). However, in today's society, statistics demonstrate that 10% of children under 16 have a recognisable mental illness (The Children's Society, 2018). Poverty is known to be a social determinant of poor childhood mental health (World Health Organisation, 2014). However, signs of mental illness that children in poverty may display are often ignored within early years, which can lead to symptoms getting worse throughout older childhood (Department for Education and Employment, 2001). Educating yourself on this is of paramount importance within your chosen career.

Low self-esteem particularly effects young children in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008). There are many factors that contribute to low self-esteem, such as a child comparing themselves to their peers (perhaps in terms of ability, or material possessions), or being told off in school for something out of their control (for example, not having the correct PE kit (The Children's Society, 2019)). Within school, these factors are unavoidable; the constant reinforcement of them could cause children to become unwilling to participate in situations where they could fail, both inside and outside of school (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007). The following scenario demonstrates this:

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Example scenario:
A lunchtime supervisor has told you that a child is constantly isolating themselves during playtime and is refusing to join in with games.

How would you deal with this situation?

In this situation, the child refusing to take part could be viewed as having a low amount of social capital; they do not feel that they have the ability to take part in the activities of their peers (Richardson, 1986). A way in which you could effectively deal with this situation is by focussing on the ideas of Freire, a Brazilian educator who suggested that in order to encourage a child to participate, what they can already do should be focussed on, rather than what they can't do (Freire, 1996). For example, as opposed to forcing a child to join in with a new game, you could reinforce to a child that they played really well with a group of children the previous week. This praise may encourage them to try the experience out again.

Although it is important to encourage participation where possible, it is also important to remember that as much as a child has the right to participate if they feel able to (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016), they also have the democratic right, and the capacity, to choose not to participate (United Nations Children's Fund, 2001). Although them not involving themselves may appear, outwardly, a cause for concern, it could be the case that the child does not feel ready for the situation. In this case, forcing them to join in with something they do not feel ready to do could make a child feel as though their opinion is not valid, and be detrimental to any progress previously made. As this handbook keeps reinforcing, Article 3 and Article 12 of the UNCRC should always be considered when working out how best to help a child; this means listening to the child's voice as well as your own beliefs (United Nations Human Rights, 1989).

The competent child vs. underachieving child

Currently, children in poverty leave the education system with considerably fewer academic achievements than their more affluent counterparts (Fergusson, Bovaird and Mueller, 2007). If you advocate for the educational achievement of these children whilst they are in the Early Years Foundation Stage, you can go far in changing their educational attainment throughout school (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010).

Looking at the educational abilities of children in poverty through a Foucauldian lens, it could be considered that children in poverty are, from the outset, not expected to achieve (Lee, 2019). Unfortunately, the case may be that these stereotypes are present within your workplace, leading to children's potential abilities being disregarded (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2019). One way of working out why this occurs is by considering the welfare model, and the rights-based model. If considered in terms of poverty and academic achievement, the welfare model considers the child as lacking academic capabilities and capacity. Their predicted attainment is unchangeable. Contradictory to this, the rights-based model views the child as having the capacity to change their predicted outcomes. They are active in their learning, and with the correct support can achieve more than what is expected of them (Lansdown and Lancaster, 2001).

Bearing the rights-based model in mind, it is important to remember that although you may not be in charge of a classroom, you are a qualified practitioner with the capacity to advocate for the educational needs of a child in poverty.

Notions of more qualified practitioners having a greater amount of workplace capital, and a higher amount of power (in terms of making changes) (Eyres *et al*., 2010) should be disregarded if you think the best interests of a child are being ignored (remember article 3 of the UNCRC – the best interests of the child should always be considered (United Nations Human Rights, 1989)). If you think that other practitioners within your setting are not giving a child with potential the support that they deserve, in terms of the academic side of school, it is your right, and responsibility, to speak up on their behalf (Alderson, 2008). Consider the following scenario:

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Example scenario:
A child who appeared to significantly enjoy school begins to have poor attendance. Their attainment and development begins to suffer because of this.

How would you deal with this situation?

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This situation is challenging. However, you must always keep in mind that the child's poor attendance at this age is not usually their own fault (Bakken, Brown and Downing, 2017). There are a number of factors at play that could be a cause for the child being off school, and unless you believe that there is a serious safeguarding concern (in which case immediate action should be taken following the setting's appropriate procedures (HM Government, 2018)) little can be done about poor attendance within the Early Years Foundation Stage.

There are many ways in which the academic side of this situation could be dealt with. In relation to article 3 of the UNCRC (United Nations Human Rights, 1989) the child's best interests should be considered, which could mean moving them into a lower teaching group. This may be the initial reaction of the class teacher, who will be aiming to ensure that the goals provided by the Early Years Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2017) are met.

However, you may think that this solution contradicts what the child wants – they may have built strong bonds with the staff and students in their teaching group and feel uncomfortable moving. This links to article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations Human Rights, 1989), that the child's voice should be heard, and provides a conflict between what is right for the child socially, and what is right for the child academically. Ultimately, as mentioned in the previous sections, you, alongside other practitioners, will have to weigh these factors up before making a final decision.

Teacher And Pupils Using Wooden Shapes In Montessori School
(Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.com, n.d.)

What next?

I hope that this handbook has furthered your knowledge of working with children in poverty and inspired you to consider your own practice. Some key points to take away are that children in poverty will always be stigmatised (Mac Naughton, 2005), and viewed as having less capital than others (Richardson, 1986). It is your job to help eradicate these views, by promoting the rights of these children when challenging situations arise. Remember, if you are ever unsure of how to deal with a situation, refer back to Article's 3 and 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations Human Rights, 1989). By considering the child's voice, as well as their best interests, you can guarantee that you are advocating for them in the best way you can (Department of Health, 2002).

Further reading

The following sources have been referenced throughout this handbook. To develop your knowledge further, you may want to consider the ideas within them in more depth.

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