

Life chances: the children's view

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Introduction

What do children themselves think about their childhood experiences? This paper provides an opportunity to hear from Australian children from a longitudinal study, now aged 11 and 12, about their own life experiences as well as to look at the changes in their family situations over time.

Longitudinal studies enable exploration of changes over time and of the reasons for change. The Life Chances Study was informed by earlier Australian longitudinal studies of children from birth, including the Brunswick Family Study, the Australian Temperament Project and the Mater–University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy (see for example Smith & Carmichael 1992; Prior et al. 1989; Bor et al. 1993). The Life Chances Study can be distinguished from these studies not only in time (the earlier studies were of children born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, roughly a decade before the children of the Life Chances Study) but also in the diversity of socioeconomic factors reported. It has a particular combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the latter providing a focus on the way the families and children concerned experience and explain their situation, with analysis also exploring individual pathways, through mapping and case studies. The study's moderate size (142 children in stage 6), gives it the advantage of allowing systematic analysis of qualitative data not often feasible in large-scale studies. The Life Chances Study has also contributed to the planning of the new large-scale longitudinal study, 'Growing up in Australia', which is funded by the federal government and currently doing first interviews with parents of 5,000 infants and 5,000 4-year-olds. The first results of that study are expected in April 2005 (AIFS 2004).

The Life Chances Study was initiated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence to explore the impacts of family income and associated factors on children growing up. The study commenced with 167 children born in inner Melbourne in 1990. We have now interviewed the families on six occasions, most recently when the children were aged 11 and 12. Data were collected from the children themselves, their parents and teachers. The results have been published in a number of reports (see reference list), most recently in *Eleven plus: life chances and family income* (Taylor & Fraser 2003).

While in the early stages of the study the mothers were the main informants, at the most recent stage all children were also asked to complete a questionnaire and selected children (including those who had been on low incomes in their early years) were interviewed about their lives and tape recorded.

This paper

1. draws on the longitudinal data to discuss some of the changes the families have undergone over the children's early years, including geographic mobility, family structure and family income
2. presents two case studies of children who have grown up on low incomes
3. explores the children's own accounts of their lives including their views about money, their present circumstances and their hopes for the future.

Changes over time

The Life Chances Study commenced in Melbourne, contacting all mothers with babies born in selected months in two inner suburbs. The 167 families reflected the diversity of the area with both high and low-income families, and included parents with a range of educational, employment and ethnic backgrounds. In 2002 we interviewed 142 (85 per cent) of the original families.

The families showed a mixture of changes and continuity over the years in terms of location, family structure, and income.

Location

By the time the children were 6 years old, only one-quarter of the families still lived in the same inner suburbs where their children had been born, while the rest had moved elsewhere—the majority still in Melbourne but some interstate or overseas. This high level of mobility has considerable implications for providers of early childhood services, in terms of continuity of service and parents' knowledge of what is available in a new area. It also has implications for the children, with a few children very unhappy about having to move away from a familiar area.

Family structure

An unexpected finding was the number of deaths of parents over the 12 years of the study. Of the 167 children at the start of the study, 7 per cent were known to have lost a parent. While we did not ask the children specifically about this, some of the children whose parents had died raised the issue and expressed their sadness in the interviews, for example in looking back over important events in their lives or about things they would wish for. For example, one boy's wish was that 'my dad was around a bit more, like living here with us'.

Family separations were a major factor in the lives of some children. At ages 11 and 12, 80 per cent of the children were living in two-parent families and 20 per cent in sole parent families; however, one third of the children had lived in a sole parent family at some stage of their lives. Half the children who were in sole parent families at 6 months of age were also in sole parent families at 11 and 12, although some had been in two-parent families in the interim.

In the interviews with the children, some discussed their experiences of their parents' separations. The children seemed less likely to be positive about the separations than their parents. A number spoke of their sadness at not seeing more of the parent with whom they were not living. This was particularly the case for some whose non-resident parent had remarried. One girl described herself as 'an emotional wreck' because of her parents' separation. Another child wept in the interview as she spoke of missing her older sister with whom she no longer lived. One boy spoke with some insight of his parents' separation:

It got annoying but it wasn't the end of the world, I knew that much. I still got by but when Mum and Dad split up and that was the period where they didn't have that much money, that was the year I started pretty much being a trouble-maker. My school went completely down hill, I hated it, and I didn't like school much and it wasn't very much fun here, so it wasn't the best of times but yeah, it was still okay. Dad's house, the flat was small but it was quite nice in there, I didn't mind it, but yeah, I was still doing really bad at school.

Family income

The percentage of families on low incomes decreased slightly, from 30 per cent at the start of the study to 27 per cent after 12 years. Throughout the study families on low incomes have included a higher proportion of parents with less than tertiary education, born overseas with limited

English, of sole parents, of families with large numbers of children and of unemployment. These characteristics, especially in combination, make it difficult for families to increase their income significantly. (Low income is defined as below 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line, high income as above the cut off for eligibility for Family Tax Benefit A and medium income as between the two).

The Life Chances Study shows that some children are on low incomes for relatively short periods of time, but others endure prolonged financial hardship. One of the key findings was the length of time that many children have spent living on low incomes: three-quarters of the children who were living in families on low incomes at 6 months of age were still living in low-income families when they were 11 and 12-year-olds.

Differences between the families living on low incomes and other families

We first interviewed the families when the children were aged about 6 months old. At this stage mothers on low incomes were significantly more likely than other mothers to report the following stressful life events:

- the mother having a major health problem
- serious disagreements with their partner
- serious financial problems.

They were also more likely to say that they had problems managing their child. In terms of social support they were significantly less likely to receive help with their child from grandparents and friends than were the mothers in more affluent families.

Most of these differences persisted throughout the children's childhood. Not only did the low-income families face greater stresses on average than other families, but they continued to do so with less informal social supports, less help from grandparents and friends and less use of services.

In terms of formal supports, parents in low-income families were less likely to use paid child-care than other families at all stages. As 3-year-olds, the children in low income families were less likely to use local libraries or attend playgroups. As 6-year-olds and 11 and 12-year-olds, they were less likely to participate in out-of-school activities such as sport, music or dance than many of their more affluent peers. They were also more likely to miss out on activities at school, because of the cost of excursions, camps and swimming lessons. As 11 and 12-year-olds they were less likely to have computer or internet access at home.

Two families on low incomes

The two families introduced below remained on low incomes over 12 years but underwent changes in family structure and in employment. They illustrate the pressures associated with low income, the difficulty low-income families have in increasing their incomes over time and the limitations low incomes place on their children's ability to participate fully in the society around them. Both the parents and the children's views are presented. Pseudonyms are used.

Lisa

Lisa's parents were refugees from Vietnam. When she was born in 1990, her father was working on a low wage as a clerk in a factory. He had education to Year 10, her mother only three years of primary schooling. Neither parent spoke English well. He subsequently tried unsuccessfully to start an import-export business. By the time Lisa was 6 years old he had returned to Vietnam, her parents had divorced, her mother had remarried and separated again. By the time Lisa was aged 11 her mother and the two children were reliant on Parenting Payment Single, which the mother found insufficient to meet daily costs. The mother had had times of depression, including

a suicide attempt. As a result of a car accident she suffered back and neck problems and lost her part-time job as a process worker. Through an interpreter, she said she feared for the future:

Recently, after paying all the bills, I am again in desperate need of money. I also try and eat less myself, so that the children may eat more. I am not sure whether I will have enough money in the next few years, because I cannot work. I must rely on handouts. Originally I had planned to work, with the little one attending prep. However the accident has dissolved all hope of that. Now I wish to go back to school and find a part-time job that is less demanding on the body. Working part time, because I would be able to pick up the kids from school ... I hope the government can set up a department or something special for us injured people to work so that I may become less dependent on government. I am not a lazy person, I have been seeking work for ages; however at the mention of being a TAC (Traffic Accident Commission) victim I am instantly rejected.

Aged 11, Lisa was in Year 6 at a government school (her third school). Her mother had difficulty with the cost of the camp (\$240), the choir and choir uniform. The school allowed her to pay in instalments. Lisa herself said she did not like about school the fact that there is 'too much money to pay'. She missed out on some activities there and was not involved in any activities away from school. Her mother would have liked her to have piano lessons and some tutoring, but could not afford these. Lisa's mother spoke of her hopes for her children's future: 'I wish them to attend university. I don't think I can afford it; however I will try my best'.

Lisa remembered times when there was not enough money:

That was bad. Because we couldn't have enough for dinner and when our shoes don't fit we don't have money to buy them.

If she had one wish:

I would wish we had a bigger house and yeah, more money than now. And my mum's health problem will recover.

Lisa hoped to be a designer when she grows up.

Kylie

Kylie was born into a sole parent family, the youngest of four children living on a high-rise estate in inner Melbourne. Her father, who was not living with the family, was unemployed. Neither parent had completed secondary school; both had some problems with reading. The mother and children moved to a country town and were eventually reunited with the father who found work in a sawmill. By the time Kylie was 11 he had worked full time at the mill for a number of years, but was earning a very low wage. His take-home pay was \$410 a week. He said:

Even though I work hard and bring home a wage it's not adequate for what I'd like to be able to provide for them as a parent. My pay's very inadequate.

He also worried about the dangers of the job and lack of maintenance of the mill. The mother wanted to work but could not find a paid job in the country town. She emphasised, 'We need that second job.'

Kylie was in Year 6 at a government primary school in a country town. She only sometimes looked forward to going to school. Her mother felt welcome at the school and helped with the fete and coached basketball. She was satisfied with the school apart from the costs. The camp would be particularly difficult to afford, but her mother felt she had to let Kylie go because she had missed out on camps in the past. Kylie had friends she saw often and with whom she played basketball. She had a paid job refereeing basketball. However her mother said Kylie could not play for the local squad because it cost too much to travel to the other towns to play. Her mother also could not afford the \$300 for Kylie to do jazz ballet with her friend.

Kylie remembered times when there was not enough money:

Oh, it was still normal but you couldn't have everything you used to have. And you missed out on say a treat or something and you couldn't get an ice-cream. It didn't bother me because you don't always need ice-cream.

If she had one wish to change her life what would she wish for? 'Nothing really'. Kylie hoped to be a sports teacher at her own primary school.

The children's views

In interviews the children aged 11 and 12 discussed various aspects of their family life, school, friends, their hopes and fears. Their views on money and on their wider life chances are outlined below.

The importance of money

The low-income parents in the study often spoke of how they tried to protect their children from the stresses of low income, often going without themselves to put their children first. This was successful to some degree, as the children were more likely than the parents to see themselves as having the same amount as money 'as most families'. However some were very aware of the impacts of low income.

We asked the children who had been on low incomes throughout the study whether they thought money was important for families. While most thought money was important, responses ranged from 'If you don't have any money you can't live' to 'Money is not your life'.

The children most often explained the importance of money for families in terms of being able to buy food. The next most frequent responses included general comments about the importance of money for paying bills and for housing or shelter. A few children mentioned specific school costs and other costs such as clothing or furniture:

Basically you need lots of money, you need to buy food with money, buy a house with money, like beds and clothes and TV, pay your bills.

A small number said money was not important, asserting happiness or family was more important. One spoke of the problems of too much money:

No ... and like sometimes when people get money somebody is jealous and somebody might kill the one that has money.

Over half the children in the long-term low-income families said their families had enough money, while a few qualified this by saying 'sometimes' or 'for some things'. Others said they did not have enough, lacking money for such things as school costs, bills, food, clothing and buying a house.

One girl speaking of her early life remembered her mum telling her:

When I was two years old and my brother was like a baby and my dad used to gamble and he used to borrow our money and we couldn't get anything to eat.

The same girl when asked what she would wish for replied:

To be smarter I think. And have a better life because we haven't got like really much ... Some people have better chances of getting something than us, because we haven't got like enough money or anything.

What was it like for the children when there was not enough money? The most common response was in terms of feeling 'sad', a few children using the words 'upset', 'angry' or 'jealous'.

Life chances

The children were asked about their views of the wider society in which they lived including the question: *Do you think every one in Australia has an equal chance to have a good life?* The initial responses of the 11 and 12-year-old children who had grown up on low incomes were generally positive, but many then qualified their answers. Those who emphasised the equality of life chances referred to such things as Australia being a rich country and a free country, that it is up to people themselves if they want to learn; and one commented, 'Everyone has a right to be special'. However a major theme for those who did not feel there was an equal chance was that some people couldn't afford what they needed. Kylie's response illustrates this theme:

Like those people whose parents can't afford food and clothing and stuff.

Other responses leaned more to personal failings such laziness, or as Lisa responded:

Some people they have a chance but they let it go.

Unprompted, a number of children from Vietnamese and Chinese families raised their experience of racism. In response to the question on equal chances one responded:

Not exactly, because some people might think that Asian people, they're not really good because they weren't born here or they have different skin colour—like racists.

Implications

The longitudinal nature of the Life Chances Study highlights both continuity and change in the children's lives, in particular

- the high proportion of children who had moved geographically
- the high proportion of children who experienced family separation (one-third had lived in a sole parent family at some stage)
- the high proportion of children (three-quarters) whose families remained on low incomes.

The findings have implications for social policy at the federal level in terms of provision of adequate incomes for families with children, particularly adequate income support and adequate wages, as well as social investment in housing, health and education.

The issues raised for early childhood services include:

- how to respond to geographic mobility of families with young children
- how to respond to the persistence of low income by ensuring critical early services are fully accessible and affordable to the children who need them most
- how to take children's views into account.

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