Child Information Poverty: deprivation, growth, and why libraries are more important than ever

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Keynote

Overview

1. Information Poverty: the lost deprivation.

2. Child Information Poverty: underpinning cycles of inequality.

3. Key Points: the need for concerted action.

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Thank You

Image: Google Maps

1. Information Poverty: definition

- Whilst definitions vary somewhat by author, there is general consensus that key concerns relate to *issues of information access and information use*; with key contributory factors generally reported as technology and literacy issues, and economic, social and cultural structures and norms.

- Multifaceted and context sensitive[1-2].

- Much influenced by structural inequalities but can also be a self-imposed state as part of coping mechanisms and/or attitudes[3-4].

The research on selective exposure reveals a… tendency for people to seek information that is consistent with their beliefs, attitudes, and decisions, and to steer away from inconsistent information.[5(p7)]

Social media facilitates the creation and maintenance of information silos, filtered bubbles, or echo chambers.[6(p2132)]

Information Poverty: key concepts

- Chatman's (1996)[13] small world theory of information poverty describes an impoverished information state as one in which people:

  1. perceive themselves to be devoid of sources of help;
  2. are influenced by outsiders who withhold privileged access to information;
  3. adopt self-protective information seeking behaviours in response to social norms;
  4. are mistrustful of the interest or ability of others to provide useful information;
  5. withhold their true problems and information needs in the belief that negative consequences outweigh benefits;
  6. selectively receive new information in response to their everyday needs.

secrecy

risk aversion

deception

short-termism

Information Poverty: impact

- Information poverty recognised as having a negative impact upon the health and wellbeing, and socioeconomic prosperity, of individuals and communities[7-9].

- Related concerns include issues of social exclusion and social justice[10-11], and fundamental human rights including freedom of communication and expression[12].

- However, limited attention outside academia.

A child deprived of access to information… is denied a fair chance to develop and better her or his situation.[8(p.60)]

2. Child Information Poverty: cycles of poverty

- Children living in socioeconomic poverty most at risk of information impoverishment.
- The UK has one of the worst (and highest rising) rates of child poverty of middle-income EU and OECD countries[14].
- 20% of Scottish children (200,000) live in absolute poverty[15].
  - No significant change in two decades.
  - Interim targets to reduce (to less than 10% by 2030) missed.
- UNICEF reports that information poverty is "expanding and extending gaps in opportunity for children… and fuelling intergenerational cycles of poverty"[8(p.60)].
- Educational attainment gaps in Scotland widening[16].
  - Progress across the UK reported as "stalled"[17(p.1)].
  - Calls to recognise that schools cannot address in isolation[18(p.1.)].

…the quality of life for children in the UK is declining[19(p.1)].

Child Information Poverty: work to date

- Whilst UNICEF have drawn important attention to child information poverty, they also highlight work as "scarce"[8(p.60)].
- To date investigation limited to one recent study…

Exploring the early manifestation of information poverty in young children

- The study[20] involved 156 children (ages 6-8) from five Scottish primary schools (SIMD Quintile 1), and 34 parents and teachers.

- A key aim was to explore how early information poverty can manifest.

- Findings evidence unmet information needs and self-protective information seeking behaviours in children aged 6-8.

- Whilst much can be explained in natural developmental terms, much can also be explained in information poverty terms with five of Chatman's (1996)[13] six propositional statements evident:

  1. Children with limited access to info resources and support.
  2. Children's info behaviours influenced/controlled by gatekeepers.
  3. Children withholding info needs in response to social norms.
  4. Children mistrusting the ability of others to provide useful info.
  5. Children believing that negative consequences outweigh benefits.

  Note. proposition six (selectively receiving new info) was not evident. Children being naturally inquisitive.

Exploring the early manifestation of information poverty in young children

- Findings also evidenced that whilst most adults believed that children are, in general, successful information seekers; approximately half of the children considered themselves to be unsuccessful information seekers.

- Findings also evidenced problematic mediation practices of parents/carers including restrictive practices harmful to child development.

- Findings have implications not just for formal education but also for broader development…

[Adults] Ignore you. (Child)

[Adults] don't have the knowledge enough to talk to you. (Child)

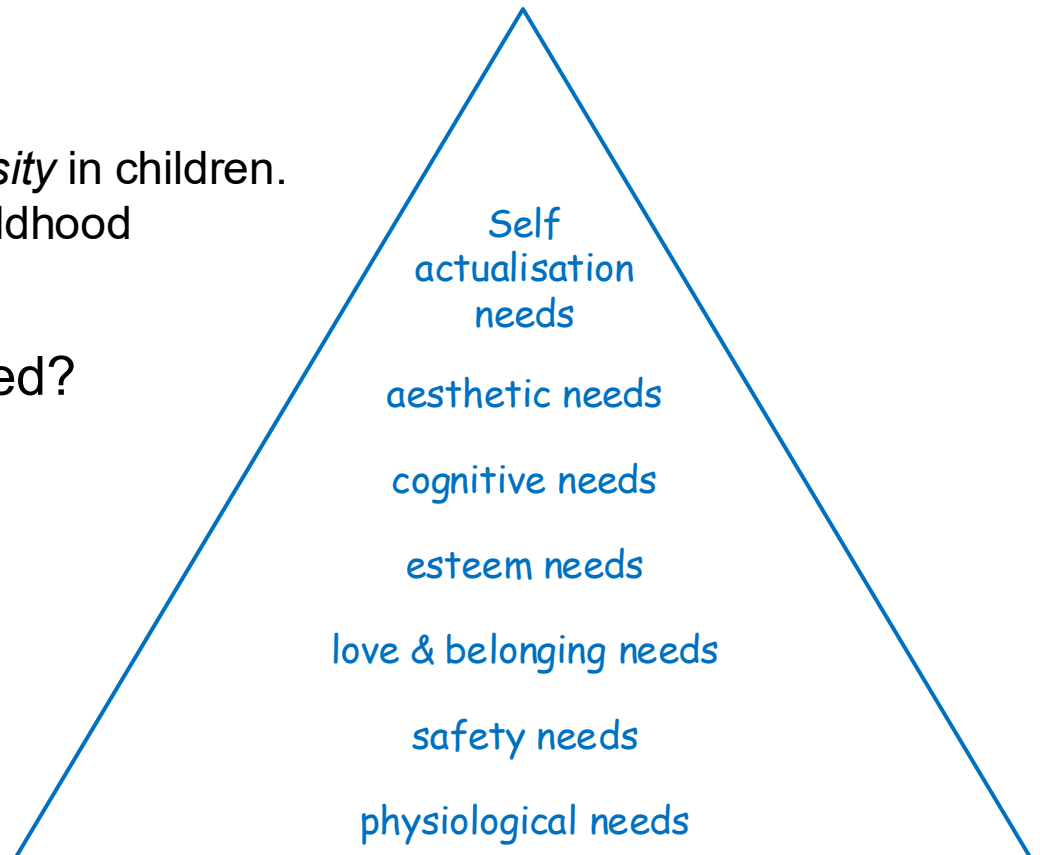[Teachers are] super busy and just say "go and sit down in your seat". (Child)

Many of my pupils don't really have access to the Internet. (Teacher)

[Many children]… have no books whatsoever, not even a newspaper at home, not even a comic. (Teacher)

Being able to invest in reading for pleasure… it's not always possible to do that, quite often… it's the staff that have provided the books. It's not the school funds... (Teacher)

Child information poverty: a broader perspective

- In impoverished circumstances much discussion is understandably focused on welfare and attainment, but what about broader growth needs?

- For example:

  - The nurturing of *curiosity* in children.
  - The broadening of childhood *experience.*

- Should we be concerned?

Self actualisation needs

aesthetic needs

cognitive needs

esteem needs

love & belonging needs

safety needs

physiological needs

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs[21]

The nurturing of curiosity in children

- A fundamental human cognition and motivation central to lifelong learning and life fulfilment[22-24].

- Characterised by intrinsically motivated, self-directed, and potentially unbound information seeking.

- A "critical driver of success in most aspects of life… [that] once sparked… creates deep learning moments"[22(p.2)].

A wandering mind, often the first signal of impending boredom, is also a creative mind.[24(p.97)]

stress tolerance

thrill seeking

social curiosity

joyous exploration

deprivation sensitivity

5 Dimensions of Curiosity (Kashdan et al., 2020)[23]

The nurturing of curiosity in children

- Whilst curiosity and learning are recognised as symbiotic, curiosity is not easily nurtured in educational systems focused on specific learning attainments and assessments[25-27].

- Influencing factors include:
    - Teaching style/practices
    - Class size
    - Available resources
    - Curriculum
    - Time

With schools promoting a performance-based focus, being curious actually poses a risk to meeting performance outcomes.[26(p.5)]

Unstructured, unmediated time is especially important for the development of creativity in children.[24(p.97)]
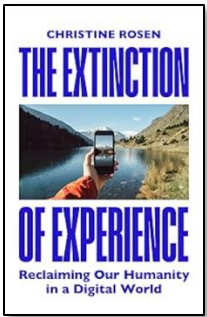
The broadening of childhood experience

- Direct experience fundamental to learning and growth.
- Rosen (2024)[24] argues that in an increasingly digital world true human experiences are disappearing.
  - That the growth in technology mediated interactions and experiences means that much of what passes for authentic experience today is vicarious and virtual (and managed or massaged by technology).
  - That our understanding of experience has become disordered.
  - That our understanding of place has become confused.

We are in the process of trading the spatial and social cues that once defined a particular place… for a more seamless and less physically bounded experience of space engineered by technology companies. The promise is a more efficient delivery of "engineered serendipity," but the reality may end up being a more predictable homogeneity.[23(p.186)]

The broadening of childhood experience

- Many children now growing up in a world where technology mediated life is normal life.
    - Boredom replaced with technological distractions and stimulation[24].
    - In-person interactions with friends declining[28].
    - Reading (frequency and enjoyment) declining[29].
    - Creative activities (writing, drawing, painting, crafts) declining[24].
    - Engagement with nature declining[30].
    - Speech, language, and communication difficulties rising[31].

…virtual experiences and technological tools are replacing unmediated, unstructured opportunities for play and learning among the population most in need of it for their healthy development: children.[24(p.71)]

3. Key Points

- Information poverty is a complex phenomenon concerned with issues of information access and information use.
  - Recognises that information impoverishment is not simply addressed by technology (i.e., that there are environmental and behavioural factors to consider).
- Information poverty a major barrier to learning and growth that contributes to intergenerational cycles of inequality.
- 200,000+ children in Scotland at high risk of information poverty.
- However, whilst eradicating child poverty is a national priority, there is no explicit strategy to address information poverty.
  - Child information poverty not even a topic of national debate or concerted research attention.

Information poverty persists and casts a corrosive pall on people's access to opportunities.[9(p.366)]

Key Points

- There is an urgent need, as part of national child poverty strategies, to develop a national agenda and action plan to address child information poverty.
  - Important that such plans are: holistic in perspective (spanning welfare, educational, and personal learning and growth needs); collaborative (multi-agency); and go far beyond issues of access to technology.
- Libraries central to such a plan:
  - In other language libraries have been addressing information poverty in one form or another since inception.
  - Libraries uniquely placed in offering *embedded and enriched information environments* that support both formal and informal learning and growth needs.
  - Not melodramatic to ask: how could we hope to address child information poverty without libraries?
- The big question:

How do we drive this forward?

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