

Pre-school practitioners, child poverty and social justice

Abstract

Purpose – Several ideas exist about social justice and how inequalities can be tackled to help families and children in poverty. The Coalition government released the UK's first Child Poverty Strategy in 2011. Pervaded by neoliberal ideology, the strategy mentions “empowering” pre-school services and practitioners within the childcare market “to do more for the most disadvantaged” (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department for Education (DfE) 2011, p. 35). The purpose of this paper is to bring to light how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners across England have engaged with policy discussions and adopted expectations concerning their place in addressing child poverty.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a phenomenological qualitative research design the paper draws upon 30 interviews with pre-school practitioners in three geographic areas of England. All interviewees worked with families and children in poverty and were senior ECEC practitioners within their pre-school settings.

Findings – Many interviewees shared the Coalition's construction of child poverty as a problem of “troubled” parenting. These views pervaded their interaction with parents and intersected with the regulatory influence of “policy technologies” to influence their practice within a context of austerity cuts. This limited practitioners' poverty sensitivity and their promotion of social justice. Therefore this paper concludes by critiquing the contribution which ECEC practitioners can make to addressing child poverty.

Practical implications – The findings suggest there may be a need for poverty proofing toolkits in the pre-school sector.

Originality/value – This paper provides a rare insight into how pre-school practitioners have engaged with, adopted and adapted assumptions about their role within policy discussion over child poverty and the promotion of social justice.

Keywords Social policy, Poverty, Social inclusion, Social welfare, Social exclusion, Children (age groups)

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social justice is about the allocation of resources such as economic, cultural and social capital. Several ideas exist about social justice, welfare policies and how inequalities can be tackled to help families and children in poverty gain access to such resources. Fundamental to shaping the UK Coalition government's approach to social justice and welfare generally has been a ‘state discourse’ pervaded by neo-liberal ideological assumptions. These ideas advocate the avoidance of fiscal deficit, redirection of public spending from income subsidies to service provision, privatisation of state enterprises and deregulation (or reregulation) to promote market entry. There is a desire to re-structure and subordinate welfare provision to market forces as the neo-liberal privileging of market solutions to social problems is

accompanied by a desire to reform the welfare state itself. As will now be highlighted, these ideas have framed the Coalition's response to help children and their families in poverty. Their recent child poverty strategy therefore implies a reduction in the intervention of the state to address issues of inequality and poverty. Rather the state's role is to be a regulator remotely overseeing attempts to support families and to improve access to welfare services.

The UK Child Poverty Strategy

By the start of the new millennium there was – 'at least notionally' - political consensus that child poverty in the UK was a significant social problem about which something could and should be done (Levitas, 2012: 452). It was estimated in 2008, materially 'child poverty costs the country at least £25 billion a year'. A 'moral case for eradicating child poverty rests on the immense human cost of allowing children to grow up suffering physical and psychological deprivations and unable to participate fully in society' (Hirsch, 2008). In 1999 the previous New Labour government pledged to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and neo-liberal alongside more traditional redistributive social democratic ideas were both influential to its 'third way' approach. The subsequent Child Poverty Act 2010 included targets to reduce child poverty by 2020. Then from May 2010 the new Conservative-led Coalition government initially 'extended the same way of thinking' by reasserting its commitment to these targets (Levitas, 2012: 457). It launched reviews on Child Poverty (Field, 2010) and Early Intervention (Allen, 2011) by former Labour Ministers. The UK's first national child poverty strategy followed in 2011 – *A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families Lives* (DWP & DfE, 2011). Given its neo-liberal basis the strategy places emphasis on labour market entry and 'making work pay'; 'supporting families to achieve financial independence'; supporting family life and children's life chances' and 'taking a placed-based approach to ensure services are tailored to local needs'. The strategy acknowledges that 55% of children living in poverty come from a family in which somebody is in paid employment (this is higher now – 66% - and varies regionally).

The child poverty strategy is rooted in, and advances, a neoliberal discourse of social justice that is pervaded by an emphasis on labour market participation, individualism and self-responsibility. It presents a discursive formation representing those with low household income as 120,000 'troubled families' (DWP & DfE, 2011: 40) in a pejorative way suggesting, 'worklessness', 'welfare dependency' (DWP & DfE, 2011: 2) and 'intergenerational cycles of poverty' (DWP & DfE, 2011: 24) are the 'root cause' of inequality and disadvantage (DWP & DfE, 2011: 8). The strategy's conflation of 'troubled families' and the 'problem behaviours' of individual parents constructs the problem of child poverty in a way which then allows for it to be made amenable to a particular diagnosis and treatment via a localised approach. It implies poor families, and in particular parents, are culpable for their own poverty. The family and individual parents are therefore identified as the site for interventions to address poverty and central government has a facilitative role in ensuring poor children and their parents get help via social investment in particular local services. This strategy and wider welfare policy therefore identifies parents and parenting as both a cause of, and a solution to, child poverty:

Recent years have seen Governments prioritize family as a mechanism for tackling social ills. More particularly, in the UK, bad parenting has been

identified as a prominent causal factor in poverty and social disorder, with contemporary policy solutions focusing on regulating and controlling childrearing practices (Gillies, 2008: 1079).

With the ascendancy of neoliberalism as 'the grand narrative of our time' (Moss, 2014: 60), an associated 'new politics of parenting' has identified parents, specifically mothers, as accountable for their children's success or failure with regards to social (im)mobility. Childcare practices of parenting have been constructed as an essential element of positive social mobility and as a promoter of social equity and justice. This has been an increasingly prominent feature of UK government policy since the 1980s (Montgomery, 2013: 22). The child poverty strategy reflects such an approach. But a strong critique has raised serious concerns about both the reliability and validity of the claim in the strategy that there are 120,000 'troubled families' in England and about its potential efficacy given the focus on the subjectivities of the poor themselves (Levitas, 2012). First, it is claimed the 120,000 figure is potentially misleading and might be mistakenly perceived to be the extent of child poverty in England. But the figure is from 2004 and the set of criteria used to estimate it did not include families in which someone worked. As indicated, over 50% of children in poverty reside within a household in which someone works. So the strategy potentially under-estimates levels of poverty. Second, critics of the strategy claim it is 'essentially minimalist' because it does not address inequality and 'the focus remains on the poor, rather than on society as a whole' (Levitas, 2012: 456). Also, the strategy is being pursued in the context of austerity measures and wider neo-liberal 'reforms' to welfare and taxation arrangements within the UK which several organisations observe will increase child poverty and mean there is little chance of the targets set for reduction by 2020 being met. Indeed, it is estimated by 2020 1 in 4 UK children will be in poverty (IFS, 2013).

Child Poverty and early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Across developed countries the global influence of neoliberalism and the associated 'new politics of parenting' mentioned above means ECEC (in England this is provided for 0-5 year old children) and parenting interventions are now routinely imposed as solutions to longstanding social problems, ensuring mothers in particular are implicated and targeted for regulation (OECD, 2012; Faircloth et al, 2013). So within the UK child poverty strategy, alongside several other measures and services, ECEC settings and practitioners are called 'key' to ensuring 'strong parenting', 'positive home learning environments' and 'support for children's early years'. The Coalition government accepts ECEC can free up parents (particularly mothers) to find work. The strategy also indicates the importance of good quality ECEC provision as a means of tackling child poverty through 'narrowing the gaps between poorer and richer children in the early years' (DWP & DfE, 2011: 43). The strategy confirms the continued provision of the previous Labour government's free education places for 3 and 4 year old children and the extension of free education places to 'the most disadvantaged' 2 year olds in England. The strategy also advocates 'targeted help to the most disadvantaged families' via early intervention (DWP & DfE, 2011: 63). A large body of evidence demonstrates how poverty negatively permeates every facet of children's lives materially, educationally, socially and psychologically (Coghlan et al, 2009; Hansen et al, 2010; Harvard University, 2012; Marmot Review, 2011; Ridge, 2011: 73). Evidence also suggests good quality provision can help improve the learning and cognitive development of pre-school

children in poverty – although some suggest any benefits are short lived (Dickerson & Popli, 2012). As such, Coalition politicians have been keen to talk up the contribution pre-school can make to addressing child poverty and promoting social justice. Former Coalition Minister Sarah Teather (2012) indicated ECEC ‘is essential to unlock social mobility from the very earliest ages... that is why this Coalition Government is committed to strengthening and supporting provision in the early years’. More recently Elizabeth Truss (2013) claimed ‘early learning for two-year-olds helps to give children the best start in life whatever their background’.

The evidence in regard to ‘what works’ in narrowing the gap between children in poverty and others ‘is clear that implementing well focused and sustained system-level strategies for remediating child and family poverty will significantly improve the range of... outcomes for young children’. Examples of strategies that are said to work include working with parents ‘to boost a mother’s education and pass on positive learning behaviours to their young children’ and high quality early childhood learning provision which will help children from all backgrounds to settle in and make good progress’ (Coghlan et al, 2009: 4). But the contribution ECEC can make to promoting social mobility and social justice is complicated by the context of the English ECEC market in which parents pay what they can for provision. The importance of context will be returned to later in the article. But its importance becomes clear by considering how across England 80% of ECEC provision is provided by for-profit entrepreneurs (Lloyd, 2013: 4). As such traditionally the English ECEC market has not been free at the point of use and within it parents have continued to purchase what they can afford beyond some limited subsidized provision (Lloyd, 2013: 4). This meant for many years ECEC was out of reach for many disadvantaged families. The prohibitive high cost of pre-school services in the English ECEC market effectively excluded many parents with low-incomes. As indicated, the child poverty strategy confirmed parents in poverty will continue to be supported as customers in the ECEC market via free education places, public subsidies including tax credits and vouchers. But this is only for so much provision and after meeting eligibility criteria which has raised issues about the potential for the ECEC market to deliver an equitable service (Lloyd and Penn, 2013). Additionally, good quality provision cannot be assumed particularly in the very areas where it is required. OFSTED has claimed the ‘inverse care law’ exists within the ECEC market with the quality of pre-school provision tending to be better in more affluent areas and therefore vary inversely with the needs of the population served.

Child poverty and ECEC policy is therefore a product of the prevailing economic, political and social contexts within which it is developed and implemented. Within such contexts power can be concentrated across groups and individuals who can dominate the policy process. As indicated, globally, the neoliberal ‘new politics of parenting’ and its discursive formation of child poverty as a ‘problem’ of disadvantaged parents, their ‘troubled behaviours’ and ‘poor parenting practices’ has been constructed, and its influence spread, by powerful groups such as the OCED, World Bank and International Monetary Fund and it has been persuasive to governments and in shaping the approaches of welfare regimes across several advanced nation states including the UK (Pemberton et al, 2012: 20). But power has a dispositional quality and refers to the possibility of an agenda being adopted via social relationships, and as such authoritative ‘top-down’ imposition of values and policies is questionable. Implementation of policy is more complex than a ‘top-down’

process and involves ‘the cannibalised products of multiple influences and agendas’ (Ball, 1994: 16). As such, policy changes and develops and ‘it can be questioned; can be considered wrong and can be influenced by [ECEC practitioners’] own views and actions’ (Baldock et al, 2013: 34). ECEC practitioners are therefore potentially important to the implementation of the current vision and approach to addressing child poverty as a means to ensuring social justice.

Research Methodology

The remainder of this article aims to bring to light how 30 ECEC practitioners across England have engaged with policy discussions and adopted expectations concerning their place in addressing child poverty. To this end, a phenomenological qualitative research approach was used to gather data across three locations in England. There is a central focus upon what this means pre-school practitioners do in regard to addressing child poverty. The research has been conducted within a broad critical realist framework which assumes social structures (such as dominant discursive formations and power structures) and agency of practitioners are ‘distinct strata of reality as the bearers of quite different properties and powers’ (Archer, 2003: 2; 2012). Social contexts enabled and constrained in regard to practitioners’ engagement in addressing child poverty. But practitioners were assumed to be active as their ‘internal conversations’ mediated between their agency and social structures to shape their actions and thinking. The research was undertaken between late 2011 and 2012. With regard to data collection methods, purposeful sampling was used to recruit 30 pre-school practitioners. Initially 10 interviews were completed in the North East of England (Durham/Tees Valley). A British Academy Small Grant was then secured and the project was extended allowing interviews to be completed with practitioners working with children and families in poverty in two more affluent areas in the south of England (10 interviews in Northamptonshire and 10 interviews in Worcestershire/Herefordshire).

It was felt important to undertake interviews in these geographical areas in this way because levels of deprivation and child poverty differ significantly across different areas of England - as demonstrated by the *The English Indices of Deprivation 2010: Local Authority District Summaries* and its supplement *The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index*. Also, OFSTED note a relationship between poorer quality ECEC provision and the poorest parts of the country. One aspect of the project was therefore to explore whether the research findings differ according to the relative affluence or poverty of the geographical area where the practitioners are located. Indeed, the analysis did find geography to be an issue in regard to the construction of child poverty by practitioners. All interviewees worked with children and families in poverty - i.e. in households having an income at or below 60% of the median British household income. All practitioners interviewed were at level 5 (Senior Early Years Practitioner) or level 6+ (Early Years Professional or Qualified Teacher) within the National Qualifications Framework. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken. The analysis identified key themes relevant to practitioners, their understandings of child poverty and their explanations about their practices. All names used below are pseudonyms to protect the identity of those interviewed.

Findings

Perceptions on child poverty, geography and inequality

Across the sample of practitioners interviewed for this research a majority and minority perspective was evident in regard to views on the poor. The majority of practitioners **shared** the logic of the Coalition government's position on child poverty. As indicated, the Coalition have constructed the poor as 'troubled' and a 'problem' and this 'discursive formation' has been pervasive in regard to 'normalising' child poverty. Evidence from the practitioners suggested this discursive formation is popular. As such, the majority of practitioners defined and constructed child poverty as a problem, but one which is inevitable and a 'normal' condition within competitive societies when individual parents and children lack motivation and the 'right' values. Those holding this majority perspective expunged social structural and societal dimensions as an explanation of child poverty. Rather they explained it as rooted in the subjectivities of parents and accordingly it was an inevitable outcome for children who have parents whose behaviours and values are labelled as 'wrong' and 'deficient'. This chimed with current notions of a so-called 'underclass' which Coalition (and other) politicians have revived through an appeal to 'hard-working families' ('strivers') and the contrasting of these with 'troubled families' ('skivers'). This position openly criticised poor parents and what was perceived as their improvidence and/or ineptness in causing their own poverty:

NE2 – Anne – Pre-School Manager - I think it's the choice of the parents of why they're living in poverty. I don't think it's anybody else's fault apart from them[...] I think it's about how they use the money that they get and the poverty stems from if they're not using the money in the appropriate way then that's how they become poor – that's how the children don't get fed properly.

The notion of a cycle of deprivation and a culture of poverty were strongly evident within interviews. Several interviewees claimed families in poverty have embedded patterns of behaviour and an acceptance of being workless and poor which meant parents are unlikely to do anything which might help lift themselves and their children out of poverty. Several interviewees suggested this ensured the poor remain in poverty and was transferred across generations - although, researchers have failed to find three generations of worklessness in families and even two generations is extremely rare (Shildrick et al, 2012). Some responses though included such myths perpetuated by the Coalition:

W8 – Kara - a lot of the kids we have are on the third generation of unemployment now. They've got Mums and Dads that have never worked and Nans and Grandads that have never worked so the ethos of getting children into school is an uphill struggle.

Explaining why the majority of practitioners held one view which was different to the minority was not a priority in the research. But from interviews it certainly appeared geography was important – so the places and spaces in which practitioners lived and worked seemed to underpin the way practitioners in the sample defined and constructed child poverty. The Campaign to End Child Poverty demonstrates how across Northamptonshire and Worcestershire (and Herefordshire) there are stark contrasts in regard to child poverty (Campaign to End Child Poverty, 2013). Across the North East within the areas where interviews were undertaken such starkness was not such an obvious feature. In Northamptonshire and Worcestershire some interviewees mentioned these stark inequalities and it was these practitioners who

resisted attaching direct blame to parents in poverty for their condition. These practitioners appeared to be more sympathetic to parents portrayed as struggling to get by. Given the starkness of inequality in their localities they connected this with negative impacts on children. This minority of interviewees suggested parents were victims of the 'cycle of deprivation' and 'poverty trap' as they lacked opportunities and resources which could be accessed to help them escape poverty. They also indicated families often faced difficult conditions of choice in which strategies – e.g. to 'stick with the social' (N2 – 'Abigail') – involved making unpalatable decisions to 'cope' with the daily struggle attached to living in poverty:

N9 – Karena - the Government are making it a bit harder. Because it's the Conservatives, they favour the working aspect of it and getting people working but they aren't putting in the infrastructure to get them into jobs. They're making it not nice to be on benefits but they're not giving opportunities to get out. They're doing voluntary but voluntary isn't going to give them money. .

These interviewees placed more importance on job loss, unemployment and consequently low income but across all three locations there was little recognition of how the majority of children living in poverty are actually living in a household where at least one adult is in paid employment. So the problem of poorly paid and insecure work was rarely mentioned across any of the locations in regard to why people become and remain poor.

Morality and engagement with parents in poverty

Building relationships with parents is considered essential to the involvement of pre-school practitioners to tackling child poverty via supporting strong parenting, positive home learning environments and children's early years. But it was considered a significant and challenging task by many practitioners across all three locations. Explaining why entails consideration of the morality pervading the perspectives of child poverty just discussed. As indicated, many of the interviewees **shared** the Coalition's discursive formation of child poverty and therefore played down explanations of it as part of any wider economic trend. But in constructing child poverty they did highlight a significant moral realm attached to class relations and the struggle for status and social worth in the working class communities in which they worked and in most cases lived. Roberts (2011: 107) notes how economic changes over recent decades mean within such communities disadvantaged groups are 'not yet' an underclass but have nevertheless 'been socially and culturally separated from the more or less continuously employed working class', such as members of the sample. In particular, the Coalition's construction and attribution of cause, blame and responsibility for child poverty chimed with normative expectations mentioned by many sample members who were working class, low paid but had worked for a long time in the pre-school sector. These normative expectations were about 'good' behaviours and practices – including 'good' parenting practices - and an underpinning hierarchical model of respectability was evident in many practitioners' comments. As such, respectability became a signifier in regard to how many practitioners classified parents.

Such morality and normative understandings were important because they seemed to pervade the efforts made by practitioners across all three localities to form relationships and engage with low income families and their likely success in this

respect. Those expressing more explicitly condemnatory morality indicated a lack of success in this respect. Several interviewees adopting such a moral stance evoked a division between the 'good or respectable poor' who were willing to come on board and accept their alleged deficiencies and the 'bad or rough' poor who were not. Indeed, they would blame such 'bad' parents for their lack of success in building a relationship with 'them'. Consequently when talking about parents in poverty these interviewees made it clear they should be expected to comply with whatever was offered as a way of improving or correcting some aspect of their behaviour and/or dispositions and if they did not do so it was their fault and there was little that could be done:

NE4 – Laura – Private Nursery Manager - When they [parents] are getting the money in, they're choosing to spend it on other things that aren't helping their children—so the Sky TV. I'm a mam and I wouldn't dream of letting my children go hungry, and not going to school with shoes on, for something that I wanted... Unfortunately, the vulnerable people won't come. I think a lot of them think that "If I get on your radar you're then going to target me to go to these groups... I don't want you to even know that I'm here because if I do something wrong you're going to come in and take my child away". Unfortunately that's the mentality that they've got.

In contrast, a more obviously humanistic moral position was adopted by a minority of practitioners mostly from Northamptonshire and Worcestershire. These were the practitioners indicating they had some success in engaging and building relationships with parents in poverty. They were those who constructed poverty as something which was largely beyond the control of parents themselves. They consequentially adopted a pro-active approach which appeared to consider trust and good communication as central and the existing knowledge of poorer parents as important in building relationships. Success was often regarded as being about taking 'small steps' and making an effort to foster such relationships over longer periods of time:

N2 – Abigail - Knowing that we don't judge them. Knowing that if their child's hungry, we'd feed them breakfast. It's not ...it's...getting through to parents that we're nothing special. We're not all rich. We haven't got loads of money in the bank. We know where they are. We know where they've been because most of us have probably been there at one point or another. And it's just to support them and let them know that we are here. We're not going to judge you. We're not going to be on the phone to social services saying, "Oh this child's come in filthy dirty every day." We're going to communicate with them first, and gain their trust before anything else really.

'ECEC', 'performativity' and poverty sensitivity

As indicated earlier, provision of early education and care (ECEC) is a key policy lever directed at tackling child poverty through impacting upon young children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills which are important to later school performance (DWP & DfE, 2011: 42). In delivering ECEC to meet this aim interviewees' accounts revealed how 'policy technology' was important – that is the 'deployment of forms of organisation and procedures, and disciplines or bodies of knowledge' which are used to organise 'human forces and capabilities into functioning systems' (Ball, 2008: 41).

Particularly, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) significantly impacts on pre-school services structurally, procedurally and culturally – for example, in regard to the way interviewees worked and their interactions with children in poverty. Following a review of the EYFS in 2012, Coalition politicians have emphasised its importance in ensuring pre-school children's 'readiness for school' via 'revised early learning goals'. The EYFS has four key themes which are meant to underpin its delivery via a play-based approach – 'a unique child' plus 'positive relationships' plus 'enabling environments' are meant to result in good quality 'learning and development'. These are listed in the non-statutory guidance ('Development Matters') which supports practitioners in implementing the statutory requirements of the EYFS. But, in working with 'unique children' to address attainment gaps between those in poverty and others, good quality and effective ECEC within early years settings will be poverty sensitive. That is, where appropriate poverty, inequality and social disadvantage will need to be considered in terms of the decisions made and approaches taken by practitioners when providing 'ECEC' directly to each 'unique child'.

However, data from the interviewees suggested this cannot be assumed. Indeed, across all three areas some interviewees questioned the extent to which what they delivered was poverty sensitive. Also, in providing ECEC for children in poverty interviewees appeared to find it very difficult to move beyond the focus of EYFS activity – particularly, the assessment aspects of the EYFS and the meeting of learning goals and targets. As such, there was evidence of an 'assessment mindedness' amongst those practitioners interviewed. They were aware of their ECEC work being under surveillance and it was even suggested thinking about poverty could potentially divert attention from performance in meeting expectations from outside agencies such as OFSTED. The importance of 'outcomes' (targets) and performance has also been accentuated further with the recent removal of *Development Matters* from OFSTED's inspection guidance and its replacement with a document entitled *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013).

But, what practitioners perceived as the most important aspects for delivering service quality when performing to meet targets and the requirements of OFSTED were not necessarily the most important aspects for children in poverty. Indeed, in this context, evidence suggested children in poverty could become passive objects and their immediate needs beyond those addressed through meeting targets were potentially at risk of being played down or missed. This applies especially to those which might not show up so obviously, such as psychic injuries attached to living in difficult circumstances associated with poverty. For instance, anxiety, withdrawal and isolation:

NE8 – Selena – Head of Nursery School - We try to treat all our children the same so they all get the same level of care and well-being. I mean that little boy that came there [he had popped into the interview]; he just needs a cuddle now and again for a bit of reassurance. He's not from a poor family or anything like that, he just needs a cuddle. I do have a little girl from a needy family probably wouldn't come to me for a cuddle [...] I think they're a lot tougher these kids.

N8 - Dolores – Childcare worker and Room Co-ordinator - I don't think I've properly thought about poverty until we were obviously discussing it now [her setting was part of the 2 year old trial]. I don't think I've properly addressed it...To actually sit down and think about poverty as child poverty, I don't think I probably have thought about it.

W6 – Edna – Childminder - 'I think there's so many other things we have to keep on top of. This year, it's the EYFS change... I think the issue [of poverty] needs to be highlighted more and then perhaps something might be done but if it's left as it currently is, I don't think anything will change'.

As Kiki's remarks below reveal, the progress of children from poverty backgrounds was monitored but use of the data was primarily about checking progress against developmental targets. She indicated an issue around emotional well-being and noted how it was having an impact on learning as the children she was engaged with aged and prepared to enter school at the end of the foundation stage. But when asked what she and others in the setting did differently to address this issue reference was made only to 'stimulating learning' which is provided to all pupils. No indication of using the monitoring data in a particularised way to inform any tailored approach to address the problem of emotional well-being for individual and groups of poor children was identified:

N10 – Kiki – Senior Practitioner - They're coming in and they're meeting targets similar to their peers. But if you...by the time they're getting into nursery, and the four year old where we're tracking them ready for their transition, you are already seeing a difference in their ability levels... In terms of their wellbeing there is a big difference because there's a lot of mental health issues out in our community... It impacts on their ability to learn... [When asked what the setting did differently to lessen the impact Kiki replied]. The learning that we offer is stimulating. It's stuff that they don't get at home.

A small number of interviewees in all three locations did mention providing food to children in poverty alongside other children. Within some Children's Centres food parcels were distributed to families in poverty. Poverty sensitivity was also evident through help offered to low income parents when managing costs associated with childcare costs. There was some evidence of payment plans and one sample member even mentioned 'writing off' parental debts related to costs and also occasionally providing free sessions. This was Abigail in Northamptonshire and as noted she adopted a more humanist moral stance in regard to poorer parents. Within the market system, some parents in poverty are supported as customers via public subsidies including tax credits and vouchers but only for so much provision and after meeting eligibility criteria. In a wider context of austerity, with restricted household incomes, debt has become a real issue. The small number of sample members mentioning them indicated payment plans were accompanied by difficult decisions inherent in the market relations between ECEC providers and parents as consumers. This set limits on poverty proofing in a market context:

N9 – Jordan - what's really hard is when we have to talk about debts... Quite a lot of the time, we can get parents on payment plans and if it's not too big a debt, they do pay them off. But if they get so large, they can't. So we've got to

be very quick at determining whether it's time to just say, "Look you have to stop bringing your child".

Budgets, quality and poverty proofing

The core purpose of Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCCs) in England is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on those in greatest need. They were originally introduced by the previous New Labour government and are identified in the Coalition's child poverty strategy as central to the role which ECEC has in helping to tackle child poverty. The Coalition claimed in the strategy it would preserve funding for SSCCs via the Early Intervention Grant passed on to local authorities. But as part of the austerity measure introduced since the Coalition was formed in May 2010, central government funding to local authorities has been dramatically reduced and there are concerns that early intervention money is being redirected to protect other services across authorities. In this context survey research by Daycare Trust has noted children's centres closures and reduced services, staffing and opening times etc. (Daycare Trust, 2013: ONLINE). This creeping influence of spending cuts on budgets and the quality of the work of SSCCs with poor families was evident in interviewees' accounts:

NE3 – Louise – SSCC Specialist Support Worker - I think two people have left but I think it's because we're not sure on job security, we're on a three month rolling contract now so a lot of people are ducking out. And obviously when you've got to cover staff and you can't put out for a job that's only going to last till the end of March and then possibly have another three months extension on that

NE7 – Sharon – Nursery Manager - the family support workers, a lot of them have lost their jobs so they're not going out to meet the families and we used to have play workers because we have sessions on through the centre and the sessions have had to be cut because there isn't anybody to run them

W2 – Kasey – SSCC Manager - we've got constraints around budgets. So you've got that whole balance of budgets but also meeting the needs of families as well. And there are conflictions at times because that's what life's about. We've been through like other authorities, big restructures. That has a huge impact on staff.

Reductions in spending available to local authorities also impact on the services they have provided to help support early years providers in their areas and improve quality. Indeed, in this context some local authorities have moved from providers to commissioners of early years support services. The Coalition recently consulted on 'reforms' which will increase OFSTED's role while changing (and many argue reducing) local authorities' quality role. Poverty proofing the impact of central and local government spending decisions and changes to roles to ensure they do not impact negatively on poor children and families will need consideration. But interviewees pointed to how the loss of local authority early years staff impacts in settings and their work with poorer children:

W3 – Sacha – Nursery Manager - I must admit, all of the cuts have come in with a new government have impacted on us big time. I've had to reduce my

staff ratio. Even though I know we can't physically manage with less staff, I've had to do it because we financially can't manage anymore. So that has had an impact. The loss of our area SENCOs with the changes at Early Years has had a huge impact on what we can offer as a setting. Whereas this time last year we would have had the area SENCOs in every 8 weeks to work with one family or another, we haven't seen her for a year. And that's huge because I'm having to now find different ways to get that support in for the families and that's taking a long time.

As part of the 'Fairness Premium' mentioned in the Child Poverty Strategy, by the end of 2015 the Coalition is extending free education entitlement for 40 per cent of 2 year olds from 'the most deprived backgrounds' (260,000 children). However, there was some disquiet expressed by interviewees about not receiving enough funding to deliver this free offer for 2 year olds. A recent survey by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) pointed to 'a chronic underfunding' of free education places for poorer 2, 3 and 4 year olds (NDNA, 2013). Indeed, interviewees illustrated some of the strain currently being placed on childcare services and practitioners within a context where austerity measures mean there is a conflict between cost and quality of provision:

NE7 – Sharon – Private Nursery Manager - We just slot them [2 year olds] into what spaces we've got. We're not getting paid any extra to care for them, so they're just getting the same ratios as the other children—which I have a problem with as well because those children that are coming to us are vulnerable. They have needs... I would like to give them one-to-one, but I can't afford to give them one-to-one. So, therefore, I'm then thinking "am I doing the best for these children" when it's a one-to-four ratio. I feel very conflicted with myself. Yes I'm quite happy for these children to come in and I'll help them but I can't give them one-to-one, which sometimes is what they need.

Within Northamptonshire the recent 2 year old trial was organised around the creation of additional 'ECEC' places within pre-school settings. The local authority established a "Guaranteed Places Scheme" which meant providers of places would be guaranteed funding for at least a year once they had agreed to deliver a certain number of places (filled or unfilled). Northampton's *Children and Families – Early Help and Commissioning Strategy 2013-16* indicates how 'the government's approach to child poverty is very closely aligned with the approach of this strategy, which seeks to support children and families to improve their overall well-being and ultimately to thrive independently without the need for support from public services'. The 'Guaranteed Places Scheme' was meant to ensure time and reassurance to sustain growth within the local childcare market. But some practitioners were concerned the primary focus on the market meant the needs and interests of poor children and families became secondary:

N6 – Diedrie - it's sold as a business opportunity. Fill your nursery with the children. It's guaranteed money. What they don't tell you is – and we know because we did it as a pilot – what they don't tell you is, all the external factors that are surrounding these children... Yes it is guaranteed money. But don't look at the money. Don't look at the place. Look at the child. And see whether you can actually cater for that child. We're quite lucky in being able to support a

lot of families here. I know we've got the Children's Centre. We can signpost things there. We've got good relationships with lots of external agencies... Maybe some nurseries haven't got that support. And then what happens to the children? What if things get missed? That's my worry.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism and an associated 'new politics of parenting' discursively positions parents as a reason for, and remedy to, child poverty. As indicated, globally this has influenced the diffusion of an approach to child poverty which sees ECEC services move from optional extra to key policy lever. Consequently, in actively pursuing the neoliberal privileging of market solutions to social problems in the promotion of social justice, several nation states including the UK have identified ECEC as a key policy lever to remediating child poverty. The take up of this globally significant policy has been scrutinized locally via the perspectives of the 30 ECEC practitioners in three geographical areas of England. While this study is qualitative and statistical generalisation is not possible, 'moderatum generalization' is possible. This means the wider significance of the findings can be explored but in a way which is both moderate – i.e. not making sweeping claims which are said to hold good over time – and moderately held – i.e. they are aesthetic views, hypothetically held and open to change (Payne and Williams, 2005). The findings raise concerns about the contribution ECEC practitioners can make in England to address child poverty. Research identifies how 'what works' in this regard will include strong relations with parents (particularly mothers) and quality ECEC provision which is poverty sensitive (Coghlan et al, 2009).

But, the practitioners interviewed across all three locations shared the Coalition government's position in regard to how they defined and constructed child poverty and this appeared to restrict their relations with parents in poverty. For the majority of interviewees, parents were to blame for their own poverty which was seen as a choice. Their attempts to 'strengthen families' and 'improve home learning' were subsequently influenced by this position. Initial contact was often made with 'the most disadvantaged' parents via some quite sophisticated referral arrangements but one interviewee nicely summarised on-going engagement as 'the hard bit'. The majority of practitioners adopting a condemnatory moral stance in regard to parents in poverty seemed to suggest none engagement was the fault of these parents because they would not accept a need to change what were viewed as their negative lifestyles. These practitioners therefore indicated any efforts to change this were unlikely to work and pointless. In providing ECEC directly to children most interviewees were pre-occupied with the EYFS and adopted an 'assessment mindedness' which meant they downplayed the immediate needs of children in poverty and lacked poverty sensitivity. This, alongside the effects of spending cuts, restricted practitioners' work to address child poverty.

Moreover, it is important to recognize how the 30 practitioners' efforts to make changes in the education–poverty relation as a means of promoting greater social justice were always likely to be bounded. As indicated earlier, there is research evidence for the benefits to both parents and children in poverty that ECEC can bring. However, issues around implementation in the context of the ECEC market complicate the situation – for instance because of the high-costs of ECEC in England and the fact subsidized ECEC provision provided for families in poverty is only part-

time. Also, very importantly, the causes of child poverty within the communities where those interviewed work lie beyond their local borders. The majority of children in poverty live in households where at least one parent works and this suggests promoting participation in the labour market - through current arrangements for subsidized ECEC 'freeing' parents to work - does not in itself always mean economic marginality will be reduced. Rather, if significant changes in regard to poverty levels are to be achieved, there will need to be major socio-economic and political alteration and far greater focus on inequality (Levitas, 2012). For instance, the limited opportunity structures in some areas of deprivation and addressing working poverty linked to low wages and insecure employment and shrinking incomes in a time of higher living costs.

While accepting the necessity for a realistic stance about the contribution ECEC practitioners can make to remediating child poverty, the strength of this study lies in it highlighting some of the worst features of an oppressive neoliberal approach to promoting social justice via poverty remediation through ECEC practitioners. The child poverty strategy mentions 'empowering practitioners to do more for the most disadvantaged' (DWP & DfE 2011, 35). The data from practitioners presented here though reveals this as one of the Coalition's 'fantasies of empowerment' in education 'which conceal the subordination of actors to... neoliberal logics' (Wright, 2012: 279). However, while the policy process may be characterized by uneven power distribution, it is complex and offers spaces into which insights from work such as this can be inserted (Dyson et al, 2010). In an under-researched area this article has provided a rare picture in regard to what ECEC practitioners across England are doing, or not, in their efforts to address child poverty and what factors help and especially hinder their efforts in this respect. The findings therefore potentially allow reflection and questioning of the 'neoliberal logics' which underpin current ECEC policy and working practices both in the UK and beyond globally. By generating this knowledge it is hoped the research can stimulate new forms of choice, awareness and empowerment and offer insight and possibility for incremental change which 'is not necessarily the enemy of transformational change' (Dyson et al, 2010: 214).

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