The Childhood Policy Landscape in England

A case study

Naomi Eisenstadt CB
November 2019

The British Academy
Reframing Childhood

Contents

1.0 Introduction

This case study will describe key developments in policy related to childhood over the last four decades. Government policy both reacts to and shapes social norms. Policy relating to children is particularly sensitive as it impacts on that most personal of issues, family life. The policies described below include duties and rights for parents, as well as government activity aimed at children themselves. While activity across the decades has been concerned with child outcomes, that is, what a good childhood can contribute to children becoming productive tax paying adults, little attention has been paid to the quality of childhood itself, and the rights of children to a good life. Except in the extremes of abuse and neglect, the debates on the nature of schools, youth services, and wider community services have rarely addressed the quality of the experience for the child during childhood. Even more rarely have they included children themselves in the debates.

2.0
Major factors driving policymaking and outcomes relating to children in England

The last forty years have seen continuities in policies about children from the three main parties. All governments have increased **centralisation**. Many issues that were once the choice of a local authority are now part of requirements from Whitehall. Changes in education, childcare and child safeguarding have all come from increased legislation and regulation from the centre, rather than discretion at local level. Along with centralisation has come raised expectations from the public on what problems government can solve. Fears of a post code lottery on services and on protective rights have led to both centralization and increasing public blame on ministers when things go wrong. While requirements on local authorities from the centre have increased, so has the fragmentation of public services. Major challenges for cooperative working at local level have been created by the privatisation of parts of the NHS and the creation of academies and free schools.

The **economic backdrop** has played a major role in policy development. A long period of growth that began in the Major era allowed the Labour Government considerable latitude in funding to back up new policy commitments. Following the 2008 crash, the Brown Government made attempts to protect families and children from the worsening economic conditions. The Coalition and Conservative Governments took a different tack, committing to reducing the deficit by massive cuts in public spending. The age of austerity added increased pressure on local authorities to deliver services with diminishing funds.

Social norms have been changing along with the structural changes described above. Of particular importance for children has been the acceptance of mothers with young children entering the workforce. Gender equality along with the need for two incomes to escape poverty has made it acceptable for women with children to seek employment. But the pressure on mothers and fathers to parent well has also increased. Both parents are now expected to work and spend time with their children on activities that foster cognitive and social development. Goals of gender equality have also spurred a greater understanding of the crucial role fathers play in good outcomes for children. While some policies, including improvements in maternity, paternity and parental leave have reflected the norm of both parents in employment, actual changes in parental behaviours, time spent caring for children, still reveal a wide gap between mothers and fathers. Both parents have increased the amount of time spent with children over the last two decades, but mothers still play the major role.

Finally, **increasing ethnic diversity** has been a feature of children's lives, particularly in urban areas of England over the last four decades. Between 1997 and 2011 the population defined as British White declined from 85.4% to 79.8%. As immigrants tend to have larger families the increase in the minority child population is even greater, having an impact on all child related services. A combination of immigration from Commonwealth countries as well as labour movement from the European Union has made England a much more diverse country in the twenty-first century than before. Most immigrant families, particularly from the Caribbean, Africa and south Asia are on lower incomes than white British families. Poverty is a key feature in the lives of children from minority backgrounds, and it is often poverty itself that distinguishes outcomes for minority children. Most families of immigrant heritage live in urban areas. Evidence suggests that people living in diverse areas are more likely to be comfortable with people from other backgrounds than those in homogeneous areas.[1] This may mean disadvantage for children growing up largely homogeneous in rural areas.

1 Schmid, K., Al Ramiah, A. and Hewstone, M. (2014) 'Neighbourhood ethnic diversity and trust, the role of intergroup contact and perceived threat', Psychological Science, 25(3) p 670.

3.0 Overview of the key policy initiatives relating to children in England

3.1 Education and childcare

All administrations in the last few decades have seen education as a key route to social mobility. The aim has been to ensure that a child's future life chances are not determined by the income status of their parents. Education has perhaps been the public service that has experienced the most control from Whitehall. What teachers teach, how they teach it, the structure and organization of schools and school governance have all been largely removed from local authority control to an odd mix of control from the Department for Education and more recently, school autonomy through free schools and academies. The private sector has also experienced an increasing role as sponsors of academies. Four major changes started in the late 1980s illustrate major themes in education policy over the last three to four decades. The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced a national curriculum, testing at age 7, 11 and 14, and increased parental choice in schools. The fourth big change, the creation of Ofsted in 1992, combined with the others to form a framework for league tables, enabling parents to compare schools. While this brought welcome transparency to education performance measurement, there are risks. Inherent in the policy is the assumption that the parent, not the child is the primary consumer. The perverse impact of such policies has been to disadvantage those children whose parents for any number of reasons cannot make the best choice.

Many of the changes started under Thatcher and Major were built upon during the Blair/Brown years. However, significant efforts were made by the Labour Government to address some of the unfairness inherent in the system. Performance judgements under Labour included contextual value-added ratings. These took account of the socio-economic background of the intake and sought to ensure that schools serving disadvantaged areas were not unfairly penalised in league tables. Funding formulas also provided additional funding to schools in these areas. Under the Coalition Government value added ratings were simplified to focus more narrowly on pupil progress based on prior attainment. Comparing two pupils at the same level at one stage, regardless of socio-economic background, did one in school A make more progress than one in school B? The Coalition Government also brought in the pupil premium, additional school funding for each child coming from a low-income family. It was designed to compensate for the extra effort that may be needed to level the playing field between poor children and the rest. There is some evidence of promise related to the pupil premium, and the gap has narrowed slightly since its introduction. However, no robust evaluation has been completed.

With the exception of London, which has made dramatic progress in improving school results across ethnic diversity and social class, the performance gap in the rest of England across the social classes has been stubbornly resistant to change. But even in London, the success of minority children in education has not been translated into the job market. Minority young people with the same or higher qualifications still suffer income penalties compared to their white counterparts.

Alongside education, particularly since 1997, there has been a massive expansion in early

education and childcare. The 1997 Labour Manifesto promised a childcare strategy. For the first time government was acknowledging that childcare was an essential element in aims of gender equality and reducing poverty. However, while the aims of education are widely accepted by the public, childcare has competing aims: improving school readiness particularly for low income children, gender equality and reducing child poverty. To achieve the first aim requires highly trained, well paid staff and regular attendance. To achieve the second requires flexibility in times and sessions on offer. To achieve the third childcare needs to be affordable. In the interests of affordability and flexibility the expansion of childcare has generally not been of sufficient quality to make the hoped-for improvements in school readiness and later attainment. Since 1997, the availability of free childcare has increased, from initially twelve and a half hours per week for four-year olds to the current offer of 30 hours per week for all three- and four-year olds and twenty hours per week for some two-year olds. Quantity rather than quality has been the main aim. The expansion of early childhood education and care has helped to achieve the aim of increased female participation in the workforce, but other changes in government policy have reversed gains in reducing child poverty. The third aim of improving educational outcomes has been disappointing. Many will argue that this is because the childcare on offer has not been of sufficient quality.

Efforts have also been made across administrations to provide a more varied set of services for families with young children. The flagship Labour programme, Sure Start, was meant to provide at local level, a combination of childcare, health, employment and benefits advice. Initially aimed at poor areas, the popularity of Sure Start led ministers to expand the programme to 3,500 centres, one for every neighbourhood in England. The Every Child Matters Agenda, described later on in this paper, was an effort to bring a similar focus on a range of services affecting children from birth to eighteen. At the same time the responsibility for children's social care was moved from the Department of Health to the Department for Education. The most radical step in this process was renaming the Department of Education and Skills; it became the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2006. The DCSF disappeared within 24 hours of the Coalition coming to power in 2010. While the wider responsibilities for child welfare stayed within the department, it was renamed again, The Department for Education.

3.2 Social Security

Our modern system of protecting children from destitution dates back to the post war Beveridge report, with a recommendation of family allowances. Family allowances were replaced by child benefit during 1977-79, paid to the mother for each child in the family establishing the tradition of a universal per child payment. The Labour Government explicitly declared war on child poverty, with Tony Blair's pledge in 1999 to end child poverty in a generation. The Blair and Brown governments used a number of tools, including employment programmes, tax credits, childcare tax credits, and child benefit, to increase the incomes of families in poverty. They also introduced a national minimum wage for all workers over twenty-five. The approach taken by Labour has been criticised because tax credits allowed employers to pay low wages and because the overall system of a variety of benefits with variable eligibility became increasingly complex to administer. However, as established by recent data from the Resolution Foundation, Labour did succeed in significantly reducing child poverty.[2]

Progress was beginning to stall in the run up to the 2008 crash. Since 2015 child poverty has been rising and is expected to rise further for some time. In 2016, the Conservative

2 Corlett, A., Clarke, S., D'Arcy, C., and Wood, J. (2018) The living Standards audit 2018. London: Resolution Foundation.

Government abolished the child poverty targets. Austerity policies of both the Coalition and Conservative Governments have required massive cuts in benefits including a cap on the total that any family could receive irrespective of family size, reductions on tax credits, housing benefit, and for higher earner families, progressively increasing taxes on child benefit. All these changes have had a disproportionate effect on families with children. The introduction of Universal Credit, designed to make the system much simpler to understand and to ensure families in work are better off than those out of work, has so far failed to achieve its aims. While employment is at an all-time high, the majority of children living in poverty now live in a household with at least one adult in work. Recent announcements have declared an end to austerity, but new funding commitments have largely been about investment in public services, not about reversing some of the more draconian reductions in benefits. In terms of social security, austerity has become the norm.

3.3 Health and wellbeing

Policy activity on health and wellbeing for children has been less active than education, perhaps because education is principally concerned with children and young people, and health and wellbeing cover the entire population and has been dominated by demographic pressures in terms of ageing. There are significant interdependencies between health and education; the quality of school meals impacts on child health; children with disabilities often require specialist services from both health and education. Oddly, even the terminology between the two departments of state is different: SEN (special educational needs) or disability. Three major developments in the last few decades stand out in terms of the government of the day making the health and wellbeing of children a priority: the National Service Framework (NSF) for Child Health, the growing emphasis on the importance of the first Thousand Days and the most recent interest in child mental health.

In 1999, the Department of Health set up a number of NSFs for major diseases: for example, cancer, diabetes, coronary heart disease, and mental health. These frameworks set out the requirements for care and a ten-year programme to achieve better outcomes. It was decided the same year to have an NSF for children. Sir Al Aynsley-Green led an expert group to determine in great detail appropriate care for children in hospital, parental and/or child consent to treatment, as well as a wider set of community-based services. Unfortunately, the extensive work coincided with the more comprehensive Every Child Matters programme described later, developed by the Department for Education. The failure of coordination and alignment on these two major pieces of work for children is clear evidence of departmental rivalries getting in the way of good policy making. All the NSFs fell into disuse with the major NHS reforms of 2010, creating clear separation between the Department of Health and a new organization, NHS England.

Second of note has been the active interest in pregnancy and the first two years of life. Scientific knowledge about the nature of early brain development during pregnancy and the first two years has resulted in Parliamentary reports emphasising the importance of attachment between parent and baby. While much has been learned, there has often been a tendency to over generalise, assuming that a less than perfect start could mean life-long disaster. Probability of risk factors has increasingly been understood by some to be determinants of poor outcomes. While it is unquestionably true that early infancy is a very rich period for brain development, it is only in very extreme cases of abuse and neglect that opportunities lost during this period are irretrievable. Nor does a good start guarantee lifelong good outcomes.

The third issue, child mental health, has come to the fore mainly in the last five to ten years. There is evidence of small increases of any disorder among five to fifteen-year

olds between 1999 (9.7%) and 2017 (11.2%).[3] As with virtually all health issues, there is a social class gradient, with children from the bottom half of the income distribution experiencing higher rates of poor mental health than the general child population. The perception of much more widespread mental health difficulties for children and young people, is, in part, driven by concerns about the use of social media. Lack of sleep, along with cyber bullying and concerns about physical image are all associated with the enormous increase in recent years in the use of smart phones, from early teens into early adulthood. The widely held view is that increasing use of social media, along with increasing exam stress has greatly increased stress and anxiety among children and young people. However, definitive data is scarce. The May Government responded to concerns in 2017 with a Green Paper promising extra funding to incentivise schools and colleges to employ specialist mental health support workers. However, it is unlikely the funding compensates for the reduction of other supports for children and young people lost to austerity: youth clubs, youth workers, after school provision, and loss of many grass roots organisations that were funded by local authorities.

3.4 Care and protection

In policy terms, the most important legislation in living memory concerning child protection was the 1989 Children Act. The Act gave every child the right to protection from abuse and exploitation and the right to intervention by the State to safeguard their welfare. For the first time in law, children were given the right to be consulted on decisions affecting their future including care options and residence options after divorce. Local authorities were required to establish thresholds to determine if a child was in need, that is, not likely to achieve their full potential without additional support. Such systems will raise or lower entry barriers to services with the ebb and flow of funding. Hence many of the support services that may have helped to reverse downward trajectories for children at risk have ceased to operate, or target at very high need. The number of children taken into care has risen steadily since 1994 while adoptions have had periods of steep rise and steep decline.[4] Poverty is highly correlated with the number of children taken into care. Given that non-white children are more likely to live in poverty, they are also over-represented in the care system.[5]

The increase in looked after children may not reflect increases in abuse and/or neglect, but local authorities risk aversion in terms of very poor family care. Improving outcomes for children taken into state care has been a core goal for central government for decades, but progress has been slow and educational outcomes for children in care tend to be significantly below their peers. Programmes to intervene early with families on the edge of care, like Labour's Family Intervention Projects, and the Conservatives Troubled Families Programme, have achieved some success but are expensive and patchy in quality. Children and families with complex problems need support from a variety of agencies. Various attempts have been made to ensure local agencies work together, and the most spectacular failures in child protection have often had at their root a failure of agencies to communicate across organisations as well as across geographical boundaries.

3 NHS Digital, Health and Social Care Information Centre 2018.

4 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf

5 Bywaters, P., Kwhali,J., Brady, G., Sparks, T. and Bos, E. (2017) 'Out of sight out of mind: ethnic inequalities in child protection and out-of home care intervention rates', British Journal of Social Work, 47: 188401902.

4.0
Key themes and trends in policymaking concerning children in England

A series of consistent themes emerges from looking at policies concerned with children over the last few decades. Firstly, the increasing **willingness of government to comment on family life** and to tell us what good parenting looks like. Politicians seem no longer to worry about the nanny state. Secondly, the theme of **social mobility** emerges early. Labour looked at social mobility alongside poverty; hence education and children's services investments were skewed towards poor areas. These areas were then subject to much more severe cuts during austerity. The enormous investment in early years services – Family Nurse Partnerships, Sure Start and childcare – was meant to level the playing field before children entered school. For older children, the emphasis on social mobility led a continued push for the expansion of places and access to higher education. Even if the 50% target of going to university was met, it meant 50% of the population of young people were largely left unsupported. The deepest cuts in education have been in the Further Education sector, where the poorest students wind up. More recently, Labour has been more interested in redistribution policies rather than social mobility.

The fundamental flaw in the arguments about social mobility is the notion that the purpose of childhood is solely to become an adult a period of maximising chances for the future, rather than a part of life that should have value and enjoyment. Particularly in England, this has resulted in the need to prove that early years services will improve later school results, and that frequent exams will enable us to ensure preparation for the next stage of education. Increased pressure on parents to provide a good start becomes pressure on children to do well. These pressures disproportionately affect families on low incomes. Parents become the focus of criticism, rather than addressing the economic and social systems of support that are failing both parents and children.

Early intervention and the use of evidence is a third recurring theme. The main argument for early intervention has been that investment before problems become too ingrained and complex for children will not only improve outcomes for children but will also yield savings for more compensatory services later on. The Coalition Government provided start-up funding for two major what work centres: the Early Intervention Foundation and the Education Endowment Foundation. The first concerns itself largely with assessing the efficacy of mainly social programmes aimed at families with children; the second is about specific classroom practice and innovation that may improve outcomes. Both are committed to measurement and evidence of efficacy and are grappling with the harder challenge of dissemination and adoption of effective interventions. Again, both are about investments now to improve future life chances for children and save costs to the taxpayer in the future.

The fourth theme where progress has been short-lived is efforts to get **agencies concerned with child welfare at local level working together**. Every Child Matters legislation (Children Act 2004) brought a statutory duty to cooperate at local level across health, social care, early years, juvenile justice, and the voluntary sector with an agreed set of outcomes for all children in a local authority area. It also included strong messages about child participation in decision making, a strong child rights approach. Indeed, the same legislation established England's first Children's Commissioner. However, the remit of the Commissioner in England did not include children's rights until changes were made during the Coalition Government. While the Children's Commissioner continues to be active, many of the other structures established to enable working together at local level have withered. Few local areas maintain Children's Trust Boards; the role of Director of Children's Services has been rolled into other senior responsibilities at local level. Efforts to improve information sharing at local level have also fallen foul of data protection rules, again, impeding joint working. Ironically, from the beginning, schools were not included in the legislation with a duty to cooperate. The removal of schools from local authority control has contributed to what is a fragmented system for children.

Finally, the last theme concerns **what is missing in the policy framework**. Children's rights, although enshrined in law, have largely been ignored in practice. As mentioned above, for one of the most crucial decisions, school choice, there is no requirement, or encouragement to involve children in school selection. There is immense confusion in when childhood actually ends. School leaving age in England has been steadily rising since 1972 when it changed from fourteen to sixteen. In 2015, school leaving age was raised to eighteen, though the period between sixteen and eighteen could be spent in college, apprenticeships or training. The age of criminal responsibility is ten years, although offenders up to the age of seventeen are treated differently from adults. This is one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility of all European countries. Probably the only public service that does seriously consider children's rights is health. While consent to treatment is guaranteed at eighteen except in certain circumstances, the views of children and young people about their treatment are enshrined under the Gillick judgement. Health professionals are required to assess the child's competence to make decisions and to respect their views.

5.0 Reflections on the future direction of childhood policymaking in England

What children need for a good life has not changed; however, the context in which those needs are met is constantly changing. Housing and employment are critically important, not just to achieve income above the poverty line, but also to provide stability in a child's school career. New technologies present challenges, but they also have benefits in enabling wider information sharing, specialist groups, and reduced isolation.
While much has been learned in the past about child welfare, some key lessons emerge as ongoing dilemmas. Politicians are impatient for results and rarely wait for proper evaluation of new policies before expanding or cancelling them. Much more attention needs to be paid to workforce issues; appropriate training and support for frontline workers is essential for quality of delivery. Reasonable pay and opportunities for progression attract the right people for what are really difficult jobs. Policies that are designed to intervene to improve life chances are less likely to be effective if delivered during times of increased child poverty. Services and income transfers both matter to long term outcomes for children, but they also matter to the quality of life for children while they are children. Relationships between parents have impact on child outcomes, but they also have impact on the quality of life for families while children are young. Perhaps the key lesson for the future is about the quality of life in the present, for adults and for children.

6.0 Conclusion

England policy on children has been a mix of concerns for all children, children in poverty and children in families with complex needs. While efforts were made, particularly during the Blair/ Brown years to involve children and young people in decisions that affect their lives, practices to involve children have not been embedded in everyday activities, and legal rights are only enshrined in the most stressful episodes; contact after divorce, residence and care proceedings. Much has been achieved for children in the last four decades, but little has been achieved *with* them.

The British Academy
10–11 Carlton House Terrace,
London SW1Y 5AH

thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood
Registered charity no. 233176

Published November 2019
ISBN 978-0-85672-642-2

Design by Only

Twitter: @britishacademy_
Facebook: TheBritishAcademy