

Childhood Policy Programme

Phase I synthesis report

July 2020

Introduction

Over the last 150 years, the experience of being a child in the United Kingdom has changed hugely in terms of how children are viewed, valued and cared for. During this period, policymaking and research relating to children and families have also undergone dramatic changes.

The British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme has investigated and debated, through a range of papers and discussions, the role of the state in childhood over the past 100 years, across the four nations of the UK, and from the point of view of different policy areas. A wide-ranging policy workshop was held to consider the outputs of Phase I of the project in October 2019, and a series of documents (Policy Chronologies, Policy Milestones, four UK Nation Case Studies, and two thematic Case Studies) were published in November 2019.

This report is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all the Phase I outputs, but instead attempts to draw out recurring or underlying themes that indicate potential areas of focus for further analysis which best match the Academy's aims and expertise.

More information on the Childhood programme can be found at www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood

Approach

In synthesising the work of Phase I of the BA Childhood Policy Programme, this report explores the role of the state in childhood from three perspectives:

1. Exploring the assumptions which underpin the experience of childhood and the development of childhood policy but are not explicit or visible in the policymaking process;
2. Exploring the impact of policy decisions on children's outcomes, in particular across the four UK nations, noting that it is not only policy about children that has an impact on children;
3. Exploring the way in which the experience of children is valued in policy making and ways in which this can be articulated in the policy process.

These perspectives are necessarily intertwined, for example consideration of the impact of policy on outcomes should also consider how children's voices could define the outcomes that matter, and consideration of how children's experiences are valued will want to review the practice across the four UK nations. Any work taken forward will need to consider how to keep all of the perspectives in view.

Perspective 1: Underpinning Assumptions

Issue 1 (1): Being vs Becoming

Underpinning the experience of childhood, and the development of childhood policy, is a philosophical distinction between childhood as a state of *being* a child and childhood as a state of *becoming* an adult. In other words, should childhood be valued in its own right, or as a phase mostly valuable as a preparation for adulthood? Much of the debate about childhood policy takes an implicitly “becoming” perspective – for example:

- Investment in early education is framed as developing “school-readiness”
- Investment in early intervention is intended to “reduce the risk of poor outcomes” in later life.

To focus on “becoming an adult” is rational to policymakers as it concentrates resources on delivering better outcomes when individuals are economically active, which can have wider economic and social benefits. However, the discussions at workshops in Phase I have suggested that there are risks to focusing too greatly on “becoming” at the expense of “being” and that there is a need to restore balance between the two.

It can be argued that some policy changes have sought to rebalance “being” and “becoming” – for example, the Donaldson Review of the curriculum in Wales (cited in the **Wales Case Study**) which took a child wellbeing perspective and resulted in abolishing some Key Stage tests. The increasing focus on child and adolescent mental health also marks a shift to policies that recognise children’s experiences.

Further work by the British Academy could seek to explore the extent to which a “becoming” set of assumptions informs UK policymaking, and how a “being” set of assumptions might lead to different, and perhaps improved, outcomes.

Issue 1 (2): Children’s Rights

The “being vs becoming” debate is linked to that about children’s rights. Although the UK Government has signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is not yet incorporated into UK law. The country case studies set out how, in Wales and Scotland, explicit commitments to children’s rights do underpin policymaking, but also highlight that it is hard to discern how this is having an impact on policy, or on children’s day-to-day lives.

It has been suggested that a more explicit focus on children’s rights might lead to greater coherence in how policy is made. However, there are questions as to what interventions are needed to guarantee these rights, and who must hold the duties to ensure a child’s rights can be exercised. Children’s rights have also often been articulated within a legalistic discourse and many proponents of a rights-based approach believe that rights must be conceptualised beyond the law in order to be successful.

Further work by the British Academy could highlight how a more explicit focus on children’s rights might lead to changes in how policy is made, in outcomes for children, and in the experience of childhood.

Issue 1 (3): Defining Childhood

The policy debate about children can tend towards the assumption that there is a shared and consistent understanding of childhood, what it is, where it starts and ends, and how children are seen by different parts of the state. However, childhood is not a fixed, universal experience, and the UNCRC recognises that children have evolving capacities.

There are several dimensions to this:

- Conflicting age definitions - for example in England, a young person has to stay in education or training until they are 18 but legally leaves the care of the state at 16, and the age of criminal responsibility is 10.
- Varying age definitions across the four UK nations, for example in Northern Ireland, children start school in September if they were four in July, which is earlier than any other European country.
- The “Gillick case” established that a child could give or withhold consent to medical treatment, if they are considered to be competent, irrespective of age. However, this developmental approach to defining whether a child can make decisions that affect them does not extend to other areas of public policy, such as how a child should be taught, despite the Summerhill case suggesting this could be legal.

Further work by the British Academy could explore the case for a “developmental stage” rather than “age” approach to policymaking and/or highlight the inconsistencies in the current policy framework.

Perspective 2: Understanding the impact of policy on children’s outcomes

Issue 2 (1): Understanding the link between policies and outcomes

The project has highlighted in a number of ways that it is challenging to link outcomes for children to policy decisions. For example, the **care leaver case study** argued that it was hard to identify the contribution of policies for young people leaving care to improving educational outcomes, compared to the contribution of a good education system more widely, and the **child poverty case study** starts with an acknowledgement that child poverty cannot be distinguished from family poverty.

Further work by the British Academy could encourage more systematic evaluation of policy initiatives in terms of their stated outcomes, and any unexpected outcomes.

Issue 2 (2): Understanding the impact of policy divergence across the four UK nations

The four country case studies, and the two policy case studies, highlight clearly the way in which policy is diverging across the four nations in a range of areas. For example, Northern Ireland’s implementation of Universal Credit has two payments rather than one per month, and there are mitigations that protect families with dependent children from the effects of the “benefit cap”, unlike in England. Another example is the “Getting It Right For Every Child” (GIRFEC) programme in Scotland, which is a long-term strategy, backed by legislation. Yet the project has highlighted how little activity there is in comparing the outcomes of these different policies and how hard it is to obtain comparative data to enable this to happen.

Further work by the British Academy could encourage a greater exchange of ideas between policymakers and academics in the four UK nations, with a view to understanding the impacts of different policy perspectives. It could consider the case for improving the availability of comparative data to enable outcomes to be assessed.

Issue 2 (3): The impact of inequality and inequity on outcomes for children

The project, and particularly the policy workshop, highlighted that the experience of childhood is affected not only by the policies that focus on children, but also by policy across a much wider canvas. Examples given included the impact of planning and transport policy on children’s play, and environmental policies on air pollution and children’s health.

The most significant area where this impact is seen is in the area of resource or income inequalities; in particular, policies relating to tax, benefits, and incentives to work. The **child poverty case study**, for instance, highlights how austerity has disproportionately impacted households with children.

The child poverty case study indicates that the four UK nations are using their devolved decision-making powers to strike different balances between measures designed to reduce inequality (such as Scotland not implementing the bedroom tax, and Northern Ireland in effect exempting families with dependent children from the Benefit Cap), and measures designed to tackle inequities, particularly in access to education and child-related services (such as the Pupil Premium or Office for Fair Access).

Further work by the British Academy could explore the interplay between child-specific policies designed to address inequities and policies that reduce or aggravate social inequalities, which largely operate at the family or community level. This could focus on income inequalities or encompass a wider range (considering race, gender, disability, for example). A four nations or international perspective could also allow comparisons between different approaches.

Perspective 3: Understanding children’s experiences and hearing their voices

Issue 3 (1): Children’s perspective on the outcomes that matter

A corollary of the “being vs becoming” debate is that children’s outcomes, and the measurement of what matters in children’s policy, has been defined by adults. The Every Child Matters outcomes framework (discussed in our paper on **policy milestones**) was informed by wide-ranging consultation with children and young people about the outcomes that matter to them, but this is the exception rather than the rule. The **Wales case study** debates the potential tension between well-being as experienced by a child or a young person and well-being as perceived by an adult. It notes that well-being underpins policymaking, but also that children’s experiences of well-being are not being measured.

The policy workshop highlighted the lack of a “subjective wellbeing” measure for children. (The ONS collect data annually from adults aged 16 and over on a range of personal wellbeing issues). In the absence of such information, outcomes are defined by adults, and the trade-offs between different policy objectives are made by adults on behalf of children.

Further work by the British Academy could consider the case for a robust subjective well-being survey for children, as exists for adults. In doing so, the Academy could work with other organisations and experts to explore innovative ways to collect contextualised

self-interpretations of their well-being needs that are formulated in a meaningful way for policymakers.

Issue 3 (2): Children's participation in the policymaking process

The policy workshop highlighted the extent to which children and young people are absent from the policymaking process. While recent years have seen the introduction of some participatory approaches, such as School Councils and local authority groups for children in care, these operate largely at a practice and implementation level, rather than a policy level. The **Scotland case study** highlights that Scotland is due to introduce a Strategic Participation Framework, which may lead the way on this issue. The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is also intended to ensure service-users, including children, are involved in development and implementation of policy. There is a similar problem with the research process, with ethics committees frequently turning down research which engages with children directly because it is seen as risky.

Further work by the British Academy could explore models of participation in policymaking that operate in other jurisdictions and consider how they could work within the UK's policymaking processes.

Concluding Remarks

This report is a synthesis of the evidence and insights collected during Phase I of the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme with the aim of identifying potential themes for the Academy to take forward into a second phase of the programme.

The themes identified in this report will be further discussed with stakeholders as part of the development of the Academy's Childhood Policy Programme. Phase II of the programme is intended to provide deeper analysis of key policy issues identified in the first phase and, through the analysis of these issues, explore ways to improve the policy ecosystem with researchers, policymakers and policy influencers, practitioners and, of course, children themselves.

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External consultants

Janet Grauberg	Organisational strategy and learning consultant
Ross Pow	Director, Power of Numbers Ltd

British Academy Staff

Nicola Berkley	Senior Policy Advisor (Public)
Dr Adam Wright	Head of Public Policy

Childhood Policy Programme Steering Group

Professor the Baroness (Ruth) Lister of Burtersett CBE FBA	Emeritus Professor of Social Policy, Loughborough University; Chair, British Academy Childhood Policy Programme
Professor Robin Alexander FBA	Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge; Professor of Education Emeritus, University of Warwick
Professor David Archard	Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast
Professor David Buckingham FBA	Emeritus Professor of Media and Communications, Loughborough University; Visiting Professor, King's College London
Professor Mary Daly FBA	Professor of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Oxford; Fellow, Green Templeton College, Oxford
Professor Gillian Douglas FBA	Executive Dean and Professor of Law, The Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London
Professor Ann Phoenix FBA	Professor of Education, Institute of Education, University of London
Ray Shostak CBE	Honorary Norham Fellow, Department of Education, University of Oxford
Professor Mathew Thomson	Director of the Centre for the History of Medicine and Professor, Department of History, University of Warwick
Professor Anna Vignoles CBE FBA	Professor of Education and Fellow of Jesus College, University of Cambridge

