"Wipe them out"!
The Social Construction of Children's Centres

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ABSTRACT

The future for Children's Centres in England looks bleak.. A change in government in the UK in 2010 saw a change in political perspective that was manifested in one way as austerity. The effects of austerity impacted on a range of public services including Children's Centres. Children's Centres also came under government scrutiny resulting in a change of focus in their activities from a core offer of providing services to having a core purpose. The study used a flexible qualitative design to produce a critical discourse analysis about the social construction of Children's Centres. A range of publicly available documents were gathered to provide naturalistic data relating to Children's Centres. In addition, six Children's Centre workers were purposefully selected to take part in a semi structured focus group interview. The subsequent analysis of the document and interview data revealed a range of rhetorical devices used by speakers to construct their perceptions of Children's Centres. These constructions were organised under four dominant discourses; a discourse of recognition, a discourse of pragmatism, a discourse of pessimism and a discourse of change. One common factor in these four discourses was the role of the UK government. Children's Centres did not appear to get recognition for some the work they did with families but there was a pragmatism about what Children's Centres could provide during a period of austerity. There was pessimism about what was happening to Children's Centres especially in relation to vulnerable families but what seemed inevitable was Children's Centres were changing.

KEYWORDS

Children's Centres; Austerity; Critical Discourse Analysis; United Kingdom Government; Political Dogma; Children and Families

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Introduction and Context

This article relates to Children's Centres in England. England is one of four countries in the United Kingdom, each of which is governed by different education policies. The article explores factors that influence the social construction of Children's Centres in England through critical discourse analysis of media outputs and a focus group interview with Children's Centre workers.

In the current political climate in England, the future of Children's Centres appears bleak. In this article it is suggested that the uncertainty surrounding Children's Centres is influenced by the way they are socially constructed. These constructions are not actual descriptions of events, they 'do not come from objective reality but from other people, both past and present' (Burr, 2015, p. 10). Speakers construct language to function in specific ways allowing them to present their realities of the events they have encountered (Potter, 1996; Graham, 2005; Haggett & Futak-Campbell, 2011). The way Children's Centres are socially constructed can be understood through analysis of the discourse related to Children's Centres produced by Children's Centre workers and in media outputs.

Recent historical context of children's centres

In 2010 a coalition government of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, parties of right wing and centrist politics, took power in the United Kingdom. The coalition government introduced constraints on the public budget described as 'financial austerity' (Van Reenen, 2015). This period of financial austerity has continued with the successive re-election of Conservative governments post 2015 (Van Reenen, 2015). Local authorities have faced increased financial pressure with a reduction in local authority grants from central government. This has filtered down to a range of locally provided services including Children's Centres which have seen cuts to their budgets and resources, leading to some facing closure (Rallings, 2014).

Just after the UK general election in 2010 the Coalition Agreement was published, this included an outline of plans which wanted an increasing its focus on the neediest families via the already existing 'SureStart' programme (Bate and Forster, 2015, p. 15). In 2012, Children's Centres changed from a core offer of provision to a core purpose (Pordes-Bowers, Strelitz, Allen & Donkin, 2012; DfE, 2013). The original core offer had consisted of,

> 'drop-in sessions and activities for parents, carers and children, access to child and family health services including antenatal care, outreach and family support services, links with Jobcentre Plus for training and employment advice, support for child-minders and support for children and parents with special needs.' (NAO, 2009, p. 7)

This was a universal approach to service provision for children and families (Lewis, Cuthbert & Sarre, 2011). Integrated full-day childcare and early learning was additionally provided by Children's Centres located in the thirty percent most deprived communities in England with a full core offer of services (NAO, 2009). The coalition governments revised core purpose of Children's Centres aimed to;

> 'improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in child development and school readiness, parenting aspirations and parenting skill and child and family health and life chances.' (Department for Education, 2013, p. 7)

The core purpose 'articulated a vision for Children's Centres' (Pordes-Bowers et al., 2012, p. 7; DfE, 2013). Children's Centres would 'downplay their role as a universal service' within a model of targeted services which would focus on the most vulnerable (NCB, 2013, p. 7). This was in line with the Coalition Agreement which had stated 'we will take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention, and increase its focus on the neediest families' (HM Government, 2010, p. 19).

The coalition's promise to continue to fund and prioritise Children's Centres appeared to be empty; by April 2013, the UK government had presided over a drop in the number of Children's Centres, down to 3,116 from a high in 2010 of 3,631 (NCB, 2013). This was predominantly caused by cuts to local authority funding, which resulted in Children's Centres closing or merging (NCB, 2013). The levels of closure were considerably higher by December 2014 with only 2,816 centres open (House of Commons, 2015). In November 2019 the government stated (with caveats) that around 3050 Children's Centres were still open in England (DfE, 2019).

The refocussing of the core offer to core purpose also provided an opportunity for the coalition government to address the previous administration's requirement to demonstrate the effectiveness of Children's Centres via value for money. The change of emphasis to core purpose was entirely compatible with the imposition of austerity measures. One direct manifestation of this, although quietly abandoned, was the idea of Children's Centres being paid according to results. This concept of payment by results was given new life with the Troubled Families agenda (DCLG, 2012). The Troubled Families Programme was introduced in England in 2010 as a response to the belief that 'there is a group of families across the country who both cause and experience multiple and complex problems, resulting in disproportionate expense to the public purse' (DCLG, 2013, p. 6).

The change to core purpose also revealed a fundamental difference in the way those most in need in society were viewed by the competing political perspectives in the United Kingdom (UK) (Manilov, 2013). Perceptions of the political classes in the

UK has beeninvestigated by Van Heerde-Hudson & Campbell (2016). Their research aimedto discover if there is any truth in the suggestion that;

> 'Many in the British public believe the political class to be increasingly out of touch, insular and unable to understand the lives and concerns of ordinary citizens. And recent evidence suggests that politicians are increasingly drawn from a narrowing middle class—a privileged class—despite significant efforts at increasing the descriptive representation of elected representatives.' (Van Heerde-Hudson & Campbell, 2016)

This potential narrowing of some politicians' perspectives may provide clues to their approaches to policy making decisions such as with Children's Centre services, their concepts of need and vulnerability and the impact of political ideology.

Prior to the coalition government, the New Labour government in England had promoted the ideals of universal services aiming to support but not stigmatise children and families. Since the middle of 2000, Labour politicians promoted the notion of 'progressive universalism' (Balls, 2007, Line 27; Lewis, 2011). Lewis suggests that this 'in the case of services meant universal provision, with the greatest help for those in the most need' (Lewis, 2011, p. 79). This vision was made real in the Children's Plan published in 2007 which 'promoted the idea of universal services operating in a preventative system' (Lewis, 2011, p. 79). This approach was arguably turned on its head with the election of the coalition government in May 2010 and beyond to the Conservative administration post May 2015.

The Conservative party had long been ambivalent towards certain vulnerable groups in society. Margaret Thatcher had `disapproved of those so lazy, feckless or lacking in self-respect that they were content to live in subsidised housing or on benefits' (Campbell, 2003, p. 248). Page (2010, p. 1) suggests this view was tempered under the leadership of Cameron which recognised 'the importance of softening the Party's approach towards those experiencing poverty and disadvantage'. However, this did not prevent the universal approach of Children's Centres becoming a targeted and – by implication – a stigmatising approach for supporting those same groups. 120,000 of those hard to reach and in need families found themselves rebranded as 'Troubled Families' adding an additional stigmatising label (DCLG, 2015).

The government had suggested the core purpose 'was always intended to offer a high level and aspirational statement of intent, which gives local authorities and individual centres the flexibility to configure services in accordance with local circumstances' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, p. 3). The core purpose was, however, criticised. The House of Commons Education Committee challenged the government's defence of the core purpose, suggesting it was 'too vague and too broad' and impossible for small Children's Centres to implement and for other centres,

'too all-encompassing to be of any use as a guiding principle of their aims and priorities.' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, Paragraph 20).

The committee was supportive of local authorities being free to organise their services to meet the needs of and improve out comes for children in their areas but they did not believe the core purpose was the way to go about it 'we are not convinced that setting a universal core purpose for all Children's Centres assists them to do this' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, Paragraph 20). The committee recommended that the core purpose was reviewed and altered to provide 'achievable outcomes for Children's Centres to deliver for children and families' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, Paragraph 20). On 11 March 2015 the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Childcare and Education) in the Department for Education Sam Gymiah was asked to give oral evidence to the committee. Gymiah had disregarded the committee's recommendation of April 2014 that the core purpose of Children's Centre be made clearer. The committee sought clarification of Gymiah's and the Government's position.

> 'You will recall that one of our strongest recommendations was for greater clarity about the purpose of Children's Centres. You have been in post for a little while now. Is the core purpose clear to you, and would you let us know what it is, please?' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015, p. 4)

By July 2015 Gymiah had announced a government consultation into Children's Centres with the aim of reporting by spring 2016 (Gymiah, 2015). Despite prescribing a core purpose the government was still unsure about the direction and purpose of Children's Centres. The promised consultation had not materialised by 2018, highlighted in the Stop Start Report which argued that 'The government should complete the long promised review of the Children's Centre programme' (Smith et al., 2018, p. 6). At the time of editing in early 2021, the report has still not materialised, Children's Centres are not being inspected and little has changed.

Methodology

The study employed a flexible qualitative design producing a critical discourse analysis (CDA) about the social construction of Children's Centres. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010, p. 1215) argue 'CDA is a mode of critical inquiry where theory and methodology are inherently linked to one another'. This is because of the interrelated nature of the social interactions investigated, producing a theoretical perspective. The main focus of CDA is to study 'the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are

enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352).

The research used two methods of data collection; document analysis and a focus group interview. Document analysis was used to gather data from a variety of media outputs in the public domain to produce complementary, alternative and competing discourses for analysis rather than confirm, deny or corroborate the data gathered from the second method, a focus group interview (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Cohen et al., 2011). A qualitative semi structured focus group interview was used to gather data from six children's centre workers (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The interview was digitally recorded in a multifunctional space at a Children's Centre. The semi structured interview provided sixty five minutes of rich deep level data. This gave the participants the opportunity to freely articulate their views (Rose, 1994).

An inductive approach to analysis was employed. The data was read then read again and coded in themes (Boyatzis, 1998). These themes were organised into eleven discourses and established marginalised and dominant discourses. There were four dominant discourses identified and these were analysed again. The further analysis aimed to establish that there was enough evidence to include the discourses for the final process of analysis. Detailed attention was given to the function and construction of the discourses that were selected. The established rhetorical devices used by the speakers were identified and highlighted in the discourses (Potter & Wetherall, 1987; Potter, 1996).

The identified devices illustrated how speakers constructed language to create their own versions of reality (Potter, 1996). The analysis revealed the speakers used a range of rhetorical devices to build their cases for and accounts of the events they described. The data analysed from the publicly available media outputs documents selected for analysis were kept in context and used ethically. BERA (2018) guidelines informed a robust ethical framework that was established in consideration of the participants in the focus group and interview data they provided.

Positionality

Reflexivity and positionality are key aspects of any qualitative approach to research. The reflexive act in qualitative research contributes to acknowledging potential bias in the research through for example, stating the researcher's positionality, so this is me. I engaged in this research as a current academic and a former Children's Centre worker. The experience of working in Children's Centres brings some of the challenges of being an insider researcher including trying to balance the benefits of having pre existing knowledge, without it becoming subjective preconceptions about what I was

finding out. I also came to this research as a white, working class, male, and a socialist with a cultural background influenced by three generations of left wing and socialist politics. My political beliefs are probably one of the key factors in how I construct the world. I was also not typical as a male working in a predominantly female workforce in Children's Centres. I am now writing about the social constructions of Children's Centres whose workforce are predominantly female from a male perspective, and this is another aspect of my positionality. I hope through sharing my positionality that I can inform the reader of potential influences on my research but in expressing those influences that I become more aware of the effects they have on me.

Findings

Four dominant discourses were identified through analysis of transcribed focus group interview and forty-eight media outputs. These discourses were: a discourse of recognition, a discourse of pragmatism, a discourse of pessimism and a discourse of change. To strengthen the findings, the rhetorical devices identified in the data are also presented (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996).

A Discourse of Recognition

A discourse of recognition was a recurring theme predominantly emerging from the focus group interview. It functioned to allow the speakers to demonstrate the importance of the work they do and how valued they feel as a workforce.

Extract One

Speaker Two: *I also think you need to have a true understanding of how difficult it is to engage with families and, and how long it takes to show a significant change, a lasting change that you can rely on.*

Extract one shows how a discourse of recognition functions to allow speaker two to highlight the knowledge and skill centre workers have. Speaker two employs a range of rhetorical devices to construct her case. The device of maximisation is employed when an understanding is maximised to 'a true understanding' and a change is maximised to a 'significant change'. The use of maximisation in this instance functions to emphasise the abilities of Children's Centre workers and the impact that they have in their work. This is reinforced when this device is employed again by speaker two when discussing a 'lasting change' emphasising the intended type of change that centre workers could effect. The discourse of recognition functions in a different way in extract two.

Extract Two

Speaker Five: *and there are some changes but you can't actually put down on paper, no you can't measure it yeah, there was someone we saw today coming in you notice a big difference but actually trying to but that as hard evidence, yeah yeah, how do you really do that and capture?*

Speaker five uses a discourse of recognition when constructing the case for the impact Children's Centre workers have had in relation to one centre user. Speaker five initially employs the rhetorical device of making evidence speak for itself also known as the empiricist repertoire. This device allows the speaker to increase the credibility of their evidence by presenting it as self-evident. So the changes speaker five cannot 'put down on paper' were there for all to see, 'someone we saw today coming in, you notice a big difference'. This device functions to play down the speaker's role in the interpretation of what she has said. The presented evidence does not appear to be a subjective opinion as the evidence presented makes the case for her. This strategy can be used to mask the reasons for a speaker's choice of evidence to build a case. The device of a rhetorical question is used at the end of extract four when speaker five asks, 'how do you really do that and capture?' This device summarises the case to persuade the audience to think about and answer the question themselves.

A Discourse of Pragmatism

A discourse of pragmatism was another dominant theme that was revealed in the data. This discourse functions to allow the speakers to construct their reality of how they have met the changes in the services they deliver and their working environment. The speakers can also construct their reality of anticipated future changes. The following extracts illustrates some of the ways a discourse of pragmatism functions for the speakers.

Extract Three

Speaker Four: *I think the other things as well is now you're going back to the beginning and you need to actually … The way that Children's Centres have evolved, you could be moving onto like a different phase where you're working at a higher level but I think if you gave Children's Centres a pot of money and said, do this with that. I think they got enough experience and knowledge to run it on a shoestring and know exactly what they need for it to work. You don't need to be given a formula by people that don't really understand what you do or how it works. You can run it, all you need is staff. You don't need lots of other things, just staff and a building, or just staff and a field, whatever. That would be enough to …*

In extract three, speaker four is positioned in a discourse of pragmatism. This discourse functions to allows them to contemplate the implications of change and provide solutions for those proposed changes. The device of pronoun selection is used throughout the extract to include or exclude the speaker in the case she is building. 'I' is used to establish her positionality in the argument whereas 'you' is employed to give a more general understanding of what might happen. Speaker four also uses the rhetorical device of generalisation when she comments; 'You don't need to be given a formula by people that don't really understand what you do or how it works'. This device allows her to spread her specific interpretation of the situation across a range of possible culprits who lack this understanding. This device also allows speaker four to suggest that this lack of understanding is characteristic of this group of 'people'. This sentence also employs the device of a rhetorically self-sufficient argument, after all what would be the point of being told what to do, by people who do not know how it is done. A discourse of pragmatism was also revealed in extract four drawn from the media outputs.

Extract Four

'*I have listened to the views of local authorities and their partners, the Education Select Committee and a range of commentators, including Ofsted itself, on the difficulties with the current inspection framework and how it fails to assess Children's Centres on the way they are organised now and the impact they have. I announced that we would conduct a consultation in the autumn on the future of Children's Centres, including their accountability arrangements. Given that expectation I do not think it is appropriate to commence a new cycle under the current inspection arrangements as they are likely to change. Instead I am suspending, on a short term basis the requirement for Ofsted to undertake the inspections at prescribed intervals pending the outcome of the consultation.*' (Gymiah, 2015)

Extract four is taken from a letter of the 25th September 2015 from Sam Gymiah on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education to Sir Michael Wilshaw Her Majesty's Chief inspector at Ofsted. Gymiah is positioned in a discourse of pragmatism when directing Wilshaw to suspend Ofsted inspections of Children's Centres. In the opening sentence Gymiah uses a selected pronoun of 'I' the language functions to emphasis his role in this decision. This presents him as a reasonable person who has listened to other opinions. Gymiah employs the rhetorical device of category entitlement to justify his decision by listening to the views of named 'experts' in the field of Children's Centres. These 'experts' include local authorities and the Education Select Committee. This device is used to give his case credibility as the audience usually accepts that certain categories of people are entitled and deemed trustworthy in relation to the subject specific claims being made. The case is strengthened by using a rhetorically

self-sufficient argument when Gymiah states 'I do not think it is appropriate to commence a new cycle under the current inspection arrangements as they are likely to change.' Gymiah's use of this device works on many levels. Gymiah presents an argument that is acceptable to the listeners requiring no further justification, because if something could be changing then there is no need to start a new cycle of inspection. Opponents also find these arguments difficult to criticise because a wider audience will generally agree with the sentiments.

A Discourse of Pessimism

A discourse of pessimism was another dominant theme that emerged from both the focus group interview and media outputs. A discourse of pessimism functions so speakers can reflect on the negative aspects of change to Children's Centres. In extract five; speakers one, two and four are responding to a question about the proposed changes to children's services in their local authority.

Extract Five
Speaker Two: *So there are still going to be Children's Centre services there will be fewer people in the centres offering that so there will be a real limit as to what you can offer*
Speaker One: *you'll be de-clustered as to what, so you won't be able to move as easily*
Interviewer: *oh right*
Speaker One: *in some ways it's a step back*
Speaker Two: *is, it is a step back*
Speaker Four: *is as if that you're going back to beginning it is going back to the beginning you will have the same ratio of staff*

In extract five a discourse of pessimism functions to allow the speakers to construct their reality of the possible negative effects of proposed changes. Speaker two at the beginning of the extract paints a bleak picture using the device of a rhetorically self-sufficient argument, less staff in centres equals less services for families. This argument although not inherently self-sufficient is hard for the audience to criticise. The device of repetition is used between speakers one and two where 'a step back' is used to emphasise the negative effect of de clustering.

Extract Six
"*I feel the cut is against a vulnerable sector of the community and these centres are very important to the people who use them.*" (Torbay Council, 2014)

Extract six is taken from open comments made in a consultation document about intended cuts to children's centre services in Torquay. The speaker is positioned in a discourse of pessimism by articulating their feelings about the effects cuts will have on people using the service. The speaker emphasises their concerns with the device of maximisation, this is not just any sector of the community that will be affected but a 'vulnerable sector of the community'. The rhetorical device of categorisation is also employed by the speaker to build their case. The speaker made a choice about how to categorise the people she was defending to affect how the audience perceived them. In this case a sector of the community or a vulnerable sector of the community could have been accurately used to describe the same group. Maximisation is used again when the speaker felt that centres far from being just important are 'very important'. The following extracts provide a range of examples of the final dominant theme a discourse of change.

A Discourse of Change

A discourse of change emerged as the overall dominant theme from both the focus group interview and media outputs. This discourse functions in a range of ways but predominantly to allow the speakers to voice their perceptions of current and future changes to the organisation and operation of Children's Centres. A discourse of change is revealed in extracts seven and eight.

Extract Seven

"*Closing Children's Centres should go ahead only after proper consultation and where alternative options have been considered," says the report. This report is a devastating verdict on an out-of-touch government with no strategy or vision for children and the early years, Lucy Powell, Shadow children's minister. There are also calls to raise the quality of staff, so that they have equal pay and status with staff in schools.*" (Coughlan, 2013)

Extract seven is from the 17th December 2013 and taken from BBC online news reporting of a report about Children's Centres from the Education Select Committee. This sees a discourse of change used to seek a way forward for Children's Centres. A rhetorically self-sufficient argument used by the committee to validate one of its conclusions. 'Closing Children's Centres should go ahead only after proper consultation and where alternative options have been considered'. This device presents an argument which appears to be common sense and is difficult for opponents to criticise, why would Children's Centres be shut without all sensible considerations being made. This device is used when the speaker or writer knows their audience will accept what they say because the audience feels comfortable about the sentiment. The lack of a challenge to the statement found in the rest of the BBC report indicates this effect. The report

writer also constructs a sense of Kitzinger's out-there-ness by noting that 'there are also calls to raise the quality of staff' (Kitzinger, 1987). Where the calls come from is not identified, so the language functions to remove accountability from the writer by suggesting the stated information comes from an independent source (my emphasis). The following extract, extract eight, shows how a discourse of change is used to express discontent by the speakers.

Extract Eight

Speaker One: *it's almost other things are being set up around Children's Centres so then you can remove them and they are no longer popular and you didn't have to keep them protected and maybe the change of government as you know that that government just wants to wipe them out because it was brought in by a different government is and that seems to be part of the agenda, I mean it was started by a different political party so is a political issue, it's not about outcomes and the fact that they work which is criminal really.*

Extract eight provides a potent and final example of a discourse of change. Speaker one is reflecting on the causes of the changes Children's Centres are facing. This positions her in a discourse of change which functions to allow her to apportion blame for the changes that have happened. Speaker one uses the device of repetition midway through the extract to emphasis the role of government in the changes happening to Children's Centres. This device functions at an emotional level allowing speaker one to gather sentiment from the audience for the case she is building. Speaker one continues to build her case with repetition and a rhetorically self-sufficient argument; 'I mean it was started by a different political party so is a political issue' (my emphasis). This speaker provides the audience with the reasonable argument that: Children's Centres were developed by a Labour government and therefore any changes made to them by subsequent administrations are politically motivated because their politics makes them see Children's Centres in a different way. This argument then requires no additional justification. The end of the extract sees speaker one build her case further with the device of making the evidence speak for its self when stating 'it's not about outcomes and the fact that they work which is criminal really' (writer's emphasis). In using this device speaker one is able to downplay her role in the collection or interpretation of the presented 'fact' that Children's Centres are effective. The device also allows her to produce evidence that appears not to be a subjective interpretation of the changes that have happened and effectively obscures her decision for using that evidence to build her case.

Discussion

A Discourse of Recognition

A discourse of recognition highlighted the skills and impact Children's Centres had on children and families. In extract one the problem of effectively capturing positive outcomes for families was alluded to. The speaker suggested that it took a long time to demonstrate 'significant outcomes'. The speaker also appeared to seek recognition for the time and effort expended by Children's Centre workers to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. This was highlighted again by the speaker in extract two who by implication wanted her centre's work to be recognised but knew that some of the results they achieved could not be 'actually put down on paper'. This presents a fundamental issue for substantiating what outcomes Children's Centres achieve and the subsequent valuing of the Children's Centre workforce. The political influences on disaffection in the workforce were suggested in the earlier discussion about financial austerity and the government's announcement of a consultation on the purpose of Children's Centres (Gymiah, 2015). The message from government although not explicit does imply that that Children's Centre are not valued and by association neither is their workforce. This reinforces Children's Centres workers' beliefs about a lack of recognition for centres and the work they currently do.

Since the establishment of the Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) there had been an issue of demonstrating measurable outcomes for the services provided (Lewis, 2011). This inability to measure outcomes was arguably influential in the government's decision to direct the change from a core offer of services to a core purpose for Children's Centres. There were measurable outcomes produced by Children's Centres including the simple registering of families attending centres, through to increasing breastfeeding rates in their communities or children achieving a good level of development in relation to the Early Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012; Poole, Fry & Tanner, 2015). The results of Children's Centres work were always going to be long term as suggested in extract one or ephemeral and anecdotal, as identified in extract two. These soft outcomes are just as valuable as those more measurable hard outcomes but how you capture their effect is an ongoing challenge (Tunstill & Blewett, 2016).

A government's investment in early prevention or more currently early intervention programmes such as Children's Centres can be effective in financial terms. The ethos of early prevention is more consistent with the core offer and universal services. This role for effective early prevention or intervention should be supported because the implications of not doing so could be catastrophic. These could be life limiting factors such as poor health and environmental deprivation for children plus the added financial cost that brings to the government. This financial burden for the government

continues with the ongoing effects these factors can have as those children become adults or 'Troubled Families' (Field, 2010; Marmot, 2010; Allen, 2011; DCLG, 2013).

The inability to measure softer outcomes could be less problematic for Children's Centres, if Children's Centres were genuinely viewed by government as an investment for and in children in all aspects of the work they undertook. Children's Centres and their teams of staff valued for working at times as a safety net, at others as a listening ear and so on in a programme of preventative and outcome enhancing services. A discourse of recognition ultimately constructs a reality where Children's Centres lack recognition for the work they did. The realities of change to Children's Centres were constructed in a different way in a discourse of pragmatism.

A Discourse of Pragmatism

Extracts three and four provided examples of how a discourse of pragmatism was used by speakers to forward their cases. In extract three the speaker constructed this reality in a practical and matter of fact way by taking a pragmatic approach to what Children's Centres can do, arguably despite financial austerity. The speaker also suggested 'now you're going back to the beginning'. The change of direction for Centres to 'the beginning' the speaker referred to, was as a result of the impact of the change for Centres from a core offer to a core purpose. This change appeared to be taking them back to the original SSLP approach of targeted intervention with children and families (Lewis, 2011). This change to a core purpose is inextricably linked to the political ideology of the post 2010 coalition government and post 2015 Conservative government. Children's Centres needed to produce measurable outputs rather than less tangible soft outcomes for families. This point overlaps with aspects of the constructions of reality in a discourse of recognition.

A competing function of a discourse of pragmatism was revealed in extract four. In this extract, Sam Gymiah the minister responsible for Children's Centres positions himself in this discourse as a pragmatic reasonable man who has listened to the views of others before making a decision about a way forward for Children's Centres. This announcement came against a backdrop of criticism for the government's lack of clarity about the purpose of Children's Centres identified in the literature (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). A discourse of pragmatism functioned to deflect criticism for the government's move to redefine what Children's Centres did. The move to redefine Children's Centres gained impetus post 2015 with the new Conservative government. The critical analysis of the literature also suggested political dogma as an influence on the change to a core purpose for Children's Centres. A discourse of pragmatism also helped obscure the government's ideological aversion to supporting those more vulnerable in society by appearing reasonable when considering the future of Children's Centres (Campbell, 2003; Page, 2010).

A Discourse of Pessimism

A discourse of pessimism constructed in extracts five and six functioned to present the negative impacts of the changes Children's Centres had experienced. A range of detrimental effects of change for Centre's included a decline in Ofsted grading and loss of knowledgeable staff, through to a trend of decline in families in attending Children's Centres (Goff et al., 2013; Ofsted 2013; 2013a; 2014a; Smith et al., 2014). In extract five, speaker two noted a 'real limit as to what you can offer' This type of observation could provide an explanation for the pattern of decline in families attending centres and the acceleration of this pattern suggested by Smith et al. (2014). A reduction in services made the Children's Centre's offering less attractive to families resulting in them stopping attending. Extract nine also saw the speaker construct a reality about future changes to centres with her local authority de clustering centres. The context for this comment was that her local authority was in the process of negotiating the running of Children's Centres by schools. This approach was not a pattern of change revealed nationally (Smith et al., 2014). Poole Fry and Tanner (2015) had conversely argued that a different trend was developing, seeing a move away from schools managing centres. One explanation for this contradiction could be that the impacts of financial austerity were deepening leaving this particular local authority to find ever more creative ways of maintaining services. In this case by getting schools to wholly manage centres.

The speaker in extract six constructed a reality of financial austerity and cuts that affect the most vulnerable families. This construction of reality was consistent with aspects of literature which had suggested exactly the same, the effects of austerity would be hardest felt by the most vulnerable families (Haddad, 2012; Poinasamy, 2013). The situation caused by government policy decisions produced a dichotomy. Financial austerity was affecting the most vulnerable families in society. This suggests these families were under more pressure and probably had an increased need for support services such as Children's Centres. However, because of the effects of financial austerity Children's Centres services were being cut and in some cases centres were being closed, so how could they provide the support these families needed.

The discussion earlier identified a distain or at best ambivalence to some of the less fortunate in society from the Conservative party (Campbell, 2003; Page, 2010). Whilst their coalition partners the Liberal Democrats might have had a different perspective, the Conservatives were the dominant partner in the post 2010 coalition. The Troubled Families agenda, which at a stroke negatively labelled 120,000 vulnerable families as problematic, had started to impact on the way Children's Centres worked by providing the target group the government wanted centres to work with (DCLG, 2015). This attitude towards one of society's vulnerable groups from the government appeared to validate the earlier suggestion of a disregard for certain vulnerable groups in society, especially from the Conservative part of the coalition.

These 120,000 families were suggested to cost the state around £8bn per year in reactive expenditure. Along with the label of 'Troubled Families' their role in anti-social behaviour was also identified of the suggested negative traits of these families and supporting statistics contributed to the general public's perception of them had the desired effect (DCLG, 2013, p. 8). This type of labelling gave permission to the general population to distance themselves from families in need by contributing to an erosion of empathy for them. People find it much easier to disregard the injustices perpetrated on a problematic group in society through a process akin to dehumanising them or at least presenting them as not typical of society in general. These people are not like the rest of us, in the words of a former UK prime minister David Cameron, the 'hard working families'. If this proposition is accepted then it seems to reinforce the idea that political ideology rather than financial austerity influenced the way the government changed how they provided for vulnerable families, as with the Troubled Families agenda and targeting Children's Centre services.

A Discourse of Change

A discourse of change was a theme that dominated the speaker's social constructions of Children's Centres. Extract seven revealed a speaker constructing a reality of an out of touch government. Van Heerde-Hudson & Campbell (2015) suggested that the public were increasingly feeling that politicians were out of touch with them, the electorate. The political classes were being viewed as unable to connect with the lives of ordinary people because they 'are increasingly drawn from a narrowing middle class—a privileged class' (Van Heerde-Hudson & Campbell, 2015, p. 1). If the view of a blinkered political class is accepted, it provides a credible explanation for the lack of political will by governments' post 2010 to maintain and nurture the Children's Centre programme. If the politicians had no real understanding or empathy for the challenges ordinary citizens let alone vulnerable citizens were facing at a human level and economics aside, how could they value what Children's Centres did for those ordinary people. One other interpretation is that an out of touch government rather than lacking any empathy because of social isolation was just ineffective or incompetent. There is support for this assertion in the exchanges between Gymiah and parliament's Education Committee over the purpose and direction of Children's Centres (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015).

Gymiah was challenged over a lack response by the Department for Education to the Education Committees recommendations and calls for action in April 2014 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014b). Gymiah was still bullish and defiant about the government's strategy when giving evidence to the committee in March 2015 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). By July 2015 Gymiah had announced the intention to consult about the purpose of Children's Centres and in September

2015 suspended Ofsted's new cycle of inspection of centres (Gymiah, 2015). This suggests an ineffective government, slow to acknowledge, reactive rather than proactive in its policy making. This also suggests an arrogant government entrenched in the beliefs of its own political ideology.

In extracts eight a discourse of change was constructed to suggest what motivations lay behind the government's change agenda for Children's Centres. Speaker one identified political dogma and ideology as one of the defining motivations for the government to changes to Children's Centres. Speaker one argued that 'maybe the change of government as you know that that government just wants to wipe them out because it was brought in by a different government'. This construction was consistent with the earlier suggestion that political ideology was a key aspect for what was happening to Children's Centres. There was a significant drop in the number of Children' Centres from the 2010 highpoint of 3,631 down to 3,116 by 2013 (NCB, 2013). The figures for closed centres had reached 2,816 by December 2014 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). In March 2015 Alex Cunningham a member of the Education Select Committee saw no signs of this catastrophic decline abating and suggested the figures for centres closing could be even worse (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). This appears to give credence to the fears of the speaker in extract eight, the government's aim for Children's Centres was to 'wipe them out'. This suggests a government that wanted to rationalise the number of centres; not because of financial austerity or because a change in their purpose would satisfy a demand for value for money. Instead the aim was to 'wipe them out' because Children's Centres were not consistent with their political dogma.

Conclusion

The four dominant discourses identified in this research have revealed the plight Children's Centre services faced and still face in England. A discourse of recognition constructed a reality of Children's Centres workers lacking recognition for the work they did. A discourse of pragmatism revealed the link between the change for Children's Centres from a core offer to a core purpose because of political dogma. A discourse of pessimism revealed the variety of constructions by speakers relating to austerity and a discourse of change is suggested to ultimately reveal the real intended change for Children's Centres in England, and that is their extinction.

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