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Neoliberalism, global poverty policy and early childhood education and care – a critique of local uptake in England

Abstract

The global rise of a neoliberal ‘new politics of parenting’ discursively constructs parents in poverty as the reason for, and remedy to, child poverty. This allows for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to become a key policy lever by using human technologies to intervene in and regulate the lives of parents and children in poverty. The article explores the uptake of this policy locally through interviews with 30 ECEC practitioners in three locations across England. The interviews suggested that the neoliberal discursive formation of child poverty as a problem of the poor themselves had symbolic power and was shared by most of the interviewees. But this worked to restrict their thinking and action, shaping a limited engagement with parents in poverty. Delivering curricular requirements was seen to further delimit practitioners’ practices with children in poverty by reducing their poverty sensitivity. Although this is a small study, its findings may be of value in questioning neoliberal logics, and their implications are considered critically.

Neoliberalism and ‘the new politics of parenting’

Neoliberalism is ‘the grand narrative of our time’ (Moss, 2014: 60) and is ‘both an approach to government and a defining political movement... In both senses, neoliberalism is grounded in the assumption that governments cannot create economic growth or provide social welfare’ (Bockman, 2013: 14). By the 1970s, the rise of Neoliberalism was evidenced by policies outlined in ‘The Washington Consensus’ (Pemberton et al, 2012: 20). These criticized statist models of welfare and argued that the welfare state negatively impacts on people, including the poor. The continuing neoliberal claim is that ‘private companies, private individuals, and, most importantly, unhindered markets are best able to generate economic growth and social welfare’ (Brockman, 2013: 14). Since the 1970s, global crises across capitalist societies - such as the oil crisis, fiscal crises, stagflation and the debt crisis – encouraged political leaders in these societies as they began to ‘forge neoliberal states’ (Bockman, 2013: 14). Within this neoliberal political project there is a desire to re-structure and subordinate welfare provision to market forces as neoliberal privileging of market solutions to social problems is accompanied by a desire to reform the welfare state itself. This process rearticulates welfare around the neoliberal logics of market and self-responsibility, ‘which act to shift responsibility for social problems from the state to the individual’ (Wright, 2011: 279). There is a defining of social problems such as child poverty not as structural problems which are the by-product of the demand side of the market economy, but rather as rooted in ‘troubled families’ and the ‘problem’ behaviours of parents (Levitas, 2012: 453).

As such, accompanying the emergence of neoliberalism, parenting has become politicised and importantly 'a new politics of parenting' has emerged (Gillies, 2008). This is an international perspective, which positions parenting as a global issue (Faircloth et al, 2013; Yeates, 2008). Parenting is now viewed as an assessable practice with a high level of political significance. With the neoliberal challenge to the welfare state, increasingly it has been families and parents, specifically mothers, that are being held accountable for their children's success or failure with regard to social (im)mobility and whether or not they are in poverty over time. Across several nation states, parenting has been constructed as the source of, and solution to, a number of social problems. There are differing national trends in regard to how the significance of parenting has emerged (Faircloth et al, 2013). 'Most 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). Within the UK the influence of this political discourse is evident in the way in which parenting and parental responsibilities have been significantly reconceptualised since the Thatcher era (Montgomery, 2013: 22). The New Labour governments (1997-2010) explicitly related parenting to their overall strategy to tackle social ills via a so-called 'third way' approach, thus attempting to fuse neoliberal and social democratic political ideas. The welfare approach of the current UK Coalition government (2010-present) signalled some initial continuity but also change to the principles underpinning New Labour's welfare policy. In particular, since 2010 there have been 'increased expectations on families and more targeted interventions' (Baldock et al, 2013: 33). 'For a small minority of troubled families [originally the term used was families with 'multiple disadvantages'] we have no option but to intervene, in the interests of their children, their neighbours and the wider community – to try to turn their lives around' (HMG, 2012).

Remediating child poverty via ECEC

Neoliberalism and the associated 'new politics of parenting' are the 'grand narratives' which have shaped and framed recent developments in ECEC (Moss, 2014: 2). This is certainly true in regard to the positioning of ECEC as a key policy mechanism to address child poverty (Yeates, 2008). Constructing child poverty as a problem of the 'troubled' behaviours of the poor themselves has allowed for it to be made amenable to a particular diagnosis and treatment. ECEC is seen as central to this treatment and across many developed countries it has increasingly been imposed as a key solution to longstanding social problems, ensuring disadvantaged families are implicated and targeted (OECD, 2012; Faircloth et al, 2013; Field, 2010; Allen, 2011). The underpinning neoliberal logic is captured by Moss (2014: 3) – 'find, invest in and apply the correct human technologies – aka 'quality' – during early childhood and you will get high returns on investment including improved education, employment and earnings and reduced social problems'. Essentially, the 'early intervention' of the state involves facilitating 'social investment' in ECEC services delivered within a market of public, private and voluntary organisations – the 'mixed economy of care'. Central and local government are involved mainly in the 'remote control' and regulation of these ECEC services and their work with the poor, although in some cases further 'early intervention' is deemed necessary

Evidence suggests that ECEC can be of benefit to children in poverty. There is a high level of understanding about how poverty negatively permeates every facet of

children's lives materially, educationally, socially and psychologically (Coghlan et al, 2009; Hansen et al, 2010; Ridge, 2011). Equally, evidence also points to 'what works' in regard to the human technologies – the methods of organisation and techniques – for addressing issues around child poverty. Research demonstrates that poverty is related to outcomes, but that the quality of what parents do with their children can make a difference, whatever their background, to these outcomes (Desforges and Aboucharr, 2003). Hence the focus on ECEC services working closely with parents. Evidence also suggests that good quality ECEC provision can help improve the learning and cognitive development of pre-school children in poverty (Dickerson & Popli, 2012). As such, examples of technologies that are said to work include parenting interventions which attempt to boost a parent's (usually the mother's) education so they can pass on positive learning behaviours to their young children. Also high quality early childhood learning provision directed at helping children from all backgrounds to make good progress is considered essential.

The power of this global discourse was evidenced by the UK's first national child poverty strategy 2011-14 (DWP & DfE, 2011) and in the updated strategy for 2014-17 (Her Majesty's Government, 2014). The technologies mentioned above feature prominently within the 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 strategy suggests ECEC can work to improve the quality of parenting and also to free up parents 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 and DfE, 2011: 43; Her Majesty's Government, 2014: 14). The initial 2011-14 strategy confirmed the retention of free education places for 3 and 4 year old children and the extension of these free education places to 'the most disadvantaged' 2 year olds in England. The strategy also advocated 'targeted help to the most disadvantaged families' via early intervention (DWP and DfE, 2011: 63) – what has become known as the 'troubled families programme'.

The suggestion within the child poverty strategy under the Coalition government about the poor themselves being responsible for their own condition has been heavily criticised and is highly controversial (Levitas, 2012). To support this claim, the strategy contains a discursive representation and pathologising of those with low household income as 'troubled families' but in an increasingly pejorative way, explicitly suggesting that 'welfare dependency' is passed down through generations within families (DWP and DfE, 2011: 3; Her Majesty's Government, 2014: 18). This pathologising of parents in poverty normalises poverty and suggests it is inevitable because parents choose to be workless and that an alleged cultural deficit handicaps the parenting skills of the poor and their relations with their children. It conveniently side-lines the fact that over 60% of children in poverty reside in a household where at least one parent works. Increasingly, this pathologising has also been accompanied by a biologisation of poverty which promotes the idea that parents in poverty through their inept parenting practices are also damaging their children's brains and development (Edwards et al, 2014). A lack of any credible evidence in support of either the pathologising or biologising of the poor (Edwards et al, 2014) has not stopped these ideas being presented as 'truth' in government documents such as the child poverty strategy. They have also therefore become

highly influential. As will be considered in the remainder of this paper, in this sense the Coalition government's child poverty strategy is about symbolic power and it represents a dominant discourse which seeks to apply a decisive influence both to the poor and to the ways in which ECEC settings and practitioners work with the poor across England.

Brodkin (2011; 254) observes that 'contemporary social policies attempt not only to reform individuals or social conditions – policy's manifest targets – but also to reform the organisations responsible for putting policy into practice'. But policy is a product of the prevailing political but also social context within which it is developed. As such, 'practitioners need to understand that policy... can be questioned; can be considered wrong and can be influenced by their own views and actions' (Baldock et al, 2013: 34). Based on the perspectives of a small sample of pre-school practitioners, the aim of the research therefore was to explore the direction of travel being taken with regard to ECEC as a key policy lever in addressing child poverty. The research tried to capture the lived realities and experiences of this small sample of practitioners as they sought to implement this policy and address child poverty – to therefore identify the everyday experiences of practitioners involved in the policy implementation process. Small qualitative studies are recognized as being ideal in meeting such an aim (Nias, 2002). As indicated in the following section, it is assumed that policy implementation is not mechanical, 'top-down' and easy to measure. Rather it is a complex process which requires an exploratory methodology which can do justice to this complexity. The remainder of this article is concerned with exploring the possibility of ECEC practitioners' views, meanings and actions contributing to shaping their engagement with policy discussions and their expectations concerning their place in addressing child poverty.

Research Methodology

Supported via a Small Research Grant from the British Academy the methodology used to complete this study was framed by a neo-pluralist theoretical framework which recognises how power can be concentrated across groups and individuals who can dominate the policy process. 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 OECD, World Bank and International Monetary Fund and it has been persuasive in shaping the approaches of welfare regimes across several advanced nation states (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 the authoritative 'top-down' imposition of values and policies is questionable. Implementation of policy is more complex than a 'top-down' process and, according to Ball (1994: 16), involves 'the cannibalised products of multiple influences and agendas'. The 'contribution of those that are not so powerful and are located outside of the centre' within the ECEC sector was therefore also potentially important in any consideration of the addressing of child poverty via ECEC services (Rabb, 1994: 10). Given this assumption about the nature of the policy process and the variability and importance of practitioners' perspectives in shaping their practices, a qualitative research approach was used to gather data across three locations in England. Qualitative methodology was felt to be essential because perspectives and practices are sensitive to contexts. Qualitative methodology also places an emphasis on

investigating the practitioners' interpretations and the negotiation involved in the policy implementation process in regard to working with parents and children in poverty.

As such, there was a central focus upon what ECEC practitioners think about the causes of child poverty and what they say they do in regard to addressing child poverty. Semi-structured interviews were the preferred method for gathering data. The interview guide included a common set of topics and open questions (Cohen et al, 2011). This allowed practitioners to answer the questions and discuss topics in their own way. It also meant that the interviews were flexible enough to allow the exploration of any potentially interesting avenues which might open up during interview. The interview questions included the following topics: background and experience of practitioners; current job role; details about interviewees' work settings; interviewees' understandings/definitions of child poverty and their perspectives on the causes and effects of child poverty; their individual role and the role of the setting in working to address child poverty; their support for children and parents in poverty including issues around practice, resources and effectiveness; partnership and joint-working in regard to addressing child poverty; perspectives on the future in regard to addressing child poverty; and also an opportunity for interviewees to ask or state anything which they felt was relevant to the topics that had been discussed. Thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken in three areas of England - 10 in the North East (Durham/Tees Valley); 10 in the South Midlands (Northamptonshire) and 10 in the West of England (Worcestershire/Herefordshire). The interviews were completed between late 2011 and 2012.

Forms of non-probability sampling were used. Variation sampling was utilized in the selection of locations. It was considered important to include areas where levels of deprivation and child poverty differ - as demonstrated by the *The English Indices of Deprivation 2010: Local Authority District Summaries* and its supplement *The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index*. OFSTED (2014) notes a relationship between poorer quality ECEC provision and the poorest areas of the country. One aspect of the project was therefore to explore whether the perspectives of practitioners differ according to the relative affluence or poverty of the geographical area where they are located. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 30 pre-school practitioners. Criteria for their selection included a requirement that they were at level 5 or above in regard to their place in the UK's National Qualifications Framework. This meant that they operated at 'Senior Practitioner', Head of Nursery, Teacher or Early Years Professional levels. These senior practitioners are key to leading, managing and/or delivering the response of ECEC in addressing child poverty. Furthermore, there is a relationship between competent staff and higher level of qualification which is considered to be one of the most important predictors of quality within the ECEC sector (Urban et al, 2012). 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. They worked in a variety of roles in a range of settings within the ECEC market. The sample included 8 Heads or Managers of Settings (most of whom had a practice role); 12 Senior Practitioners in the Early Years; 8 Sure Start Children Centre Workers (including roles such as Positive Parenting Tutor and Childcare Facilitator); and 2 others including a Childminder and Local Authority Foster Parent who was a previous Deputy Manager in nurseries.

The project's theoretical framework drew on neo-pluralist and critical realist assumptions about the possibility of practitioners' dispositions making a contribution to what they are doing to implement child poverty policy (Archer 2003). So although they were potentially influenced by wider structural organisation and relations and powerful discourses therein, their views might differ and practitioners' agency could also potentially be important in shaping practice. Insight from theory outlining ideological perspectives on child poverty (Ismael, 2006: 5) and the ideas of Moss (2014: 3) identifying how there are many 'stories' (theories or explanations) which are used to represent ECEC as an institution and practice also offered insight – particularly the current dominant theory of 'quality and high returns' underpinned by neoliberal ideas. Within this overarching framework, theme analysis was used; this is 'a process of working with raw [qualitative] data to identify and interpret key ideas or themes' (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 373). Within interview studies, it involves preliminary analysis and the reading of all transcripts and the identification of initial themes. As indicated, the interviews were semi-structured so some themes which were potentially of interest had already been identified prior to the main analysis. But as the child poverty strategy indicates that working with parents is a key element of what practitioners should be doing this was obviously going to be important in interpreting and making sense of the data. These themes therefore underpinned the main analysis and the segmentation and categorization of data and linkages (inferences) being made between these categories or themes. As part of this main analysis process, summary charts were made for the ten interviews in each area. These allowed for data from within one case (interview) to be scrutinized but also it was a way of looking at each initial category (theme) across interviews. For instance, these tables allowed a link to be made between what a practitioner said were the main causes of child poverty and what they and their setting do in addressing child poverty. These themes contained sub-themes such as working with parents or practice with children. All names used below are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of those interviewed.

Findings

As indicated, ECEC settings/ practitioners working with parents in poverty and providing their children with good quality early education are the key practice technologies identified as important to addressing child poverty. Through pathologising disadvantaged parents the neoliberal 'new politics of parenting' constructs and articulates child poverty as a problem of the poor and their deficient subjectivities - thus making this 'problem' amenable to diagnosis and treatment via ECEC services and human technologies. But this caricature is not necessarily a reflection of social reality, rather it is a discursive formation that supports political direction in a context where competition exists between political discourses. It articulates a 'mode of rationality' (Clegg, 1989) which offers direction to ECEC services as the preferred mechanism for addressing child poverty. But did ECEC practitioners share and adopt this discourse?

Symbolic power and working with parents in poverty

The child poverty strategy's pathologising of the poor and its outlining of the role of ECEC practitioners is about symbolic power – i.e. discipline used to control both the poor and those agencies such as ECEC who receive investment to work with the poor in a way which is said to promote quality and remediate disadvantage. Moss

notes that this neoliberal promotion of ECEC across several nation states is 'a story of quality and high return' and concerns control and calculation. He claims it is about projecting 'a regime of truth' that exercises power over thoughts and actions while directing or governing action (2014: 4). As indicated, the Coalition's poverty strategy makes parents in poverty amenable to treatment which is directed at addressing their alleged deficiencies. The majority of practitioners interviewed (22 of 30) shared this neoliberal logic and defined and constructed child poverty as a problem rooted in parents' negative subjectivities, dispositions, behaviours, motivation and/or undesirable values and practices. They mentioned how parents in poverty have a culture of poverty which is inter-generational and claimed poor families consequently have embedded patterns of behaviour and an acceptance of being workless and poor. This means they are unlikely to do anything which might help them 'break the cycle' and lift themselves and their children out of poverty- so these practitioners also suggested that escaping poverty is something largely down to individuals. As the examples below indicate, these practitioners did not mention social structural inequality as a primary cause for child poverty and its perpetuation:

NE9 – Sandy – Senior Practitioner - it is a circle, I think they get into a rut. Like grandparents have never worked and parents don't work and you just...our job I always think our job is to break that cycle and get them to be motivated to learn and get the education to break that cycle

N8 – Dolores – Senior Practitioner (Room Manager) – I look at it and think well poverty could have been just a fact of families that don't seem...that are quite happy to sit at home and not necessarily try and find themselves work and better themselves;

W2 - Kasey – Children's Centre Manager - unfortunately for some of those families, because they've been in the poverty cycle, it's become culturally embedded in them, that becomes a disadvantage in itself. I think it's about parents wanting to come out of poverty;

A minority of interviewees (8 of 30) suggested that parents in poverty are victims of a 'poverty trap' because they lacked opportunities and resources which could be accessed to help them address poverty. They also indicated that families often faced difficult conditions of choice in which strategies – e.g. to 'stick with the social' (N2 – Abigail – Deputy Nursery Manager) – involved making unpalatable decisions to 'cope' with the daily struggle attached to living in poverty. These interviewees placed more importance on job loss, unemployment and consequently low income – although at the time of interview across all three locations there was little recognition of how the majority of children 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:

N6 – Deirdrie – Manager (Senior Practitioner) – my understanding of child poverty is there are many factors that could come into it. It could be housing issues. It could be a workless household.... My understanding now is it could be changing because there are parents who are working that are just meeting

their family needs and just having enough money to pay everything. But there's no extra money for if the child needs a school uniform or something.

Most of the practitioners interviewed therefore shared the neoliberal construction and attribution of cause, blame and responsibility for child poverty and in this sense this discursive formation held symbolic power. It was not a central focus of the research to explain why the majority held a different view to the minority. Surprisingly because it may appear counter intuitive, those in Northamptonshire and Worcestershire, where there is greater starkness in regard to poverty and socio-economic inequality (Campaign to End Child Poverty, 2013), were more likely to adopt a more sympathetic view of parents in poverty. Whether or not practitioners worked in Sure Start Children's Centres did not appear to make a difference to which view was held. But the symbolic power of the more negative views held by most in the sample was demonstrated in the tacit assumption by those practitioners holding it for their work with parents in poverty to be about the latter changing as a way of addressing their deficiencies and problems. If they did not do so it was the fault of the parents in poverty and there was little that they as practitioners could do:

W2 - Kasey – Children's Centre Manager - I think it's about parents wanting to come out of poverty. Until they're ready to engage, you can put as many services in as you like, but until they're ready to say, "Actually I want something different for me and for my family." Then it won't happen.

Defining poverty as a result of parental deficiency therefore appeared embedded within the relations the majority of those interviewed tried to establish with parents in poverty. As a result practitioners mentioned an approach which stressed inequality rather than reciprocity (Vandenbroeck, 2014). This appeared important in explaining why many in this small sample reported difficulties in building trust-based relations with parents in poverty. Practitioners hinted that parents they tried to 'reach' were suspicious and reluctant to accept practitioner dominance over them through an approach which emphasises the need for parents to change while lacking co-construction (Vandekerckhove and Vbijk, 2014).

NE2 – Anne – Pre-School Manager - I did healthy packed lunches because the packed lunches were like, oh, my word. And like I say I'm not the best – I'm no trying to dictate to people but it was, well, I've got a piece of fruit and bread, all this kind of thing, don't try and tell us what to do. Don't try and tell us what to put in our children's packed lunch, who do you think you are sort of thing which I found quite funny to be honest.

But, in contrast, the minority of practitioners who constructed poverty as something which was largely beyond the control of parents themselves indicated some success in engaging and building reciprocity with parents in poverty. They adopted an approach which did not assume a deficit model of parents. Consequently they appeared to consider equality, 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 – Deputy Nursery Manager - 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.

Bounded pedagogy and reduced poverty sensitivity

Just as the neoliberal political project identifies parents in poverty as amenable to treatment and control, their children are also a prime target for governing with a view to benefiting them, their neighbourhoods and wider society. To this end, recently there has been 'the rigorous application of potent human technologies to ensure young children conform to the same universal, comparable and centralized standards, whether these be norms of child development or mandated learning goals' (Moss, 2014: 41). But it is feared the function of such technologies is to 'classify, measure and regulate' in the early years and to normalize and 'determine how children should be' while potentially downplaying what is really taking place in the lives of young children – in 'the complex, contextualized and perspectival' reality in which they are situated (Moss, 2014: 42). In regard to the reality of the lives of children in poverty, research which has consulted directly with them reveals how poverty:

penetrates deep into the heart of childhood, permeating every facet of children's lives from economic and material disadvantage, through the structuring and limiting of social relationships and social participation to the most personal often hidden aspects of disadvantage associated with shame, sadness and the fear of social difference and marginalisation' (Ridge, 2011: 73).

Quality ECEC with children therefore needs to be poverty sensitive by recognising the potentially profound influence of poverty, inequality and social disadvantage on children's lives. Poverty sensitivity means practitioners will be sensitive to the fact a sizeable minority of children (almost 1 in 4 and more than this in specific areas across England) are entering settings with needs related to the disadvantage they and their families are experiencing. Poverty sensitivity means practitioners will recognize how through their practice meeting these needs will be a challenge (and this does not mean a problem) and will also mean children in poverty require particularized attention. Poverty sensitivity therefore also means practitioners will be committed to listening to parents and children in poverty by way of making a real difference in their lives. Children will not be made passive and their needs will be central to a poverty sensitive practitioner's practice when delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as a 'technology', i.e. as a form of organisation, procedure and a body of knowledge. But poverty sensitivity cannot be assumed and there is a gap in the knowledge base in this regard. One study from the United States is now dated but it found that practitioners working in childcare centres serving low income families 'were observed to be less sensitive [to needs] and more harsh' when

interacting with families and children in poverty than those practitioners in centres serving children and families from higher-income brackets (Phillips et al, 1994: 472).

Across England the EYFS aims to classify, measure and regulate by providing an 'abstract map of how children are supposed to be at given age' (Moss, 2014: 41). But concerns have been expressed that the use of such a technology could mean ECEC practitioners 'lose sight of what is taking place in the everyday lives of children' as 'the child becomes an object of normalisation' (Dahlberg et al, 2013: 39). This has been called a 'process of complexity and diversity reduction' whereby 'the singularity of the child is grasped, not respected' (Moss, 2014: 42). Reassuringly the singularity of the child is meant to underpin delivery of the EYFS – 'a unique child' plus 'positive relationships' plus 'enabling environments' are meant to result in good quality 'learning and development' preparing children for school. But some interviewees revealed a worrying tendency to ignore diversity thus potentially downplaying individual needs. So, although a small number of interviewees talked about providing food and clothing to children, including children not in poverty, interviewees also provided evidence suggesting that children in poverty could become passive objects. This applies especially to those needs which might not show up so obviously, such as psychological injuries attached to living in difficult circumstances associated with poverty:

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.

W8 – Kara – Nursery Owner Senior Practitioner) - It's not something that we do differently but in any nursery in any setting, if I worked in the poshest area in Kensington, I'd still react to children the same way as I react to any child, whether the child's deprived or whether the child comes from a very affluent background. To me, a child's a child who needs the same;

Interviewees also revealed how they appeared to find it difficult to move beyond their focus on EYFS and how the issue of poverty was largely not prioritized.

NE3 – Louise – Sure Start Specialist Project Worker - we never discuss anything like that [child poverty]... it's just all around getting the best outcome for the child... where their development level is. So obviously there's a lacking in speech so we want to promote that... it's obviously nursery care isn't it so it would be on EYFS;

N8 - Dolores – Senior Practitioner (Room Manager) - 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'.

In using the EYFS to classify, interviewees spoke of knowing where children were in regard to developmental measures. But little indication of using the monitoring data in a particularised way to inform any tailored approach when working with individual and groups of children in poverty was identified. Some interviewees claimed involvement in the 2 year old pilot helped raise awareness of poverty as an issue – but not always convincingly, as Lola's comments below indicate:

Kiki – Senior Practitioner - They're coming in and they're meeting targets similar to their peers... 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... [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.

Lola – Early Years Professional - 'the two year pilot has definitely, for me professionally, has definitely opened my eyes'... [But later in the interview talking about prioritizing child poverty] 'I would say we don't necessarily or have needed to'!

Discussion and conclusion

Neoliberal ideology and an associated 'new politics of parenting' has influenced the diffusion of an approach to child poverty which sees ECEC services move from optional extra to key policy lever. This global phenomenon is evident across several nation states. Within the UK, successive central governments have promoted ECEC as a tool for remediating child poverty through practitioners intervening in the lives of parents and children in poverty to help them improve their human capital, dispositions and behaviours. The take up of this policy was scrutinized locally via the perspectives of 30 ECEC practitioners in three geographical areas of England. Data from the 30 interviewees suggest that the approach they adopted to working with parents and children in poverty was highly influenced by contextual circumstances. Contextually, the neoliberal construction of child poverty as a problem of the poor and their deficient subjectivities appeared to have symbolic power. Indeed, most of the 30 practitioners who were interviewed shared this discursive formation. But this included an underpinning condemnatory stance which, rather than promoting engagement with parents in poverty, paradoxically, appeared to restrict their thinking and actions in this respect. There was little opposition from interviewees to this discursive conflation of poverty with poor parents and parenting practices. Interviewees' data also suggested their use of EYFS and its development goals shaped and compelled their performance in a way which reduced their poverty sensitivity.

In terms of limitations, it is important to acknowledge that small qualitative studies such as this one lack external validity, meaning that generalising the findings of a study involving only 30 practitioners is problematic. However, while contested, a belief that one must choose between an interpretive qualitative approach, which

rejects all generalization, and a positivist quantitative approach dependent on statistical generalizations has been termed 'simplistic' (Payne and Williams, 2005). Many accept that qualitative research can claim wider relevance in the sense that it can bring knowledge into view which refutes certain more widely held assumptions about the everyday world while penetrating fronts, uncovering meanings and revealing complexity. So a strength of this small qualitative study lies in how it moves beyond 'official' explanations of what ECEC is doing in tackling child poverty to reveal concerns and discrepancies which are associated with the everyday life of practitioners within this policy process. In this sense it is recognized that attached to small qualitative projects there is the possibility for an intermediate type of limited generalization, known as '*moderatum* generalization'. The latter is moderate in two senses – 1) 'there is no attempt to produce sweeping... statements that hold good over long periods of time'; and 2) claims based on such small studies 'are testable propositions that might be confirmed or refuted through further evidence' (Payne and Williams, 2005: 296).

Indeed, this research suggests there is a need to collect further evidence to test out some of the findings from this small sample. This is important as there are approximately 2.8 million children currently living in poverty in the UK, 21% of all children. Research recognises that the quality of nursery provision for children in disadvantaged areas is of a poorer standard than in more affluent areas. Consequently there have been calls for the raising of staff qualifications to address this 'quality gap'. But there is a continued poverty penalty by the end of pre-school in England with the 'outcomes gap' between children from low-income families and their better-off peers not reducing but remaining stubbornly resistant, particularly in relation to language and communication skills. This is across all settings including those where quality of provision is identified as being relatively high based on measures used such as versions of *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales* (Mathers and Rees, 2014: 5). This research may offer insights as to why. For example, the data in this study raises questions about whether qualification level is always linked to quality when it comes to working with parents and children in poverty. All interviewees in this research were senior practitioners and relatively highly qualified. Yet the data suggests the approach adopted by these 30 practitioners will struggle to have a significant influence in regard to ensuring 'quality and high returns' (Moss, 2014: 3) expected of ECEC by policy in the remediation of child poverty.

To its credit, in the autumn of 2014 the UK Coalition government intends to extend the pupil premium to the early years with an aim to support disadvantaged 3 and 4 year olds. Previously, in 2011 the child poverty strategy mentioned 'empowering practitioners to do more for the most disadvantaged' (DWP and DfE 2011, 35). The pupil premium in the early years would seem to offer them the ideal opportunity to do so. But there is a concern raised by this research that the Coalition's 'mode of rationality' offering direction to ECEC services to address child poverty and mandates of the EYFS in regard to assessment and accountability may potentially reduce the quality of provision made by practitioners for the disadvantaged – even where delivered by well-qualified staff. As such, although small in scale, this research highlights a need to avoid macro-blindness in the pursuit of quality provision for the most disadvantaged children and parents. Further research is required to explore whether we are witnessing what has been described as the

Coalition government's 'fantasies of empowerment' in education 'which conceal the subordination of actors to... neoliberal logics' (Wright, 2012: 279).

Therefore, it is hoped that the above findings potentially allow reflection and questioning of the neoliberal logics which underpin current ECEC policy and working practices both in England - but also globally. It is important to create an ECEC context where competition can be created between discourses so that alternative courses of action can be considered. But what comes through in the narratives of the interviewees is that they seldom have the opportunity, time and space to question the ideas which shape their approaches. One way in which this might be done is to pilot a 'poverty proofing' toolkit for early years staff, similar to those developed by the charity Children North-East for primary and secondary schools. The Education Endowment Foundation notes that early intervention in the early years is expensive but is relatively effective in regard to impact. A poverty proofing toolkit could be relatively inexpensive but facilitate reflection which could help to prioritize poverty as an issue and improve poverty sensitivity.

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