

# CHAPTER 1

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY YEARS POLICY

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## Overview

The aim of this book is to explore early years policy and the ways in which policy is formulated and in turn impacts on services, practitioners and their practice, from predominantly an England perspective but informed, where relevant, by wider international perspectives. In this, the first chapter, we describe the structure and rationale of the book and we signal some of the key themes and issues that are developed in the ensuing chapters.

We begin by considering what policy is and why it should matter to early years practitioners. We then introduce the four parts of the book which link to key overarching themes: Part 1: Poverty and social disadvantage; Part 2: The evidence

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base for early intervention; Part 3: Marketisation and democracy; and Part 4: Frameworks, regulations and guidelines. Some chapters give an account of how policy is conceived, developed and implemented; others review the evidence base for current policy directions and initiatives. Some chapters are written by academics and researchers and others by those directly involved in policy development and implementation.

In this book, and in all the books in this series, we use the terms early years and early childhood education and care (ECEC) interchangeably. 'Early years' is a term more commonly used in the United Kingdom (UK) to reflect the bringing together of both care and education under one policy umbrella. However, both terms embrace the view that it is impossible to educate without caring, nor care without developing and promoting children's learning (Owen and Haynes, 2008). We also use the term *she* when referring to individuals to reflect the feminised nature of the early years workforce.



## What is policy and why does it matter?

The study of early childhood is quintessentially multi- and inter-disciplinary, because young children's lives and experience can't easily be partitioned into health, education and care; therefore, any study of early years policy will contain elements of health, education and social care/social welfare policy, which themselves have different traditions and exponents and have been linked historically with different departmental responsibilities at national government level in the UK.

National policy often seems remote to early years practitioners and other professionals working directly with children and families; it is not always recognised as affecting our services and lives. At most, it provides a framework that we are required to work within and is often considered uncontested because both the public and practitioners feel powerless to challenge. Policy initiatives are increasingly supported by guidelines and training through which ideas are communicated and legitimized as the best way forward. In this book, we take the view that it is essential for all practitioners and others committed to early years services to achieve not just an awareness of policy and its implications for practice, but what Simpson and Connor have termed 'policy literacy': 'Policy literacy aims to make recipients and practitioners of social welfare more critical and discriminating readers, performers and producers of policies' (2011: 2).

They describe three phases in the achievement of policy literacy:

- 1 Understanding policies and their impact on the lives of children and families.
- 2 Learning to analyse and question the basis, construction and coverage of policies including what is missed out.

- 3 Exploring underlying issues and principles behind policy formation, including: whose interests a particular policy ultimately serves? Whose viewpoints are represented (or ignored)? What are the alternatives? And, how can existing policy be challenged?

Through consideration of the development and implementation of recent policies across the education, health and social care/social welfare spectrum, in England and elsewhere, this book attempts to lead readers through phase 1 and phase 2 above and to start to raise some of the questions that constitute phase 3. In other words, it highlights the relevance of policy and policy making to all those involved with early years and supports the trajectory of thinking from the personal to the political.

## Part 1: Poverty and social disadvantage

A key aim of most governments is to reduce and preferably eliminate poverty and social disadvantage in young children and to ensure their well-being. In 1997–2010, under the Labour government in the UK, early years became the target of wide-spread reform aimed at supporting families in combining work and caring responsibilities and thus addressing the high level of child poverty (OECD, 2011). Before the current financial crisis, child poverty fell in the UK more than in any other OECD country but this is now predicted to increase because of cuts to, for example, child and family benefits – regardless of the fact that the OECD (2011) report *Doing Better for Families* argues for social spending as a long-term solution to poverty issues. In Chapter 2, Naomi Eisenstadt describes the policy background in Britain and explores the challenges of establishing a new model of service provision for young children and families, aimed at reducing child poverty through ‘progressive universalism’; that is, designing public services to ensure maximum support for the most disadvantaged, while avoiding stigma and ensuring a minimum service base for all. Sure Start was targeted at poor areas in the UK and aimed to ameliorate the negative impact of living in poverty for very young children and their families. Eisenstadt discusses the origins and development of the programme as grounded in local communities and designed to respond to local needs. The chapter considers the lessons learned as Sure Start moved towards a more standardised universal model based on Children’s Centres and considers implications for future policy.

Sue Owen, Caroline Sharp and Jenny Spratt continue the theme of universal versus targeted provision in Chapter 3, when they focus on policies and practice change aimed at: (a) improving developmental outcomes for all young children entering school; and (b) narrowing the gap between the poorest, most disadvantaged children and the rest (see also Chapter 10). Through an illustrative case study, they explore the issues and problems which can arise when policy objectives such as these appear in practice to be difficult to achieve simultaneously. They argue for specific, targeted interventions, within a universal framework, in order to address the challenge of narrowing the gap of disadvantage.

## Part 2: The evidence base for early intervention

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The chapters in this section contribute to our understanding of the evidence that can be used to support and justify early years policies and practice initiatives, particularly by exploring the more scientific/medical aspects around brain development and psycho-physiological regulation with which many early years practitioners are less familiar. This evidence complements and adds to the now considerable weight of evidence to emerge from a series of important reviews commissioned by successive governments and undertaken in England between February 2010 and May 2011. These include: Frank Field's (November 2010) review of poverty and life chances, *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults*; Graham Allen's (2011) review *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*; Michael Marmot's review of health inequalities, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*, originally published in February 2010 and updated on its anniversary in 2011; Dame Claire Tickell's review of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning* (March 2011); *The Munro Review of Child Protection Report: A Child-centred System* (May 2011). All of these reviews have emphasised the critical importance of the early years for development and well-being throughout the life span and called for greater investment in early years services and better training of personnel. At the time of writing, the government has yet to publish a definitive response to all of the above. A revised Workforce Strategy for the early years sector is also anticipated in order to meet the challenges of implementing any recommendations arising from the reviews.

The main purpose of such reviews has been to create the evidence base on which future government policy can be formulated. This follows on from a decade or more in which 'evidence-based practice' has been espoused for the development of professional areas such as nursing, teaching and social work. Adopting an evidence-based approach implies that policy making is a rational process of evaluating the evidence and applying that knowledge to formulate policy within budgetary constraints. However, as we shall see through this book, fundamentally policy making is as much about values, moral and political judgements as it is about evidence. Core values and political ideologies underpin the direction of travel in policy because they determine the end point in terms of what sort of society we want to live in, what sort of childhood we want for our children and what sort of people we want those children to become.

Angela Underdown and Jane Barlow in Chapter 4 argue that evidence from brain research and observational data demonstrates the particular importance of the first and second years of life, in terms of infants' brain development and emotional attachments as the foundation for good developmental outcomes and later mental health. They make a strong case for intervening at the earliest stages of life through a partnership approach to working with parents as enshrined in the Healthy Child Programme (HCP). Based on a model of progressive universalism (see above), the HCP promotes services that begin during pregnancy through to the first year of life to help parents to provide sensitive, responsive parenting and so to promote brain growth and strong,

positive attachments. They conclude that early years practitioners have a key role in promoting infant mental health, by working alongside other practitioners in the delivery of the HCP.

Evidence, evaluated rigorously and applied rationally, is rarely the sole basis on which policy choices are made. However, in Chapter 5, Stuart Shanker and Roger Downer describe the origins and impact of the Enhancing Potential In Children (EPIC) project – a research-based programme investigating the neurobiological and social basis of children’s ability to ‘self-regulate’ – that may prove to be an exception. They identify the challenge of applying lessons learned from the laboratory into clinical practice and later up-scaling into workable curricula and environments for early years settings, while at the same time working to persuade policy makers of their value. In translating the scientific evidence into policy and practice, they describe the policy response in one state of Canada (Ontario) that in April 2010 agreed to start rolling out pre-school programmes based on EPIC principles, in order to increase the ability of children to achieve their full educational potential.

In Chapter 6, Mary Crowley returns to the theme of working in partnership with parents where she documents the gradual expansion of services and support for parents in England from the early 1990s until 2010, and the evidence base to support these developments. She discusses the important role of Parenting UK in developing training for work with parents, leading to the development of National Occupational Standards in this area. She notes the accumulating evidence for, and growth in awareness of, the importance of supporting parents amongst policy makers, including, increasingly, recognition of the role of fathers. The variety and scope of new services for parents have developed significantly over the last decade or so. However, not all parents are aware that support and help may be available. Crowley argues for investment in raising awareness and in training those who deliver parent support.

### **Part 3: Marketisation and democracy**

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National, international and global forces demand a well-qualified workforce with appropriate remuneration and working conditions, universal access to early childhood education and care, and substantial public investment in services and infrastructure (OECD, 2006). However, as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) discuss, global forces and international organisations may offer a blueprint of how things might be, but how institutions and services are conceptualised and viewed and how policy is determined remain the business of nation states. Such decisions will incorporate a notion of how societies should be and how children are viewed and valued. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) (and Moss in Chapter 7) offer the Swedish pre-school system as an example of pre-school education viewed as a public good and where a national pre-school curriculum makes a clear commitment to democracy as a fundamental value. In contrast, some economies, including England, have developed a trend towards a ‘market’ in early childhood provision which critics such as Woodrow (2011) believe lead to economics, rather than factors such as learning and well-being, being the driving factors

for investing in early years services. Within this approach to early childhood provision and services, education is seen as a commodity with practitioners accountable for effective delivery.

Peter Moss in Chapter 7 argues for democracy as a fundamental value in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and makes a case for alternative discourses to those of the market place. He argues for more ethical and democratic practices and considers the possibility of democracy as a fundamental value in early childhood centres. He considers what democracy might mean in the early childhood centre and offers examples of how it might be practised by adults and children alike. He considers factors and conditions that might either stifle democracy or enable democratic practice to flourish in early childhood education (ECE).

In Chapter 8, Eva Lloyd considers the marketisation of early childhood services and provision. She explains that different models of state support for early years education and childcare provision are employed across Europe and globally, but that most early years systems include a mix of both private (for-profit and not-for-profit) and publicly funded provision, often referred to as a mixed economy of childcare or the childcare market. In her chapter, she explores the rationale for, and the problems associated with, adopting a market-based approach. She focuses primarily on childcare market policy developments in England but also reviews national and international evidence of the impact of such an approach.

As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) note, institutionalisation of childhood can be a force for good, but it is imperative that practitioners are informed and vigilant and can maintain a critical stance in relation to both policy and practice (2005: vi). The role that professional development can play in enabling practitioners to become critical and aware is clearly articulated in Chapter 9. In this chapter, Dawn Tankersley, Gerda Sula and Ulviyya Mikayilova tell the fascinating story of the work of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and its member Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). They describe the role these organisations have played in working together to introduce a new paradigm of democratisation in the form of a child-centered approach to early childhood education, through professional training in the former communist bloc region. They describe how ISSA has brought new values and principles into the ECEC sector in the region and discuss how this work has positively influenced the behaviours and practice of many practitioners and contributed to the growth of democratic approaches in the wider society.

## Part 4: Frameworks, regulations and guidelines

Policy frameworks, regulations and guidelines can be both enabling and restrictive as we see in Chapters 10 and 11. They can empower children and families and those who work with them and ensure their entitlement to services and provision but can also, as we note above, be a means of legitimising questionable policy initiatives as being for the common good. As we discuss above, the period in which the Labour government was in power was a period of considerable policy change for early years in

England, which included the centralisation of regulation and inspection under Ofsted with national standards for early years provision, development of new professional roles and statuses (DfES, 2006), new qualification frameworks (CWDC, 2010) and new curriculum initiatives (DCSF, 2008).

Increased public investment requires greater accountability and brings with it greater monitoring and regulation of both people and public services which, it has been argued, reduces the professional autonomy of those working in the early years (see Miller and Cable, 2011 for critiques). In such a policy context, there is a danger that both practitioners' daily practice and children's progress and well-being are only measured and valued as 'outcomes' against externally prescribed standards and benchmarks to ensure that services are worth the investment.

In Chapter 10, Lesley Staggs returns to the theme of Chapter 2, of a universal framework for young children, but takes a different perspective. Drawing upon her personal and professional experience of policy development and implementation, she documents the trend towards a national and centralised form of curriculum and assessment strategy for young children in England, and describes how external and competing policies influenced its development and implementation. In particular, she notes the lack of government appetite for taking a long-term view of policy in favour of quick results.

Differences in curricular approaches stem from different conceptions of children and childhood, and as Bennett (2001) argues, developing and implementing curricula for young children involves making important decisions and choices about what and how they learn. The national education and assessment strategies Staggs describes, encompassing key learning areas, learning goals and a sequential approach to achievement, have been criticised as the 'schoolification' of early childhood with an over-emphasis on 'academic' provision for young children (OECD, 2006: 62), and for encouraging practitioners to focus on 'strategic compliance' with national requirements rather than playful learning (Goouch, 2008: 93).

Safeguarding is the theme of Chapter 11, where Wendy Rose explores the development and implementation of a policy framework as a mechanism for bringing about change in Scotland. She discusses part of a national programme which aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people and which emphasises the need for a deep change in culture, systems and practice rather than 'bolt-on' policies and superficial consultations, through a whole system change. She introduces the notion of 'proportionate universalism' as a means of reducing disadvantage in children's lives and the need for a unified and coordinated approach to intervention through multi-agency services and universal services to deliver prevention and early intervention.

## Final thoughts

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In this chapter, we have argued that policy matters for those who work with young children and families, and have introduced chapters from a range of perspectives that illustrate this point. However, we argue that to be aware of policy agendas and

developments is not enough. Practitioners need to develop their skills of analysis and critical evaluation, to question the link between evidence and the dominant discourse and to consider and reflect on the values and assumptions on which each policy is based.



### Summary

In this chapter, we have:

- introduced the four overarching themes which frame the chapters in this book: poverty and social disadvantage; the evidence base for early intervention; marketisation and democracy, and frameworks, regulations and guidelines
- encouraged you to begin to think about how and why policy matters in the early years
- introduced the notion of 'policy literacy' as a means of enabling practitioners working with young children and families to become more critical and reflective in relation to policies and related practices.



### Questions for discussion

- 1 Can you think of a recent policy change that has impacted on you or your practice? Can you say how and why?
- 2 Why is it important for education, health and social welfare/care professionals to work together?
- 3 What do you think are the benefits of a common framework encompassing skills, knowledge and competence for those working in early years services?  
(Higher-level question)

### Further reading



#### Levels 5 and 6

Baldock, P., Fitzgerald, D. and Kay, J. (2009) *Understanding Early Years Policy*, 2nd edition. London: Sage.

The authors provide an accessible introduction to early years policy and explore how policy is made, implemented and developed.

Frost, N. and Parton N. (2009) *Understanding Children's Social Care: Politics, Policy and Practice*. London: Sage.

This book describes and analyses the nature of social care in the UK, including its location in an historical and political context, an analysis of key areas of children's social care and an overview of social care in England at the time of writing.

### Levels 6 and 7

Jones, P. and Walker, G. (eds) (2011) *Children's Rights in Practice*. London: Sage.

In this book, conventions and legislation relating to children's rights and their implications from a range of professional perspectives are explored. The chapters include implications for child-centred policy, services and practice across education, health and health promotion, safeguarding and social care and a specific chapter on early years.

Miller, L. (2008) Developing professionalism within a regulatory framework in England: challenges and possibilities. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16(2): 255–68.

This article provides a critical review of policy developments leading to the creation of a new workforce role in England, the Early Years Professional, within the context of externally prescribed standards and regulatory frameworks.

Pugh, G. and Duffy, B. (eds) (2010) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years*, 5th edition. London: Sage.

The fifth edition of this book offers wide-ranging coverage of early years issues including a focus on health issues, multi-agency working, policy, research and practice.

### Websites



[www.cwdcouncil.org.uk](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk)

This website provides information, links to policy initiatives, publications and reports relating to early years workforce reform.

[www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

The stated mission of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

The OECD website for the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs ([www.oecd.org/departement/0,3355,en\\_2649\\_34819\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/departement/0,3355,en_2649_34819_1_1_1_1_1,00.html)) provides information, reports and publications relating to family policies in OECD countries.

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