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‘Seen but not heard’. Practitioners work with poverty and the organizing out of disadvantaged children’s voices and participation in the early years

Abstract

Living in poverty disadvantages young children reducing school readiness. ‘Pedagogy of listening’ can potentially support resilience remediating against poverty’s negative effects. Little, though, is known about how early childhood education and care practitioners work with children in poverty and the attainment gap between such children and their peers remains significant within England and the United States of America. This article reports research using a mixed methodology which explored these issues in localities across both these countries. We argue a dominant technocratic model of early years provision in these contexts creates normalization and diversity reduction. This, and austerity measures, stymie pedagogical space and practice organizing out listening to children in poverty. We suggest this may help explain why the attainment gap remains so stubbornly resistant to reduction across these countries.

Poverty and its mitigation via ECEC

The central aim of this research was to develop knowledge of early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners’ opinions about child poverty and how they work with poverty across several geographic locations in England and the United States of America (USA). In both countries poverty is defined by an income threshold and both have a high percentage of children in poverty compared to other developed countries. In the USA currently 21% (about 15 million) of all children live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold (National Centre for Children in Poverty, ONLINE) and in the UK 19% of children currently live in poverty and this rises to 29% (3.7 million) when housing costs are considered (End Child Poverty, 2016).

Living in poverty is predictive of negative outcomes in the early years, schooling and into adult life. Family income is used to explain why but increasingly a more polycentric approach to defining poverty, its causes and its effects on children has become important and influential in both England and the USA. This explanation suggests interconnected risk factors cause poverty. As such, in addition to income poverty, there is recognition children in poverty are also deprived educationally, socially, psychologically and through ill health and these factors reduce life chances. Definitions of poverty are important because from them policy and practice follow. Neoliberal ideology and its definition and approach to addressing poverty have been strongly influential in England and the USA.

Neoliberals place less priority on structural factors such as underemployment, unemployment and low incomes as causes of poverty and condemn the state's role in providing income transfers (via welfare benefits and tax credits) to remediate poverty because they claim these promote 'welfare dependency' and poor lifestyle choices made by individuals (DWP & DfE, 2011 and HMG, 2014). Rather neoliberalism supports the prioritizing of 'social investment' to improve life chances via access to services such as ECEC. Research demonstrates how ECEC has a positive effect on all children's outcomes (Field, 2010). ECEC also enables mothers to find employment, at least in theory, reinvigorating labour markets and reducing poverty (Simpson and Envy, 2015). ECEC has therefore been supported and expanded by neoliberal welfare regimes in England and the USA. Neoliberal polity valorizes a 'measurable, statistical and standards-based' technocratic model of quality in ECEC markets (Paanenen et al, 2015: 692) which acts as a management and accountability tool regulating practice while 'claiming to compare performance anywhere in the world, irrespective of context' (Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 5) – we return to this below and problematize this model of ECEC.

There is long-running debate about how far education can 'compensate' for background and the effects of structural factors in society (Bernstein, 1970), including a recent focus upon the early years (Brooker, 2015: 34). Poverty cannot be tackled by ECEC alone, but given the high levels of poverty mentioned above it is vital that it remains a priority area for ECEC. In the neoliberal context above, some have reasserted the importance of income poverty (Putnam, 2015) and economic capital - 'clearly ... money makes a difference to children's outcomes' because of 'the

stress and anxiety caused by low income (the Family Stress Model), and parents' restricted 'ability to invest in goods and services that further child development (the Investment Model)' (Cooper and Stewart, 2013: 05). Others offer a phenomenology of poverty drawing on post-structural (e.g. Bourdieu) and bioecological (e.g. Bronfenbrenner) theories respectively to highlight ways in which socio-economic status works through economic capital but also cultural capital, place and relationships at several levels including the family to influence the educational transitions, learning experiences, life chances and subjectivities of young children (Brooker, 2015; Siraj and Mayo, 2014). Siraj and Mayo highlight the potential of ECEC in building resilience across learning biographies of children in poverty. Resilience is the 'outcome of dynamic developmental processes rather than an observable personality trait of an individual' and is claimed to provide young children in poverty with 'the capacity to cope with life's setbacks and challenges'. It 'follows when the cumulative effects of 'protective' factors in the child, and in the life and environment in which the child develops outweigh the negative effects of 'risk' factors in that child or in their socio-cultural context' (2014, 6). Attending ECEC provision is potentially one such protective factor.

The importance of listening to children in poverty

Listening is central to foundational and contemporary theories and approaches in the early years – 'having at their heart' the importance of 'intense listening and a desire to tune into children'. Listening can help build resilience as it helps practitioners to recognize 'the vulnerability of young children which stands alongside their unique, active and curious approach to learning' (Miller and Pound, 2011: 5-7; Siraj and Mayo, 2014). It acknowledges the rights of children in poverty and helps establish respectful relationships which support learning (Clark et al, 2010: 5). A 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi, 1993) involves 'listening to the ideas, questions and answers of children' but also this means practitioners will 'make meaning from what is said, without preconceived ideas of what is correct or valid' (Dahlberg et al, 2007: 60). Listening underpins several activities used to respect diversity and to support inclusion, learning and development of all children. Dialogue advocated in the early years with children involves 'purposive conversations' (French, 2011) as these can support diversity by allowing adults working with children to find out about all the ways in which children differ, including socio-economic differences. Listening therefore potentially allows practitioners to become sensitive to the impact

of inequality and to gain an understanding of disadvantaged children's priorities, interests and concerns therefore allowing children to have some participation within the construction of pedagogical space.

Listening underpins some key concepts which form the building blocks of early years theory and support for diversity and resilience such as 'inter-subjectivity' – the awareness of others (Rogoff, 1999). This is also true of 'joint-involvement' establishing a shared focus between child and adult and 'co-construction' and 'meaning-making' whereby adults engage with children's knowledge and understandings (Jordon, 2009). In extending children's learning, listening is core to 'sustained shared thinking' between practitioners and early years children in poverty, accompanied by a focus upon social and emotional well-being (Siraj et al, 2015: 7). In operationalizing the concepts above and partaking in the activities mentioned the necessity of listening to children's perspectives becomes 'more than just a tool or instrument; it can also be understood as a culture, or an ethic, a way of being and living that permeates all practice and relationships' (Clark et al, 2010: 5). 'The belief system that ECEC practitioners bring to practice' (Lancaster and Kirby, 2014: 96) influences how much they 'buy into' this pedagogy of listening; as do situational influences on the pedagogical space they have to do so. There is, though, a knowledge gap in this area. Although practitioners have been consulted about diversity (DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) /ISSA (International Step by Step Association), 2011) a specific focus upon their work with young children in poverty has rarely been undertaken. Below we address this lacuna and claim how doing so offers insight into the persistence of an attainment gap between children in poverty and their peers in the early years. Therefore we believe this research offers an important and timely contribution to the ECEC field.

Research methodology

The research design adopted a mixed methodology comprising a quantitative survey strand and a phenomenological qualitative strand. The quantitative survey allowed for a broad set of data exploring ECEC practitioners' attitudes and behaviours in regard to poverty and work with poverty. The qualitative interview strand allowed us to explore the meaning practitioners' attached to their work with children in greater depth. Meta-theoretically the research was

informed by critical realist ideas recognizing practitioners' bounded agency (Archer, 2003). Practitioners were active in the process of working with children in poverty and might be influenced by several theories (explanations) about the causes of child poverty and other theory representing ECEC as an institution and practice – including the current dominant theory of 'quality and high returns' underpinned by neoliberal ideas (Moss, 2014: 3). The selection of England and the USA was not simply ad hoc. Neoliberal polity in both countries has shaped ECEC as a mechanism to address child poverty. This study allowed for a comparison of the respective approaches and experiences of practitioners within this polity context and the identification of any common challenges they face. Locations within both countries were selected via variation sampling to include practitioners working in relatively urban and rural contexts (e.g. New York City-Ohio in the USA and Teesside- Worcestershire and Northants in England). Practitioners in both countries were selected purposefully – with the central criteria being they must work with children considered to be in poverty. Most had a relatively high status as practitioners in the early years – e.g. Pre-Kindergarten teachers in the USA and Senior Practitioners (level 5 or above in the national qualifications framework) in England.

Adopting the non-probability sampling approach above means we cannot say our practitioners are representative of the wider early years population in both countries. But, the sampling used allows us to meet the aim for the research and allows for 'moderatum generalization'. The latter is moderate in two senses – (1) below 'there is no attempt to produce sweeping... statements that hold good over long periods of time'; and (2) claims based on studies like ours 'are testable propositions that might be confirmed or refuted through further evidence' (Payne and Williams 2005, 296). The questionnaire was administered via Survey Monkey and a link to it was distributed through email lists of practitioners undertaking continuing professional development at universities of the research team members from England. In the USA the e-mail was sent to lists of schools obtained online or through personal contacts. The questionnaire was constructed with several blocks covering themes of interest: 1) attitudes about causes of poverty; 2) assessment of children living in poverty on seven common assessment dimensions; 3) attitudes of practitioners to interaction in settings with children living in poverty. All items were responded to using nine-point scales (e.g. 1 = "strongly disagree"; 9 = "strongly agree" or 1 = "below average" and 9 = "above average"). The interviews were semi-structured, and some

themes of interest were identified to shape the interview guide in both the USA and England. The guide included themes such as practitioners' backgrounds, roles both general and relating to children in poverty, meanings attached to poverty and its causes, and work with/support for children in poverty. These were going to be important in interpreting and making sense of the data. In total 338 questionnaires were returned from practitioners (159 from the USA and 179 from England). Thirty semi-structured interviews were completed in the 3 areas of England mentioned above (10 from each area mentioned above) and 30 across the USA - 10 in Ohio and 20 in New York City.

Analysis of quantitative data used descriptive (frequency tables and measures of central tendency and distribution) and inferential statistics (analysis of variance and correlations). As part of the statistical analyses, variables were combined when thematically-related and highly correlated. For instance, the items in the poverty beliefs scale were scored such that higher scores indicated a more situational understanding of poverty, and then averaged into a composite. The reliability coefficient indicated an acceptable level of inter-item consistency ($\alpha = .78$). The qualitative analysis was completed using Nvivo software and themes mentioned above covered in the interview guide underpinned the main analysis. The process of theme analysis included the segmentation and categorisation of data under themes and then the identification of linkages (inferences) made between these themes. To aid this theme analysis, summary charts were made for all interviews in each country. These allowed for data from within one case (interview) to be scrutinized and were also a way of looking at each theme across interviews. Ethical approval for the project was gained from relevant Research Ethics Committees of participating universities. The Statement of Ethical Practice issued by the British Educational Research Association underpinned day-to-day conduct and ethical standards throughout the project. All practitioners participating within both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research across both countries provided informed consent. To this end, a consent form and information sheet were provided to participants at the start of the survey questionnaire or they were passed on directly prior to interviewing. The research ensured the anonymity and privacy of all participants. Participants were assured data being used in any outputs would be anonymized and pseudonyms would replace all real names and work settings. All names used in this article are therefore pseudonyms. Practitioners were offered a chance to withdraw their data from the project and

none took up this option. We also stressed to participants how only information which forms a useful and justifiable element of the project was to be collected. All physical materials (e.g. paper copies of interview transcripts) were stored within secure premises. Electronic (digital) data were also stored securely with accessibility only via password-protected networks.

Findings and Discussion

As noted, there is consensus ‘an understanding of childhood poverty that is grounded in the lives and experiences of children is an essential part of addressing the intractable nature of child poverty and has the potential to add considerably to our capacity for addressing social and structural inequalities within childhood’ (Ridge, 2003: 9). But the data we present and discuss below is a concern in this regard.

Normalization and diversity reduction

Listening through pedagogical interactions should be central to working with children in poverty as it allows recognition of diversity, inclusion and can help in resilience building. Table 1 below holds data that are potentially a concern. It reveals how across several factors practitioners completing our survey in both countries entered into interactions holding relatively pessimistic views about children in poverty. Participants were asked to consider ‘children that you have taught that you considered to be living in poverty’. They were then asked to assess such children on seven common assessment dimensions: ‘social development (e.g., peer interactions)’, ‘emotional development (e.g., self-regulation)’, ‘health (e.g., overall health, hygiene)’, ‘motor skills (e.g., can use crayons)’, ‘cognitive skills (e.g., letter recognition)’, ‘respectfulness’, and ‘ability to stay on task’ (all items were responded to using a nine-point scale where 1 = ‘below average’ and 9 = ‘above average’). The pessimism revealed potentially shapes the importance these practitioners attach to listening to children’s perspectives and the dialogue involved (Lancaster and Kirby, 2014: 93):

Table 1: Practitioner Attitudes to Children in Poverty Compared to their Peers by Item by Nation

Measure	ENG		USA		<i>p-value</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Children in Poverty (comparison with others)					
Social Development	3.44	1.73	4.11	1.97	.014
Emotional Development	2.98	1.52	3.97	1.83	<.001
Health	2.91	1.50	3.93	2.00	<.001
Motor Skills	3.74	1.60	4.26	1.77	.035
Cognitive Skills	3.04	1.55	3.84	1.94	.002
Respectfulness	3.70	1.74	4.45	2.03	.007
Ability to Stay On-Task	2.93	1.45	4.11	1.79	<.001

A notable finding from our survey data, though, was how on the whole practitioners did not strongly agree or disagree that they interacted with children in poverty differently. Rather, data suggest recognition of poverty status did not feature prominently in shaping the interactions of practitioners with children. Table 2 shows data on a scale which measured how much practitioners' 'strongly agreed' (= 9) or 'strongly disagreed' (= 1) with each of the following statements: 'I try to be extra-sensitive during class to children living in poverty'; 'I provide extra classroom assistance to children living in poverty'; 'I try to treat children living in poverty identically to other children'. The mean finding for practitioners in both countries across all these statements was close to a neutral 5 mid-point of the scale – although practitioners in the USA agreed more that they provide equal treatment to children in poverty this was not statistically different between countries:

Table 2: Practitioner Attitudes to Interaction with Children in Poverty by Item by Nation

Measure	ENG		USA		<i>p-value</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	

Classroom Interactions with Children

Provide Extra Support	5.70	1.84	5.64	2.32	.470
Try to be Extra-Sensitive	5.89	1.86	5.88	2.19	.433
Provide Equal Treatment	5.66	2.65	6.38	2.34	.051

A tendency for practitioners to downplay poverty status and to interact with children in poverty in a similar way to other children was a key theme mentioned several times during the interviewing and raises a concern because it is claimed “‘good’ listening distinguishes dialogue between human beings which expresses and constitutes a relationship to a concrete other’, from monologue which seeks ‘to make the other the same’ (Dahlberg et al, 2007: 60). Children experiencing poverty are likely to have different needs to other children (Ridge, 2011). So this tendency to treat children the same is a threat to diversity being recognized and also fully respected. An explanation for this pattern shown within the data was suggested by practitioners via the interview data which provided more detail about interaction between our practitioners and children in poverty. The quotes below show how when engaging with children diversity and poverty status were downplayed:

USA - Olga – Preschool Teacher - I am just a preschool teacher, not a low income preschool teacher. I’ve worked with the richest of rich and the poorest of poor and my classroom and teaching style is the same. I often say that you can walk into my classroom and into one where parents pay a thousand dollars a month and see no difference.

England – Kara – Nursery Leader - I don’t think we prioritize it [poverty] simply because I don’t think it would be any benefit to the children... If I worked in the poshest area in Kensington, I’d still react to children the same way as I react to any child ... But I do like the Early Years Foundation work that we do. I’m a strong believer that you need to look at the children’s development and, not assess it, but monitor it.

The above comments are illustrative of those made by several practitioners revealing a normalizing influence on practitioners 3000 miles apart and are replete with diversity and complexity reduction. Poverty blindness is evident. Our data suggest explaining why involves recognizing how increasingly some key and ubiquitous shaping ideas can be found across borders and contexts. Mentioned earlier, a technocratic model of quality within early years provision strongly supported by neoliberal polity has shaped its expansion and management across both England and the USA. This model of quality involves the ‘rigorous application’ of scientific knowledge via ‘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). The English *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), *The New York State Pre-Kindergarten Foundation for the Common Core* and *Ohio’s Birth Through Kindergarten Entry Learning and Development Standards* are all ‘human technologies’ pursuing standards and early learning goals to produce the ‘good learner’ (Bradbury, 2012: 1). The normalization and diversity reduction mentioned earlier shows how these technologies have a structural, procedural and cultural influence on practice and upon practitioners’ relationships and dialogues with children across distant geographical locations. In pursuing a technocratic model of early years practitioners from England and the USA revealed how they felt compelled to prioritize preparation for and assessment against early learning goals which some identified as developmentally questionable:

England – Kerena – Childcare Worker - We follow everything that is put in place. So we follow all the Acts and all the legislation and we’ve got lots of policies we must abide by. They all shape how we do it [support children in poverty]. If you didn’t do it, you are in trouble.

USA – Olive - Pre-Kindergarten Teacher - they’re asking for so much in terms of the use of the computer, but just like developmentally – and it’s just ridiculous. And there are two – Language and Math. So we complained, we told them what the problems could be – the problems happened, but nobody listened, the district made the decision and we were just, they don’t listen.

Contextual restrictions and the organizing out of children's voice

Implementing quality requirements attached to the curricula mentioned above acted as a 'meta-policy' steering early years practice at a distance. This had 'the power to challenge, disrupt and constrain early years teacher's deeply held child-centred pedagogical values' (Roberts-Holmes, 2014: 1). This context constrained our practitioners from drawing upon discourses of ECEC theory in their practice and from pitting these against normative, standardized and overly technicist conceptualizations and articulations of ECEC (Jones et al, 2016: 7). Comments by several of our practitioners in both countries suggest pursuing the requirements of the curricula in contexts where they worked meant children in poverty could become passive objects. The situations in which these children live were made peripheral at best, or, at worst, ignored. Several practitioners indicated children's voices, participation, circumstances and needs were played down and effectively organized out of practitioner-child interactions and for some they struggled with this:

England – Sandy – Senior Nursery Practitioner - Never in any of the assessments of the children [had poverty been considered]. Never, ever. We just look at it, like I say it is just the unique child and all we look at is that child. So we wouldn't look at everything what was going on around.

USA – Rita – Kindergarten Teacher - We're not giving them the services and support that they need to be successful and then bogging them down with these tests that they really couldn't possibly be prepared for because they haven't had the preschool or other experience and advantage that other children have. Then like I said earlier they are always behind, they are behind.

Frustration and a feeling of confliction was expressed by several practitioners at the restraint they experienced while working with children in poverty in these contexts. This was because they felt attempts to gain a more holistic perspective, including an understanding of children's lives, was stymied and this potentially resulted in the activities they provided being restricted:

England – Joy – Sure Start Centre - I feel the school agenda is going down the road which I can't quite comprehend, I have to say. It feels like it's ... it's not focusing on what we need to focus on because it doesn't take into account what children are coming from or what they're bringing with them to school... you can't ignore what they come from and what they go home to. And I feel like it's like 'that's not our business. We're only going to do school'. And I think that's ridiculous. So that agenda I struggle with.

USA - Edith – Pre-Kindergarten Teacher – everything's being so focused on test, test, test, test, test, you're not looking at the children... I'm very strong on being developmentally appropriate, and these things are not developmentally appropriate, especially for young children. I mean, they're taking State-wide tests on the computer in kindergarten. Come on – computers... they need to be engaged.

Disadvantaged children are less likely to have experiences of a wide range of activities and may find it more difficult to cope with choosing between an array of different activities involving unfamiliar resources connected to demonstrating they are 'good learners' (Bradbury, 2012: 16). Not engaging children via listening means they may struggle to even participate in activities connected to becoming a 'good learner'. Without appreciating 'the concrete other' via pedagogy of listening means activities can lack sufficient understanding and appreciation of children's home environments. This might be about 'the nature of cultural capital' and the tradition of literacy use in families raising the possibility culturally specific knowledge valued by ECEC curricula may be at odds with 'alternative versions' of cultural capital in homes (Brooker, 2015: 35). Especially as such activities are literacy events involving literacy practices and items which may lie outside their experience - literacy is more than an isolated neutral skill but is always situated. So, as some interviewees revealed, the organizing out of listening to children was potentially detrimental.

Some also indicated how this was compounded by austerity measures associated with neoliberal political projects and their stress on economy in recent years within England and the USA. The latter meant practitioners were attempting to listen to and interact with children in the context of 'affordable quality' in the early years (Truss, 2012). In addition to an ideological force, this

neoliberal platform placed negative material influence on the pedagogical spaces in which practitioners worked. Reference was made to ratios and funding shortages connected to economic austerity. These restricted staffing levels and the time which practitioners could devote to establishing positive relationships via active listening, purposeful conversations and dialogue. ‘Feeling conflicted’ resulted and pervaded some interviews:

USA – Yvette – Child Development & Education Manager, Early Head Start - Issues that hinder our work, are lack of funds to provide better services. We are under a federal sequester. Budget cuts mean less children and families served, more work on fewer employees; that does not help provide better quality services, which is what we all strive to provide. We know that basic needs have to be met in order for children to learn, feel confident and comfortable. If those needs are not being met we cannot expect children to learn optimally

England – Sharon – Private Nursery Manager - We just slot them [disadvantaged children] into what spaces we’ve got. We’re not getting paid any extra to care for them, so they’re just getting the same ratios as the other children—which I have a problem with as well because those children that are coming to us are vulnerable. They have needs... I would like to give them one-to-one, but I can’t afford to give them one-to-one. So, therefore, I’m then thinking “am I doing the best for these children” when it’s a one-to-four ratio. I feel very conflicted with myself.

Conclusions

Despite expansion of ECEC services we know that the ‘attainment gap’ between children in poverty and others within the early years remains significant both in England and the USA (Mathers and Smees, 2014). It is claimed this is because children in poverty do not have enough access to ‘good quality ECEC’. This, though, presents a paradox. For instance, in England almost 90% of ECEC provision was rated as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ quality in 2015 (OFSTED, 2015) and yet the significant attainment gap remains. Our data suggest a lack of priority attached to listening to children’s voice and supporting their say in matters that affect them lies at the heart of why ECEC has made so little impact on reducing this attainment gap across contexts in

England and the USA. Data discussed above reveals how the problem may be intrinsic to the very procedures and measures in early years that have been adopted across borders to produce and ensure ‘quality and high returns’ on investment in ECEC. Data we collected appeared to show pedagogy of listening was stymied by the construction of this dominant technocratic model of quality in the early years and austerity measures within the context of its delivery.

International networks such as DECET and ISSA exist to promote inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for all children to thrive. Their research consulting experienced ECEC practitioners from varied countries identified how they generally supported practice-related competences which are: ‘willing to accept diversity in society’, are ‘non-judgmental’, include open mindedness, empathy and understanding, show flexibility and adaptability and are sensitive and responsive to children’s needs (DECET/ISSA, 2011). Findings drawn from our experienced and well-qualified practitioners question this largely positive picture and perhaps make for uncomfortable but, we believe, important conclusions.

Policies in the contexts where our practitioners work include politically driven discourse which has the power to enforce pedagogical change in early years. Curricula are designed to shape the thinking and behaviour of those working with children and to direct their interactions and dialogue with children in poverty. This restricted the possibility of practitioners acquiring an informed awareness of the process and experiences that militate against such children and lead to children’s marginalization. Practitioners’ data imply requirements such as preparing for and assessing whether or not children are ‘good learners’ organized in governance of the child as they were brought under the adult gaze with listening amounting to checking against universal norms in the form of early learning goals (Clark et al, 2010: 11). Normalization organized out listening as part of a holistic approach to understanding the existing lives of children in poverty – there was a lack of poverty sensitivity and discernible poverty blindness with limited focus upon inequality as pedagogical space was subordinated by regulating influences attached to quality requirements. Many of those responding in our research indicated children in poverty were seen but not heard. The approaches several interviewees described ran the risk of failing to respond adequately to children’s perspectives and needs, something which some practitioners in both countries expressed frustration and a sense of conflict about. Drawing on child-centred theoretical ideas mentioned earlier, these practitioners questioned the developmental

appropriateness of what they are being asked to implement. Their response was reactive gestures, such as providing warm clothing and food for children in poverty, rather than outright resistance. But the frustration they expressed highlights what is termed ‘the troubled relationship between early years and early years policy’ (Neaum, 2016: 1).

We point to a continuing need for ECEC services to improve attempts to maximize the perspectives of children in poverty and their needs – even in the context of targeted initiatives. For instance, some of our sample members from England were involved in the trial of the 2 year old free education places targeting directly children in poverty but produced the findings mentioned above. Reasserting the importance of pedagogy of listening in the contexts where our practitioners were situated appears necessary if they are to make any progress in reducing the attainment gap between children in poverty and their peers. It is claimed resilience helps explain why a small percentage of children in poverty ‘succeed against the odds’ in early education and why the majority who lack it do not become ‘good learners’ – and central to this is ‘active cultivation’ adopted by parents of children in poverty while at home (Siraj and Mayo, 2015). In playing their part in building resilience practitioners ‘need to find out about what is happening at home and where necessary to provide children from poorer educational home environments with more stable emotional support and more educational support’ (Siraj and Mayo, 2014: 235). The importance of pastoral care and its relationship to learning and improving outcomes has also been noted by research exploring effective attempts to reduce the attainment gap in early literacy (OFSTED, 2011).

Listening potentially contributes to resilience building but reform of practice is essential and will not fully materialize until it is recognized that such a pedagogical approach is about rights and ‘an ethic, a continuous process and a relationship’ (Clark et al, 2010:185). DECET and ISSA have produced guidance on how to promote diversity underpinned by such an ethic to be reflected upon. There are also calls for the adoption of praxeology as a participatory reform of practice within the early years (Pascal and Bertram, 2012). Reforms are fine, but our data imply provision for children in poverty may only be significantly changed via ethico-political transformation and movement from the neoliberal platforms upon which ECEC is increasingly built in England and the USA¹.

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