Talking heresy about 'quality' early childhood education and care for children in poverty

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Abstract

This paper considers the socially progressive function of a model of 'quality' early childhood education and care widely prescribed to address child poverty across England and the USA. Ubiquitous, it is imbued with a sense of objectivity, secureness and practicality. We question these foundations. Then using data from practitioners in both countries, we contrast expectations about this model of ECEC as an unmitigated good building resilience to 'break cycles of disadvantage', with the everyday experiences and frustrations of practitioners pursuing it. Their data suggest this model of 'quality' has limitations and some heresy is required about this policy orthodoxy.

Introduction

This article reports research which has explored how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners across England and the United States of America (USA) are responding to policy expectations about their role in addressing child poverty. Debate has raged for a long time about the potential of education systems to 'compensate' for structural issues such as class and poverty (Bernstein, 1970; Bibby, et al, 2017). Largely ignoring this debate, a prevailing orthodoxy has emerged supported by politicians, policy makers and many others with an interest in children's welfare within England and the USA. It claims ECEC has a socially progressive function and can contribute significantly to 'breaking cycles of disadvantage'. The official models of 'quality' ECEC promoted in policy across England and the USA to tackle the negative effects of poverty have much in common and come from a 'school-based tradition' in the early years (Penn, 2011: 108). They emphasize preparation for school, the acquisition of clearly defined readiness attributes by individual children, and performance against prescribed early learning goals. This article begins by providing a challenge to 3 key foundations underpinning this prevailing orthodoxy. The article then addresses a gap in the evidence base by drawing on data from ECEC practitioners in England and the USA. This is rare as the voice of practitioners is largely missing from discussions about the responses to poverty of ECEC and education generally (Bibby et al, 2017: 187). Data confirm a concern about this official approach to 'quality' in the early years by pointing to complexity and diversity reduction with limited poverty sensitivity in the accounts of many practitioners we consulted. Data highlight limitations which are not conducive to promoting positive, reciprocal and co-constructed relations with children and parents in poverty. Below we question wider held, and too often taken for granted, notions about the socially progressive potential of ECEC. We argue it is difficult to respond to poverty if focus upon it is effectively organized out of early years settings, meaning it is absent in pedagogical spaces and it is not foregrounded in practice

Child poverty and its remediation through early childhood education and care (ECEC)

As indicated, across developed countries 'quality' ECEC has become a key policy to address the negative effects of child poverty. This is the case in both England and the USA. Children are overrepresented amongst the poor measured by income thresholds in both countries - with 29% of children (3.7 million) in the UK living in poverty (End Child Poverty, 2016) and 21% of children (about 15 million) in the USA (NCCP, ONLINE). From the earliest years living in poverty damages children's education, health and well-being and is strongly predictive of marginalization, social exclusion and limited life chances (Dickerson, & Popli, 2014; Cooper and Stewart, 2013; Marmot et al, 2010; Field, 2010; Ridge, 2011). Providing 'quality' ECEC as a means to address these negative effects is now widely supported by supranational organizations (European Commission, 2013; OECD, 2012), governments (HMG, 2014; USA Department of Education, 2015), QUANGOs (Social Mobility Commission, 2016), charities (Butler and Rutter, 2016; Save the Children, 2016) and think tanks of varying political hue (Centre for Social Justice, 2012; Waldegrave and Lee, 2013; IPPR North, 2015). It is believed ECEC can contribute to improving children's learning while reducing a gap in outcomes between children in poverty and their peers – ultimately promoting school readiness, education and social mobility (DWP & DfE. 2011 and HMG, 2014).

Theory and research in the early years is used to justify this policy (Miller and Pound, 2011: 7). International research demonstrates how ECEC can produce improved cognitive and social outcomes by end of early years for all children – including those in poverty (Field, 2010; White et al, 2016). Research claims ECEC can support resilience and contributes to a small number of children in poverty 'succeeding against the odds' (Siraj and Mayo, 2014, 6).

Given its potential 'the number of children attending ECEC programmes has exploded in the liberal welfare states… of the USA and the UK' (White et al, 2016: 259). There are some parallels and points of tangency between the two countries in regard to ECEC provision and its development. Convergence includes prioritizing ECEC as a social mechanism to address child poverty delivered via a mixed market model including a significant amount of private for-profit provision; the costs of which are relatively high and prohibitive for low-income families in both countries (OECD, 2012; Stout Sosinsky, 2013). Within the USA, ECEC is for children from birth through to compulsory schooling age (6 in both New York and Ohio the locations discussed in this research). In the USA responsibility for ECEC (within home-based, centre-based and school-based settings) 'is largely at the state and local level'. Cities and states have steadily increased pre-school enrolments but participation is far from universal. In the USA 'there is little political will to offer new national initiatives' (Stout Sosinsky, 2013: 144). There is existing federal-level support and involvement which is mainly focused upon providing opportunities to children and families below the federal poverty threshold excluded from the ECEC market. For instance, Early Head Start (EHS) provides child and family development provision for pregnant women and children in poverty aged up to three years across several states including New York and Ohio. Participation nationally though is limited - only 6% of eligible children received support from EHS in 2015-16. Head Start is longer established and provides children in poverty aged 3-5 years with a range of services – but in 2015-16 only 31% of eligible children and

families participated (National Head Start Association, ONLINE). Priority access to EHS and HS is based on level of special needs, homelessness and migrant status. Within England there has been unprecedented expansion of ECEC in the last two decades. Free national ECEC places are available for all children aged 3-5 (compulsory schooling starting at 5 years old). Children in poverty access free education places currently for 15 hours a week (extending to 30 hours per week for parents working 16 hours per week or more from September 2017). These places are taken up by almost 100% of children aged 3-4. There are similar places for some 'disadvantaged' 2 year olds – including those in poverty - but around a third of those eligible do not take them up. Sure Start Centres also provide support to children and families – including those in poverty – but they are under financial pressure due to recent austerity cuts. Early years pupil premium also provides additional funding to pre-school settings to help improve the learning of 'disadvantaged' 3-4 year olds.

'Quality' ECEC – a contested concept in the early years

While expansion has taken place, it is very important to recognize 'there is no research consensus' around the specific types of policy interventions that flow from the evidence base which shows the potential of ECEC to support the outcomes of children in poverty (White et al, 2016: 529). It is neoliberal ideology and rationalities which have strongly influenced the official type of ECEC included in its explosion across England and the USA and how issues of quality have taken place (Penn, 2011: 2). Neoliberalism 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). Rather neoliberal political projects in the UK and USA have restructured and subordinated welfare provision to market forces, including early years markets in both countries attempting to improve the skills of parents and children in poverty. This includes a desire to make children and families in poverty 'productive economic entrepreneurs' (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 248) and a rejection of the idea poverty is a result of structural inequities. Rather, an individual explanation casts poor people as lacking the adequate motivation (as opposed to the adequate resources) to provide for themselves without government intervention . This construction of child poverty as a problem of the 'troubled' behaviours of the poor allows for 'social investment' in ECEC markets to improve life skills of those in poverty (Main and Bradshaw, 2014: 194). As noted earlier, some public ECEC provision is made within both countries allowing the poor to access ECEC as it is expensive.

Such investment in ECEC is expected to ensure 'quality and high returns' (Moss, 2014: 2-3) via early years practitioners working with both children and parents in poverty. Across both England and the USA notions of what constitutes 'quality' ECEC as a means of ensuring such returns has increasingly been shaped by a 'school-based tradition'. Differing curricular traditions are a feature of ECEC internationally and have distinctive discourses – i.e. ways of talking and thinking – about the early years which shape different approaches. The 'school-based tradition' is performance-centred and emphasizes early introduction to formal learning, 'especially emergent literacy and numeracy, and the acquisition of key skills' in readiness for transition to school (Penn, 2011: 108). This approach has been useful to neoliberal polity because it allows their agenda to be imposed via a 'new public management' of the early years market and a

conceptualization of 'quality' as something 'measurable, statistical and standards-based', ensuring individual children in poverty are supported to become better motivated and school ready learners with a view to then improving their outcomes in school and their life chances (Paananen et al, 2015: 692).. It ensures '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). It also acts as 'a technology of distance, claiming to compare performance anywhere in the world, irrespective of context' (Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 5). 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 'early learning goals' and 'common core standards' focusing particularly on strengthening accountability, raising academic outcomes, improving assessment while placing pre-eminence on key sills important to achieving the 'school ready' learner.

Advocates of this technocratic approach to 'quality' ECEC imbue it with objectivity, secureness and practicality. Discussion around it, though, is often uncritical and obfuscates how each of these foundations has been contested. The 'objectivity' of this dominant model of ECEC has been questioned with an assertion it is ideologically driven (Moss and Dahlberg, 2008). It is claimed neoliberal polity's imposition of this 'quality paradigm' on the ECEC sector means it lacks neutrality – strangling a more democratic ethic in the early years sector while replacing it with one which results in early years settings becoming 'places first and foremost, for technical practice: places where society can apply powerful human technologies to children to produce predetermined outcomes' (Moss, 2007; 7). It is argued this takes away the capacity to question and offer alternatives (Dahlberg et al, 2013: 39). There are several alternative conceptualizations of 'quality' in early years (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Penn, 2011; Moss, 2014; and Jones et al, 2016) and some refute any notion of a general 'objective' model of 'quality' and promote a 'subjective quality' which is contextualized, democratic, relative and dynamic (Jones et al, 2016: 7).

Secureness is provided by the research evidence-base mentioned earlier which points to the success of this measureable and statistical model of ECEC in raising outcomes for all children. Advocates of it link this to its socially progressive potential by boldly claiming it is 'vital' as it can help 'break cycles of disadvantage' (Mathers et al, 2012: 5). But, as noted, there are doubts about how far education (including ECEC) can 'compensate' in this way for background and the effects of structural factors in society (Bernstein, 1970; Brooker, 2015). Also, the assumption of a meritocratic society necessary for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to 'beat the odds' can be challenged (Bloodworthy, 2016). There is also an evidence base which challenges the knowledge claims of research supporting this 'quality' model in the early years – for instance, it is claimed in England the rolling out of free ECEC entitlement 'to 3 year olds had small impacts on the outcomes of children assessed at age 5, which get even smaller by age 7, and disappear completely by age 11' (Brewer et al, 2014). Additionally, across England and the USA 'sizable income-related gaps in school readiness are present in both countries before children enter school' and these are persistent and have not closed in any significant way with the expansion of 'quality ECEC' (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2011: 1; Stout Sasinsky, 2013; Mathers and Smees, 2014). Practically there also exists an evidence-based argument that, for young children, 'quality' in the form of a school-based tradition with 'a prescribed, outcomes driven curriculum,

focused on formal skills in preparation for the next stage of education [school readiness], is misinformed, developmentally inappropriate and potentially damaging' (Neaum, 2016: 3;Jones et al, 2016: 7). There have been calls for a 'move beyond quality' (Dahlberg et al, 2007) and for the use of other languages of evaluation in ECEC (Moss, 2014: 76; Moss 2016). Indeed, 'quality ECEC' has been labelled 'fools gold' (Penn, 2011). But such critique has mainly been confined to intellectual musing critiquing the school based tradition, its 'schoolification' of the early years and suggesting how 'quality' ECEC might be 'reimagined' and practically applied in alternative ways (Jones et al, 2016). As such, although 'millions of words are spoken and written' about how to close 'gaps in educational attainment between poorer and richer children', within this context 'we hear relatively little of the teachers' voice' (Bibby et al, 2017:187).Our research addresses this gap in the evidence base, particularly in regard to the early years sector.

Research Methodology

Despite these challenges, though, 'quality' ECEC and its use with children in poverty is presented as straightforward and as a approach which has significant socially progressive potential by policy makers and many with an interest in children's welfare. Using a 'sociology of the everyday' (Neal and Murji, 2015: 811) we interpret the narratives and experiences of ECEC practitioners to reveal the everyday pursuit of this quality model and reveal it is far from mundane. Rather it is a process characterized by normalization, complexity reduction, poverty blindness, confliction, division and exclusion. We bring into view how the 'micro life' of pedagogical practice and space, social relationships and interactions within ECEC contexts reflect connections with wider political forces. In engaging with the structure-agency knot, interpretation of data outlining our practitioners' everyday experiences was informed meta-theoretically by critical realist ideas recognizing their bounded agency (Alderson, 2013; Archer, 2003). A mixed methodology comprising a quantitative survey strand and a qualitative interview strand was used. The quantitative survey data revealed the broad pattern of attitudes of ECEC practitioners' about poverty and their work with poverty. The qualitative interview strand considered in more depth the meaning practitioners' attached to their work with children. The selection of England and the USA was not simply expedient. As neoliberal polity has shaped ECEC as a mechanism to address child poverty in both England and the USA, situating the research within these countries allowed us to reveal respective approaches and any common challenges practitioners faced. Locations within England were selected via variation sampling to include practitioners working in relatively urban and rural contexts (e.g. more urban Teessideand more rural Worcestershire and Northants). Locations in the USA (New York and Ohio) were based on convenience as contacts with academics in these locations were established. Respondents, though, were selected purposefully and had to work with children in poverty and have 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.

The questionnaire was administered online via distribution lists and constructed with several blocks covering themes of interest. The interviews were semi-structured, including 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. 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) and 30 were also completed across the USA (10 in Ohio and 20 in New York City). These practitioners may not be representative of the wider early years population in both countries, but the sampling allows us to meet the aim for the research and their evidence can be used to refute wider policy assumptions. We adopt 'moderatum generalization' below with our conclusions being 'testable propositions that might be confirmed or refuted through further evidence' (Payne and Williams 2005, 296). Qualitative theme analysis was completed using Nvivo software. Quantitative data analysis used descriptive and inferential statistics. Ethical approval for the project was gained from relevant Research Ethics Committees of participating universities. All practitioners participating within both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research across both countries provided informed consent and were given guarantees about confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Pseudonyms are used below.

Findings and Discussion

Complexity reduction and poverty (in)sensitivity

Evident across both countries in many of our practitioners' responses was a noticeable reductionist stance which failed to appreciate the complexity of circumstances within which children in poverty live and did not connect these to their learning and development. Responding to our questionnaire several practitioners from both countries indicated no strong preference for providing different support to children living in poverty. They also indicated no strong commitment to being additionally sensitive to children in poverty. Practitioners responding to our survey in both countries did not strongly agree or disagree that they interacted with children differently because of their poverty status. Rather, data suggest recognition of poverty status did not feature prominently in shaping practitioners' interactions with children. Table 1 includes 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' and 'I provide extra classroom assistance to children living in poverty'. The mean finding for both statements in each country was close to a neutral 5 mid-point of the scale:

Table 1: Practitioner Interaction with Children in Poverty by Item by Nation

Measure	ENG		USA		p-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
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

Lack of a focus upon poverty via their practice with children was also a theme which emerged from many of the interviews and raises a concern because living in poverty means children are more likely to have significant needs when compared to their peers (Ridge, 2011). Quotes below reveal how some practitioners in both countries claimed the poverty in which children lived was not something which was prioritized via their own practice or their settings. Complexity and diversity reduction was evident with poverty and inequality blighting disadvantaged children's lives appearing peripheral within practitioner thinking for various reasons. Some practitioners in both countries implied poverty simply wasn't considered important as a factor influencing children's development or they were distracted by other demands on their time and pedagogical expectations. For instance, there was mention of following curricular guidance to 'monitor' children but poverty was not prioritized as part of this process:

>   Louise – England - 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;

>   Dolores – England - 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 disadvantaged 2 year old early education trial]. I don't think I've properly addressed it;

>   Edna – England - Childminder - I think there's so many other things we have to keep on top of... I think the issue [of poverty] needs to be highlighted more and then perhaps something might be done;

>   Lola – England - 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!;

>   Kara – England – 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, 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;

>   Wendy – USA – Pre-Kindergarten Teacher - I have the same expectations of everybody - so that they know the circumstance is not going to affect what's expected of them. That's your circumstance. I'm really sorry to hear that, but this is what we're going to do;

>   Leonard – USA - Preschool Teacher - it doesn't seem, from what I have seen, it doesn't seem like anyone is doing anything about it [poverty];

Jane – USA - Preschool Teacher - schools are just trying to keep their heads up above water right now. They are worried about so many other things, other than poverty, and I mean no, I don't think it's a priority for them. I don't think it's enough of an issue;

Denise – USA – Preschool Teacher - It's just not something that is spoken of very often… I think it should be, because I mean the child is here for what seven hours a day, and that's a huge part of their life... So I would say definitely schools need to get more involved;

Jack – USA - Kindergarten Teacher - No, I don't think so [when asked if his school has a role in addressing poverty]... I mean I really haven't addressed it per se [poverty], but I work with the children that are subject to that… I think a role of an educator is to just ... you know ensure that those kids are studying;

Olga – USA - 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.

In both countries several practitioners indicated dialogue about poverty within the contexts in which they worked was missing and this is a concern because it weakens their ability to respond to disadvantaged children's needs. Practitioners in the early years are expected to apply a body of knowledge in practice. This is not simply knowledge of procedures, curricula and their technical requirements, but also knowledge connected to children's circumstances and home backgrounds etc. and how these differ socio-economically and can effect development of individual children and their needs. Such knowledge is gleamed via interactions with children. It is also collected from parents. To facilitate this approach the principle of working with parents of children in the early years is now firmly established across both England and the USA. This can include parents sharing observations and jointly planning and co-constructing next steps for their child's learning with practitioners who can gain sensitivity to contextual factors such as poverty through these interactions. This provides benefits for children in poverty, their parents and practitioners (Draper and Wheeler, 2010). But table 2 shows data from a scale which measured how much practitioners responding to our survey 'strongly agreed' (= 9) or 'strongly disagreed' (= 1) that parents of children in poverty attended meetings with them, volunteered in their setting, were responsive to communications or engaged in their child's learning. The data showed practitioners tended to disagree in regard to each and a disconnect between them and parents in poverty is highlighted:

Table 2: Practitioner Interaction with Parents of Children in Poverty by Item by Nation

Measure	ENG		USA		
	M	SD	M	SD	p-value

Interactions with Parents in Poverty					
Attend Meetings	3.07	1.89	3.39	2.15	.283
Volunteer in Setting	2.66	1.75	3.18	2.11	.062
Responsive to Communications	3.44	1.85	3.91	1.87	.081
Engaged in Child's Learning	3.48	1.82	3.95	2.15	.095

As mentioned earlier, early intervention policies across neoliberal political contexts, including England and the USA, place responsibility for poverty on factors within families and individuals including 'the wrong type of parenting' (Gillies et al, 2017). But, while parents are constructed as a cause of problems connected with poverty, with the help of ECEC practitioners they are also presented as a solution to these problems (Gillies, 2008). ECEC practitioners are expected to engage with parents in poverty generally, at workshops and through courses to improve their parenting skills so they can better support children. For various reasons, in both countries several practitioners revealed how a lack of engagement with parents is limiting ECEC's potential impact on poverty. In England, parental deficiency appeared embedded within the relations which some practitioners tried to establish with parents in poverty. They stressed inequality rather than reciprocity and they struggled to engage parents via this process. This is unsurprising because rather than inequality research reveals parents prefer co-construction when interacting with practitioners. They want to be listened to, respected and have their views and knowledge taken seriously (Draper and Wheeler, 2010; Vandenbroeck 2014). In the USA practitioners attached to (Early) Head Start provision work exclusively with families in poverty. They pointed to funding restrictions which stymied their engagement with parents or meant they did not 'reach' many parents in poverty:

> Kasey – England - 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;

> Summer – England – Senior Nursery Practitioner - we're not reaching all the families, to be honest. It's the hardest job for us getting those who least want to engage … that will always be a challenge because of the lifestyles that they have;

> Rowena – USA - Head Start Teacher - I don't think we are even tapping into many of those families. We serve 40 families. I know there are more out there who have children and they are living in poverty and we are not reaching them;

> Yvette – USA – Head Start Child Development & Education Manager - All children in the program come from families living in poverty… 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.

'Schoolification' and pedagogical space

Downplaying of contextual specifics such as poverty is a characteristic which has been associated with the 'school-based tradition' in the early years mentioned earlier. This tradition is claimed to 'write out' broader conceptualizations of school readiness and some of the realities of the lives of disadvantaged children and families. Accordingly, through its concern with the gradual introduction of school-based learning and key skills, a focus on what comes next and a preoccupation with readiness-attributes of individuals it is claimed to have 'limitations' as a response to addressing poverty in educational settings (Bibby et al, 2017: 5). This is in the sense of how realities of living in poverty manifest in the classroom and in the sense of their impact upon educational outcomes (Bibby et al, 2017: 6). Bernstein's concept of 'pedagogic device' has been applied to theorize how this emphasis on school readiness and formal learning enforces change and restricts pedagogy. Pedagogically in the early years a school based tradition means significant control over the selection, sequence, timing and pace of learning is required to ensure that… children's learning [is] aligned with later schooling'(Neaum, 2016). But it is asserted this reduces practitioners focus upon gaining an understanding of childhood poverty that is grounded in the lives and experiences of children. Practitioners 'determine how children should be' while being distracted from 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).

Data presented above highlights poverty blindness. Some of our practitioners made explicit a link between the increasing emphasis on 'schoolifcation' and this lack of focus upon poverty in the context of children's lives. They also suggested this is detrimental to meeting children's immediate needs and to supporting their learning. As noted, 'quality ECEC' can help children in poverty build resilience. But if implementing ECEC results in practitioners not acknowledging vulnerability linked to poverty this becomes problematic. Within both countries some practitioners expressed confliction about the challenge of developing and assessing children's formal skills via a school readiness process which, they implied, effectively removed a focus upon the circumstances in which children live:

> Joy – England - Sure Start Centre - I feel the school [readiness] 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;

> Sandy – England - 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;

> Rita – USA – Pre-Kindergarten Teacher - it's [the ECEC curriculum] like unfair to these children that are coming in with no background knowledge... 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 be possibly prepared for because they haven't had the preschool or other experience and advantage that other children have;

Edith – USA - 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;

Olive – USA – Head Start - We're applying a test here' to these kids that come… when you have kids that don't have a breakfast in the morning, didn't get enough sleep, are coming from a shelter where they felt like this is not my house, they're worried, even at this young age. They're worried with other things greater than how does this letter sound.

Practitioners also revealed how children in poverty can possess 'alternative versions' of 'cultural capital' – which may be at odds with culturally specific knowledge valued by ECEC quality requirements attached to school readiness (Brooker, 2015: 35). This can be illustrated with reference to ethnicity and language. Cultural capital includes assets such as language spoken. In readying children for school all the curricula which our practitioners were implementing placed a value on competence in English as the national language. In the USA some practitioners connected to (Early) Head Start worked with children who have to meet eligibility criteria to receive support– including recent migrant status. Many of these children and their parents have limited or no English. This was a source of concern among practitioners in the US. There was some demarcation between the responses from the respective countries in this respect - although it was mentioned in England it featured less prominently as a source of additional need talked about for children in poverty. When working with children our practitioners' pedagogy, autonomy and practice became subordinate to external curricula, regulation and criteria for teaching and learning in English:

Karena – England – Sure Start Worker - We have a high majority of speech and language referrals. I think that links to the second languages, the fact that their first language isn't English… so that is a high priority as well to develop that because… it's just communication wise it's hard for the children;

Olive – USA – Head Start - In this district, the ESL population is growing, which means you have more and more kids whose second language is English, not the first one. So they don't even understand yet what they are being told;

Yolanda – USA – Kindergarten Teacher - There is mostly Hispanic children in the school, 98%... a very important role I play is teaching them the English language so that they can survive!

 Several practitioners therefore highlighted the centrality of a coercive power within the 'schoolification' process and its consequences for stymied pedagogical space. Power is about practitioners' ability to act or behave in certain ways connected to their practice and their (in)ability to influence pedagogical space, events and actions. Our findings support others research claiming the school readiness agenda and its performative discourse can act as a 'meta-policy' restricting practice as it has 'the power to challenge, disrupt and constrain early years

teacher's deeply held child-centred pedagogical values' (Roberts-Holmes, 2014: 1). In this sense our data points to the operation of negative power. But the narratives of our practitioners also offered some examples of power operating in a more positive form with emancipatory potential (Alderson, 2013: 61). This resulted from 'dualism' (Archer, 1995) within the practitioner-context interrelationship. Although operating in restrictive contexts, as agents our practitioners did reflect upon their pedagogy as a 'comparative space' which they take up and allow to children - i.e. quotes above reveal there was a difference in the extent to which practitioners expressed a commitment to listen and respond to children's voice and needs connected to poverty. Our responses also show how pedagogy remains 'an intellectual and authoritative space' in which practitioners continue to have some discretion about the extent to which they include children's interests in pursuing performative goals. Some comments also revealed it is 'moral space' in which practitioners continue to have some power over distribution of resources and freedoms attached to uses of different forms of activity (Alderson, 2013: 73). Regulation and control were certainly evident, but also was the influence of competing discourses in the 'meaning making' attached to the accounts of some practitioners when speaking about their pedagogy. There were traces of theoretical, academic and child-centred discourses within practitioners accounts. These were important in reactive gestures of practitioners who undertook additional pedagogical activity to meet the immediate needs of children related to poverty status:

> Anne – England - Pre-school Leader - within our setting, when the children come in, if a child asks me for something to eat on a morning, I would just go straightaway and get them something to eat. And I think that's where it's maybe different to other places;

> Denise – USA - Pre-Kindergarten Teacher - we send home a bag of food for some of the kids for the weekend because they didn't have food, so the kids would take a backpack on Fridays, taking home their food;

> Edith – USA - Pre-Kindergarten Teacher - as a teacher I try to provide whatever the kids need, if they need clothes I go out looking for clothes, if they need food I always try to provide snacks for those kids who don't come in with a snack. Just try to … figure out what they're missing and what they need, and try to see if I can get it somehow.

Conclusion

What amounts to policy orthodoxy supports the socially progressive function of a ECEC 'quality' model pervaded by a school-based tradition with a focus upon the readiness-attributes of individuals required to start school; rather than broader conceptualizations of readiness such as that associated with a 'social pedagogic tradition' (Penn, 2011: 108). ECEC placing an emphasis in 'schoolifcation' has become key to remediating child poverty and social exclusion across England and the USA. As noted, those supporting this approach put to one side debates about how much ECEC can 'compensate' for background and structural inequalities in societies where social mobility is limited and social exclusion widespread. Rather it is generally accepted without too much critical scrutiny by many stakeholders with a concern for children's welfare that this 'quality' model in early years can discharge a socially progressive function in a straightforward way. But only a minority of pre-school children in poverty within the USA

access ECEC provision. For those that do in the USA and in England our evidence points to potential limitations attached to the early education they receive. We indicated how each of the foundations supporting the model of 'quality' ECEC in both countries can be contested. Moreover, this article is unique in bringing rare evidence from practitioners to the debate about the implementation of this 'quality' model and this suggests the approach being implemented is not a magic bullet which will remedy profound problems associated with experiencing child poverty. While it is difficult to contest that children should arrive at school ready to learn, in its concern with what comes next it is claimed this current approach can obscure some of the realities of the lives of disadvantaged children and families. Indeed, appreciation of contextual specificity and inequality in the lives of children in poverty was missing from many of our practitioners' accounts, – with a discernible lack of poverty sensitivity evident. Some, in both countries, linked this lack of focus upon poverty directly to the ECEC approach they were being compelled to deliver suggesting it is developmentally inappropriate, detrimental and certainly not the unmitigated good which pervades discussion of it in many policy documents.

ECEC alone cannot address the negative effects of poverty in the early years, but there is consensus it should play a part in supporting children in poverty and this means it needs to be as effective as possible. Moving beyond critique, our findings support a practical response through the development of 'pedagogy of listening' within the early years which '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). Within the current context, though, one can question whether such an approach will only result in piecemeal change. While their pedagogical space was stymied by official requirements, some of our practitioners exercised positive power in an attempt to support children in poverty. But these amounted to reactive gestures only.Overall, our practitioners reveal it is time for some heresy concerning the current policy orthodoxy if there is genuine interest in finding the best ways of supporting children in poverty within the early years.

Acknowledgement

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