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Report on Research Findings: An Evaluation and Analysis of Family Service Provision

In a time of economic prosperity and growth (Allen, 2015), it seems incongruous that over a quarter of British children are living in poverty (Barnado's, 2015). In 1999, Tony Blair pledged to abolish child poverty within a generation (Piachaud, 2012). Since then, child and family service provision has endured a vacillating journey, meandering through variable policy initiatives and budget cuts (Piachaud, 2012; Rallings, 2014; Weinberger et al., 2005). Widespread confusion over the use and availability of children's services (Royston & Rodrigues, 2013), coupled with the recent closure of numerous children's centres (Rallings, 2014), have provided an opportunity to consider the future of provision. This short paper will aim to explore the issue further: through the examination of practitioner interviews on current and past service provision, an informed understanding of government policy will be sought. These opinions and reflective accounts will be analysed using current research, government policy aims and relevant literature in order to arrive at an awareness of how children from disadvantaged backgrounds are best supported.

Firstly, in order to provide context, the aims of this research project must be acknowledged. The purpose of the data collection was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of those working within a single local family service centre, a participant group made up of a family services co-ordinator, two senior practitioners, three outreach workers, two group facilitators, four health visitors, and six nursery workers. The data originated from two sources: notes from a focus group of all participants, and transcripts of three in-depth interviews of the family service co-ordinator, a senior practictioner and an outreach worker – this was a random sample based on availability and willingess to participate. Once this data was analysed with relevant literature, inductive conclusions on the effectiveness of local service provision could be drawn. For this project, the socially complex nature of the issue in question lends itself well to an interpretivist, qualitative approach – an increasingly popular methodological choice in early childhood research (Mukherji & Albon, 2015; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Interviews are particularly productive when it comes to qualitative social research and, in this case, semi-structured interviews were utilised because of their flexibility and ability to extrapolate free responses and rich, qualitative data (Fielding & Thomas, 2008; Holstein & Gubnum, 2004; Nunkoosing, 2005). Semi-structured interviews, in which a standardised list of questions prompted follow up discussion, enabled participants to contribute to a holistic picture of family services, an essential endeavour in a time of uncertainty and change for local provision.

Whilst the essential role early childhood plays in determining life chances is generally accepted (Pickles, 2010; Ridge, 2013; Robertson & Messenger, 2010), the body of literature relevant to this topic is diverse, multitudinous, and, at times, conflicting. To begin, it feels relevant to discuss the definition of child poverty. Piachaud (2012) explains that, in recent years, child poverty has generally been defined as any household income below 60% of the national median – a relative measure based on European Union procedure. However, Pickles (2010) argues that a definition of poverty based solely on income is, at best, unhelpful and, at worst, detrimental to children's life chances. She asserts that this flawed understanding of poverty was a key inadequacy of Labour policy, as illogical child poverty targets were prioritised over an understanding of causation (Pickles, 2010). Dodds & Paskins (2011) take this further, stating that policy has frequently failed to address the perpetuating mechanisms of child poverty. An example of this, as provided by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ)

(2012), is the Child Poverty Act (2010), in which governments are legally bound to an income-based child poverty target. Whilst Ridge (2013) hails this legislation as an "aspirational backdrop" (2013, p. 406) to a society striving for social change, the CSJ (2012) argues that the Act's focus on income-based poverty measures is detrimental to effective, long-term policy solutions. Instead, the CSJ (2012) encourages a focus on factors sustaining poverty, such as family breakdown and educational failure. A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2009) argues that the problem with income-based child poverty targets is that, often, the quickest and most cost-efficient methods for governments to achieve them is to move families marginally above the line and, in doing so, tackling few of the mechanisms perpetuating child poverty. Drawing on these findings, it could be inferred that income-based strategies are ineffectual when faced with families experiencing intergenerational disadvantage.

Miller & Hevey (2012) explain the 2010 Coalition's attempt at supporting families like these. The transcripts from the three in-depth interviews demonstrate the manifestations of this under Conservative governments, with the mention of a discernible focus on parents returning to work. Whilst the Coalition government made efforts to circumvent this, the participants interviewed acknowledged an increasing focus on fulfilling targets and evidencing outcomes (Miller & Hevey, 2012). Furthermore, one participant explained how the fulfilling of targets allows for the demonstration of progress. It has become clear that the lack of evidenced outcome improvement has been detrimental to the support of children's centre provision (Miller & Hevey, 2012). Therefore, it would seem patent that efforts to measure, and then demonstrate, the efficacy of family services should be wholeheartedly encouraged, and it appears that target use can facilitate this.

Throughout the interviews, funding, and the lack of it, was consistently blamed for substandard provision – with one participant citing it as the biggest change to recent provision and the sole requirement of service improvement. Rallings (2014) laments the funding cuts that have befallen family services: cuts that, practitioners felt, have manifested in group closures and inadequate support for many. Service provision for vulnerable children is an impassioned endeavour for many and, in the atmosphere of uncertainty that currently surrounds the sector, an endeavour that often manifests in a proclivity for blame (Pickles, 2010; Ridge, 2013; Waldegrave, 2013; Rallings, 2014). Ridge (2013) and Waldegrave (2013) suggest that the blame for these recent funding cuts lies with the Coalition and Conservative governments, an accusation levied, not only in literature, but by practitioners who associate these administrations with the reduction and consolidation of services. In particular, one of the participants forged links between the introduction of a right wing government, funding cuts and a move away from universal services.

Whilst Sure Start – a multi-disciplinary, locally-led, early support service for families with young children (Weinberger, Pickstone & Hannon, 2005; Miller & Hevey, 2012) – was created as a universally available service, it works hard to support those families in greatest need and, from the interview transcripts, it seems that lack of funding has confined family services to the latter purpose (Garbers, et al., 2006; Department for Education, 2013). It's important, for the efficacy of service provision, that intended families are reached (Weinberger, Pickstone & Hannon, 2005) and, whilst targeting assists this effort, it brings with it many problems (OECD, 2009; Dodds & Paskins, 2011). One participant highlighted the likelihood of missing families when providing heavily targeted

services, whilst another explained how social stigma is easily introduced; these are both claims supported in literature, with the OECD, in particular, warning against the use of targeted family services (2009; Miller & Hevey, 2012). One participant explained how services were being closed in areas with fewer target families, a claim that sits at odds with government mandates: for example, Every Child Matters, although an archived paper, was built upon a theme of universalism that promised support for all children, "whoever they are and wherever they live" (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003, p3; Sheppard, Macdonald, & Welbourne, 2008). Yet, as this has proved difficult to achieve, it could perhaps be inferred that the increasingly targeted nature of family services, fuelled by a lack of funding, is creating an atmosphere of elitism – in which children living in areas with large numbers of target families are able to access more support.

The literature concerning service provision is clear in its realistic account of the difficulties concerning wholly universal services: an extremely expensive and, almost, unaccountable method of support (OECD, 2009). Similarly, practitioners are understanding of this, with one participant justifying the use of universalism only as a method of generating effective referrals. This method is epitomised in the 'cascading-service' model of provision, in which families are universally screened and then offered targeted support where necessary (OECD, 2009; Miller & Hevey, 2012). However, constructive suggestions like this are rare occurrences in the interview transcript. With funding cuts eroding their provision, participants are acutely aware of the waning political interest and uncertain future of family services: a future they feel powerless to alter – "time, money and energy" replies one participant when asked to describe the biggest challenges to current provision. Piachaud (2012) laments this predicament, maintaining that an awareness of the realistic nature of tackling disadvantage is necessary in obtaining government and public support. Lack of clarity surrounding effective provision is a theme that emerged from the research presented here, and this confusion could be linked to government apathy (Rallings, 2014). Both professionals and parents acknowledged that confusion over services was detrimental to effective working, and Rallings (2014) blames this uncertainty on variable provision and a lack of strategic vision. This is an uncertainty echoed by the House of Commons Education Committee (2013), and one that can be linked to the recent funding cuts (Royston & Rodrigues, 2013; Waldegrave, 2013; Rallings, 2014).

It would, therefore, seem imperative that the streamlining and clear direction of family services be made a priority. The difficulty of this, however, lies in the variable design chosen by the Labour government, and its manifestation in a multiplicity of service types (Coote, Allen, & Woodhead, 2004; Jack, 2005; Weinberger, Pickstone, & Hannon, 2005; Miller & Hevey, 2012). The participants involved in this research study, all originating from the same family services team, were unable to comment on differences in local authority provision; although, they were aware of the difficulties of implementing a local service design. For example, two of the participants spoke about the insular nature of the community, citing lack of aspiration as a proponent of intergenerational inequality. In an attempt at tackling this, one participant advocates for the use of national policy strategies as a method of setting acceptable standards and achieving fairness. National-level strategies are, often, a much cheaper method of support, and can allow for the implementation of evidentiary programmes (OECD, 2009; Dodds & Paskins, 2011). The participants recognised that the local authority preferred evidence-based programmes, with one practitioner giving the introduction of the common assessment framework (CAF) as an example of where national strategies encouraged fairness. However, even with this prescriptive approach, it was acknowledged that the local design in which

these approaches operate leaves room for variety of application: the local authority requires an 'identified need' before intervention is justified, but the consideration of what constitutes 'need' is open for interpretation.

Yet, despite this, the participant responses repeatedly demonstrate a predilection for local, community-based approaches: practitioners feel like they understand the demographic of the area well, and are able to respond effectively to this local need. This is a claim supported in literature, with a correlative relationship repeatedly forged between community understanding and provision efficacy (Jack, 2000; Kisker, Love, & Paulsell, 2003; Horwath, 2010). An inadequate appreciation of the experiences of those living with disadvantage is linked to unsuccessful and unsustainable anti-poverty policies, and the emancipatory nature of grassroots, or 'bottom-up', approaches can work to combat this (Karelis, 2007; Dodds & Paskins, 2011). One practitioner lamented the apparent move away from this by recent governments: David Cameron's parenting class scheme named an embodiment of this new, more prescriptive method. This change was remarked upon a number of times in the interview transcripts, with multiple participants acknowledging that there was now a greater focus on evidence-based, prescriptive programmes.

Thus, an apparent impasse is created, in which community-based practitioners are confident in their ability to effectively respond to local need, unwilling to support the nationally-developed approaches that policy-makers remain keen to implement. Rallings (2014) provides a tenable resolution to this scenario, advocating for a more coherent national strategy that will afford local programmes greater focus in their service organisation. Traditionally, governments have struggled with the difficult task of reconciling community-based strategies with the need to demonstrate national impact (Bunt & Harris, 2010). Restructuring children's centres and family services, bringing them all under the umbrella of 'early help', would aid this endeavour, cohering local approaches with national policy goals whilst facilitating a cascading-service model of support (Rallings, 2014).

Throughout this project, the pursuit of conclusions that delineate effective provision for disadvantaged families has remained at the forefront of research and analysis efforts. However, these conclusions remain elusive: the variety in individual child, family and community needs prevents extensive extrapolation of service type. Whilst, important discussions on who to engage, when to engage, and how to engage remain unresolved, the short analysis presented here goes some way to addressing this. The large disparity between research findings, government directives, and policy manifestations has become apparent; the obvious remediation of this disparity lies in projects like this, in which links are created between theoretical discourse and practical provision. The social and economic inducements for effective family support have been clearly demonstrated; an effort that provides support and validity to changes in provision. With increased funding, a clear strategic focus on 'early help', and an enabling approach, families can be supported to break from the grievous constraints of disadvantage.

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