**Title: Troubling discourses of child and family poverty in the UK**

**Abstract**

Poverty in early childhood is pervasive, effecting every aspect of children’s lives. Under current government policies child poverty in the UK is predicted to rise to 40% by 2022. Dominant discourses of poverty have historically focussed on an over-arching discourse of moral responsibility essentially relating to deserving and underserving poor. This paper examines how government policy continues to significantly impact on young children and families low incomes in early childhood and how stigmatised discourses about welfare, work and are pervasive. It is argued that discourses of redistribution and children’s rights deserve greater recognition if poverty is to be addressed.

Key words: poverty, early childhood, discourse, policy and practice, family

Main Text:

**Introduction:**

The UK is the fifth largest economy in the world, however, as highlighted by Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur, 14 million people - a fifth of the population - live in poverty (Alston, 2018). Child poverty rates have risen to 30% and according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies are predicated to rise to 40% by 2022 under current government policies (Hood and Waters, 2017; DWP, 2018). This paper analyses how poverty discourses are woven into early childhood policy in the UK and specific programmes in England. It is argued that poorly conceived and stigmatising policies are entangled with historical discourses of the deserving and underserving poor serving to sustain and reproduce poverty in early childhood.

*Increasing inequality*

Over the last three decades, income inequality in the UK has increased and is higher than many other countries in Europe (OECD, 2017). Although the UK has been effective at creating jobs since the recession in 2008, and total employment is high compared to other countries in Europe, low and stagnating wage levels have put more young families and children at risk of poverty. Government policies, such as austerity measures and low taxes for those with the greatest incomes, have increased inequality and hampered economic growth (Summers and Balls, 2015). In addition, the uncertainty around Brexit (the UK’s departutre from the European Union [EU]) and the risk of a ‘no deal Brexit’ (leaving the EU without a deal) is predicted to result in price rises, falls in real wages and lower employment leading to further impacts on young families’ incomes (Barnard et al., 2018).

Poverty in early childhood is pervasive and effects every aspect of children’s lives causing isolation and exclusion from society (Ridge, 2011). In England by the age of five there is asignificant gap in children’s educational attainments – with the gap widening as children get older (DfE, 2014; SMC, 2017). In addition, children living in areas of disadvantage have an increased risk of health issues and a shorter life expectancy (ONS, 2014). Food poverty has increased significantly with the Trussell Trust (2019) reporting a 73.4% increase in food bank supplies since 2013 and the Food Foundation (2019) estimating that 19% of children in the UK experience food insecurity. Children’s lives are inextricably linked to those of the families they live in. Although all families are vulnerable to poverty some are more effected than others, for example, 47% of lone-parent families live in poverty (CPAG, 2018; Marsh et al., 2017). Family poverty is highly gendered - 90% of lone-parents are women and are at higher risk due to limited work opportunities (Alston, 2018; Millar and Ridge, 2013). Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are twice as likely as white groups to live in poverty due to intersecting issues of unemployment, economic activity, lower pay, geographic location, migration status and educational attainment (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017).

Tyler (2013, p. 170) suggests that the discourse of the ‘undeserving’ and ‘deserving’ poor has pervaded government policy in the UK reproducing a moral distinction between ‘honest hard-working families’ and a ‘parasitical, pathological underclass’. Discourses of a deserving and undeserving poor harkens back to the Victorian New Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 (amendment of the Poor Relief Act 1601)’ (as discussed by Ridge and Wright, 2008). The moral discourse of the New Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 made a distinction between the ‘master evil’, fit, working age men who were able to work but unwilling and the ‘impotent poor’, those who were too old, young or ill to work (Walker and Chase, 2014). The Poor House was there as deterrent or punishment and public funding was only offered to those who were in dire need. Structural inequalities were reinforced, as those who were most vulnerable to poverty were not able working-age men but instead women, children, those with a disability and/or health condition and the old. The analysis below examines how existing government policies have done little to improve the lives of children and families in early childhood and continue to reflect discourses of deserving and undeserving poor.

**Discourses of work and welfare**

The Labour government (1997-2010) were committed to eradicating poverty in Britain by 2020 (REF). Their approach was characterised as the ‘third way’ drawing on both redistribution and welfare to work - redistribution through benefits for families who could not work and the promotion of paid work for those who could (Ridge, 2013). Although the number of children in poverty decreased by one million during Labour’s term of office, in real terms poverty levels had not moved far from peak levels of poverty in the 1990s (Aldridge et al., 2012). The discourse of Labour’s over-spending was ‘pushed’ by the Conservative government and the media, paving the way for the introduction of austerity measures (Jones, 2015). Austerity measures worked hand-in-hand with neoliberalism in the dismantling of the welfare state and privatisation of services through a series of ideologically driven spending cuts (Mendoza, 2015). In-work poverty rose significantly despite increases in employment and qualifications because many families were working too few hours (exacerbated by high housing and childcare costs) to get their income sufficiently above the poverty line (Aldridge et al., 2012).

Post 2010 changes in government triggered a policy shift from Labour’s discourse of ‘welfare to work’ to a discourse of ‘work pays’. Rather than taking Labour’s approach of transferring incomes to poorer families via tax credits, the Coalition government (and later the Conservative Government) aimed intensive support at the most disadvantaged to support families into the labour market (Simpson, 2013). Bamfield (2012, p. 832) suggests their actions were a moral imperative in terms of reducing ‘state hand-outs to the poorest in society, lest they became trapped in a state of welfare dependency that erodes personal and social responsibility’. As a consequence of post 2010 policy, benefits and children’s services were cut - particularly affecting young families and lone mothers (Gillies, 2014; Crossley, 2016). Sure Start, a flagship Labour policy aimed at reducing child poverty, offered a range of integrated services for young children and families including health, early learning and family support and free childcare and was particularly effected (West and Noden, 2016). As a result of government cuts a significant number of sure start children’s centre were closed or amalgamated resulting in a significant reduction in services (Smith et al., 2018, p. 38). In addition to cuts to existing children’s and families services – post 2010 policies have attempted to address poverty by supporting parents into work and by overhauling the benefit system. The discussion below explains how policies relating to social security and childcare have obscured structural issues of gender and high childcare costs and have done little to address poverty in real terms.

*Universal [dis]credit*

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013 by the Coalition Government to ‘ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay’ (DWP, 2010, p.2). By replacing several previous tax credits and benefits into one benefit and providing a stronger incentive for work it was hoped that Universal Credit would ‘tackle poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency’ (DWP, 2010, p. 2). CPAG (2017, p.2), argued that the policy has punished lone parents and couples with young children resulting in a system which was less generous than the one it replaced. In addition, issues with the initial mandatory five week waiting time for payment, imposed sanctions and benefit freezes have resulted in significant financial hardship for many families, such as, increased debt, rent arrears and use of foodbanks (DWP, 2018; HCCPA, 2018; The Trussell Trust [TTT], 2019). It is predicted that one and a half million more children are likely ‘to be living in households below the relative poverty line’ as a direct result of the policy (Portes and Reed, 2018, p.15). Thus, for young families, and particularly lone mothers, Universal Credit, in it’s present form, is unlikely to fulfil its promise to make work pay. Arguably the policy reflects a stigmatising moral discourse associated with Victorian notions of the deserving and the undeserving poor – effectively punishing yourng families who are not able or have a very limited capacity to work.

The two-child limit policy which came into effect April 2017. As part of the policy, the child element of Universal Credit is only paid for children who are the first and second born (on or after 6th April 2017), unless special circumstances apply (Gov.UK, 2019). The government impact assessment stated that the policy would both ‘increase financial resilience and support improved life chances for children in the longer term’ (HMT and DWP, 2015, p. 7) – suggesting that the policy would encourage low income families to have fewer children. However, End Child Poverty’s (2018, p. 1) have strongly criticised this assumption and argues that the two-child policy unfairly penalises larger working families on low incomes – stating that in 2017 160,000 families were up to £2,780 worse off a year as a result of the policy and ‘more than half of children in families with three or more children are forecast to be in poverty’ by 2021/2022 (End Child Poverty, 2018, p. 2). In summary the policy is ill conceived and fails to support families at the point of greatest need (End Child Poverty, 2018).

*Free childcare*

Affordable and available childcare is essential for parents, particularly mothers with young children, to move from welfare to work. Despite increased government spending, the price of childcare has continued to rise (Rutter, 2015). Consequently, some parents, in particular lone mothers, do not gain financially from moving into work (Harding et al., 2017).Part of the Coalition and Conservative Governments’ offer to address childcare issues has been the extension of government funded childcare. The Childcare Act 2016 set a duty to secure 30 hours of free childcare for working parents for children aged three to four years old in September 2017. The aim of the extended hours was to reduce the cost of childcare and ‘support parents into work or to work more hours if they wish to do so’ (DfE, 2015, p.4). Although many early years providers were willing and able to offer the extended hours, several issues have been identified which impact on engagement, such as financial viability, staff retention and recruitment (Paull et al., 2017). In addition, Johnes and Hutchinson (2016) argue that the policy disadvantages families on the lowest incomes who do not qualify for the 30-hour entitlement and tax-free childcare. Early evidence suggests that the 30 hours free childcare is benefitting couples and those already in paid work more than lone parents and those not in paid work (Paull et al., 2017). For many families, particularly lone mothers, work does not pay and the policies to date have done little to reduce poverty through employment – in-work poverty continues to rise with recent government figures reporting that 69% of children in poverty live in working families (DWP, 2010 ;DWP, 2019).

**Discourses of early intervention**

Pathologising discourses have increasingly pervaded government policy and framed poverty in children and families around ‘a problem of welfare dependency, poor parenting, psycho-social problems and family dysfunction’ (Churchill, 2013, p. 218). Thereby a process of ‘othering’, drawing a distinction between ‘us’ (the non-poor) and ‘them’ (the poor) has legitimised the way policy has served to stigmatise and shame the poor (Lister, 2015). Gillies et al. (2017) suggest that an increased government emphasis on early intervention reflects a biologisation of parenting. They argue that government policies on ‘early intervention’ have been underpinned with dubious evidence from neuroscience which has served to reinforce gendered, classed and cultural inequalities around poverty in early childhood. In their critique of Allen’s (2011) report on early intervention,theyexplain howunsubstantiated research in neuroscience, has been used to support a biologised account of early intervention which is underpinned by a deficit model of parenting (Gillies et al., 2017). They suggest that discourses of biologisation and early intervention are played out in gendered and classed ways, such as targeting parenting interventions at pregnant women and new mothers on low incomes.

A recent example of early years intervention aimed at alleviating poverty in early childhood is the pupil premium funding. Pupil premium funding for school aged children was introduced in 2011, however, the early years pupil premium (EYPP) for three and four year olds, for children who were identified as ‘disadvantaged’ has only been available since April 2015 (DfE, 2017). The aim of EYPP was to ‘close the gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers by providing funding to early years providers to help them raise the quality of their provision’ (DfE, 2014). In addition to the 15 hours funding early years settings already received for three and four year olds, would receive up to £300 per year for each child who is eligible for EYPP (DfE, 2014). However, the funding for early years settings was considerably less than that received by schools for children in reception to year 6 (4 to 12 year olds). The latest government evaluation highlights a number of barriers for settings trying to access the funding (DfE, 2017). Smaller settings, who were likely to have fewer children accessing EYPP and therefore less funding reported less improvement to children’s outcomes compared to larger settings who had greater numbers of children accessing the EYPP. Settings also found it difficult to plan how to spend the funding as they were often not informed of how many children had been awarded EYPP until after they received payment at the end of the term. One of the most significant barriers reported by settings was the application process. Parents are responsible for applying for EYPP, however, the funding goes directly to the setting. Settings reported that parents sometimes reluctant to apply because of the negative impact and stigma parents may feel in relation to their child being identified and targeted as ‘disadvantaged’. Arguably until pupil premium funding for children in preschool settings is in line with funding with children in schools the difference early years settings can make is limited. In addition, an approach which identifies families through the application process has the potential to contribute to further shame and stigmatisation for being poor.

**Discourses of redistribution and children’s rights**

Redistributionist discourses address the issues of poverty through collective responsibility and the de-stratification of society and the more equal distribution of power and material resources (Townsend, 1979, p. 63). As a response to the significant increase in family food poverty (TTT, 2019), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF] (Barnard, 2019) have recommended a redesign of housing, labour markets and the social security system. In line with a redistributionist discourse, they propose that having more government funding to boost weaker local economies; more ‘genuinely’ affordable housing and a stronger social security system (for example, addressing issues associated with Universal Credit) to help end food poverty.

In addition, to addressing the wider context of poverty, early childhood is an important site of intervention to support young children and families. The Food Foundation’s (2019) ‘Children’s right2food charter’ sets out both children’s rights in terms of health diet and recommendations about how this can be achieved – for example, providing expanding holiday provision programmes; food voucher schemes for parents; support with breast feeding; and monitoring of food standards in settings. A further recommendation by the food foundation is to poverty proof the school day. ‘Poverty proofing the school’ was a project developed by Children North East (nd) and provides a toolkit to help schools reduce the stigma and barriers to learning associated with poverty. Findings from the project evaluation (Mazzoli-Smith and Trodd, 2016) suggest that poverty proofing improves children’s attendance and attainment, more effective use of pupil premium funding and take up of school meals. Poverty proofing is something which could be easily adapted for pre-school settings which would help to address issues of stigma and support for children in the early years and their families more effectively. Overall early years settings, if provided with sufficient government support and funding are well situated to fulfil the recommendations set out in the Children’s right2food charter to help address poverty.

*Conclusion*

Early childhood is a vulnerable time particularly for children and families on low incomes. This policy analysis suggests that individualising, pathologising and moral discourses pervade government poverty policy obscuring structural issues of low pay, high childcare costs and stagnating wages. Such issues are exacerbated by intersections of gender with mothers and in particular lone mothers particularly affected. Unless there are changes to current policy it is very likely that poverty will increase for many families. Arguably if the fortunes of children and families on low incomes are to change the government needs to first recognise that poverty is a structural and economic issue which urgently needs addressing. Discourses of redistribution and children’s rights deserve greater recognition and early years settings are arguably an important site to help and support children and families in poverty.

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