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Early childhood education and care policy in England under the Coalition Government

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This paper reviews developments in policy on early childhood education and care – early years – under the Coalition Government in England. Three factors came to define the Coalition's performance and record in this area: ambivalence about the rationales for the two areas of early education and childcare; a disconnect between early years and other social welfare policy approaches; and the dominant influence on policy of a political belief in market operations as the favoured delivery model for early years services. Successive early years policy documents also reflected the Coalition's shifting position on young children's rights and interests in relation to early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Keywords: early childhood education and care; early years policy rationale; path dependence; co-production; childcare markets

Introduction

Early childhood education and care as a distinct area of policy development was slow to appear on the Coalition Government's policy agenda: the Coalition's first early years policy paper was published only in July 2011 (DfE and DH, 2011a, 2011b). During the following four years, however, this would prove to be one of the more toxic policy areas in terms of the Coalition partnership itself. Ultimately, major commitments on early childhood education and care made in both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos for the 2015 election suggested that both parties underwent a change of heart concerning the importance of this policy area in the years following the Coalition's formation. However, the last-minute public discussion and inclusion of these commitments suggests that this was prompted mostly by election pressures.

This paper's focus is restricted to wider influences on the evolution of early years policies in England during the period 2010–15. This account also includes evidence from the Coalition's foray into participatory policymaking (Gramberger, 2001), which took the form of co-producing initial early years policies during the first half of this administration (Lloyd, 2014a). In contrast, for a forensically detailed analysis of the full Coalition record on under-5s in England, a working paper by Stewart and Obolenskaya (2015) is an excellent source, drawing on Office for National Statistics (ONS) data.

Over the last five years early years policymaking remained complicated by the continuing split concerning responsibilities for early education and for childcare at the level of central government. Childcare policies and the associated policy tools, such as the childcare tax credit, which partly subsidizes childcare for working parents, fall under the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions, in close collaboration with the fiscal authority, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). As far as the four nations that make up the UK are concerned,

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these policies and tools remain within Westminster's remit and thus apply across the UK as a whole, as do parental leave policies.

On the other hand, formulating and implementing early childhood education policy has been a largely devolved responsibility since 1998 (Clark and Waller, 2007). Differences between England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland in respect of the early years curriculum, workforce qualifications, and early education funding streams have emerged since then. However, according to Gambaro *et al.* (2014), major pressure points in English early education policy – for instance around staff qualifications, inspection regimes, and the expansion of education for 2-year-old children at the greatest risk of disadvantage – share prominent features with those in the other three nations making up the UK. Arguably, observations about the impact of Coalition Government early education policies in England can to a considerable extent be generalized to the UK as a whole.

The English early childhood service system differs from that in other European nations in important respects. Universal early education for 3- and 4-year olds (often referred to as childcare in official documents), free at the point of delivery and funded by a direct, supply-side provider subsidy, was introduced under the Labour Government. Since September 2010 the size of this universal early education entitlement has been 15 hours per week during school term times, a commitment made by Labour and honoured by the Coalition. The Coalition also continued and increased Labour's offer of free early education targeted at 2-year olds living in disadvantaged circumstances. By September 2013 this provision was meant to have reached 20 per cent of all 2-year olds (LaValle *et al.,* 2014), although this target was missed by about 30 per cent (DfE, 2014a). By September 2014 the offer was due to be taken up by 40 per cent of all 2-year olds; statistics to confirm whether this target was reached had not been published at the time of writing.

Early education is offered, alongside childcare for the children of working parents, by a mix of private for-profit and not-for-profit childcare businesses, such as small community day nurseries and settings belonging to larger childcare chains, some of which are listed on the stock market. Most of these providers are small businesses. Together with state providers, like nursery schools and nursery and reception classes in state primaries, these private childcare businesses operate within a mixed market economy (Lloyd and Penn, 2012).

The Coalition's 2012 revision and simplification of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Programme (DfE, 2014), originally introduced in 2008, was intended to standardize the educational quality of this complex early years provision system. The EYFS defines the legal requirements and standards for promoting the care, learning, and development of children from birth to age 5 in Ofsted-registered early education and care provision. As yet evidence is scant that this aim is being satisfactorily realized, with children growing up in disadvantage less likely to attend good-quality early years provision (Ofsted, 2014).

The costs of childcare for the children of working parents are funded through the tax and benefits system via parent subsidies, though such support remains very limited. Two-thirds of British parents paying for formal childcare beyond the free early education hours receive no help with its costs via employer vouchers or tax credits (Butler *et al.,* 2014). At the time the Coalition Government took office, HMRC (2011) estimated that 20 per cent of parents did not receive the childcare tax credit support they were entitled to and there is no evidence this situation has improved under the Coalition. The current childcare demand-side subsidy model hence poses a significant affordability challenge to parents. Predictably, in light of the size of the early education entitlement, there is limited evidence that the provision offered in this manner has had any impact on household income by enabling parents to work (Brewer and Crawford, 2010; Brewer *et al.,* 2014).

Since parental childcare fees are subsidized only retrospectively, if at all, parents still need to find the full fees for any childcare at the point of delivery. Without fee caps or other checks on the market, fees payable by parents have been steadily rising, so that the costs of a part-time nursery place for a child under 2 have increased by 33 per cent under the Coalition Government, while there has been no commensurate increase in wages (Rutter, 2015: 1).

For those parents not in receipt of childcare tax credits or – after 2016 – of the childcare element of Universal Credit, the Coalition in March 2013 announced a new initiative to be phased in from the autumn of 2015. This Tax-Free Childcare Scheme, targeted at better-off families, will replace employer childcare vouchers. Although these plans have already been revised in light of feedback from a 2014 consultation, which described this policy tool as regressive and likely to drive up fees within the childcare market (Cory and Alakeson, 2014), its impact has yet to be felt.

The childcare market delivery model is rare in the rest of Europe. Even where other European countries do operate childcare markets, they work differently. For instance, whereas the Netherlands and France employ similar mixed economies of childcare for the children of employed parents (Lloyd and Penn, 2014), early education is delivered within the school system. As a result, its quality is unaffected by the impact of market dynamics on the operations of private childcare businesses delivering this service.

In England, on the other hand, concerns regarding the quality of early education and care delivered within the private sector, especially in disadvantaged areas, have been mounting over the last five years (Ofsted, 2014; Mathers and Smees, 2014; Gambaro *et al.,* 2014). Among the cohort of children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances the Coalition's early years policies, or rather its reluctance to intervene in the childcare market, may have failed children with disabilities even more than others. A 2014 Parliamentary Inquiry into childcare for disabled children concluded that 'the Childcare Act 2006 sufficiency duty is not compensating for the failure of the market to provide childcare for disabled children' (HM Parliament, 2014: 8).

Path dependence and the Coalition's early years policy rationales

Embedding her critique of Coalition early years policies within a family policy framework, Henricson (2012: 75) observed that 'the Coalition's stance has been to respond to the legacy it inherited rather than to enter the family policy arena with a strategic programme.' Like Labour policymaking before it, the Coalition's early years policy formation has been bedevilled by its ambivalence regarding the relative priority to be accorded to different early years policy rationales. Policy rationales, the drivers of early years policy developments, emerge from multiple competing, intersecting, overlapping, and frequently incompatible arguments, as Penn (2011) has illustrated within an EU context.

Three policy strands are traditionally associated with English early years provision: social welfare services for poor children, currently exemplified by Sure Start Children's Centres; universal early childhood education, now an entitlement delivered in schools and by private-sector providers; and childcare for children with employed parents, always delivered by the private sector, but now primarily by for-profits (Lloyd, 2008; Penn, 2009). Since 2009 a targeted form of early childhood education has been added to the second strand, the free education offer for 2-year olds originally introduced by the Labour Government. These three policy strands, or rationales, continue to be legislated, funded, and, at least partially, administered separately. The period during which the Coalition Government was in office was no exception.

This complexity is compounded by the fact that early education policy – determining what children learn and why – comes under the four UK nations' individual jurisdictions, while childcare policy remains centrally legislated, as already explained. Moss (2014a) has argued that the English early-years service system has failed to integrate these separate strands into a conceptually coherent, equitable, and sustainable whole, even after the major policy changes introduced in 1997. The state of English early childhood institutions and policy arguably reflects the influence of a factor known in political science as 'path dependence' (Pierson, 2004).

While it was originally employed mainly in economics, Pierson (2004: 10) used this concept to refer to 'the dynamics of self-reinforcing or positive feedback processes in a political system'. He demonstrated its usefulness when applied to the analysis of evolving social processes, dominant institutional arrangements, and the power relations within these. The concept has since been applied more widely in comparative analyses of early childhood policy developments. Data on childcare systems in 20 OECD member states revealed that such systems display an 'institutional stickiness of policy designs' that inhibits childcare policy change (Rigby *et al.,* 2007: 106). For instance, instead of promoting change, early childhood education and care policy formation may institutionalize split administrative systems, where government responsibility remains allocated partly to education, but shared with other departments and along age-related boundaries (Kaga *et al.*, 2010).

Path dependence may also reinforce ethical and value-laden positions and dominant paradigms relating to early childhood provision, which can be shown – certainly across Europe – to influence subsequent social and policy debates (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009; Penn, 2011). The lack of transformative change in the Coalition's early years policies evidences the continuing impact of such processes. Arguably, its early years policy development during the years 2010 to 2015 reflected the same path dependence that had previously characterized Labour's policies in this area. The Coalition Government displayed a similar inability to Labour's failure to separate out interface issues between early education policies to promote children's life changes and childcare policies aimed at promoting family economic well-being.

Across Europe, public investment in early childhood education and care has come to reflect dual – often triple – policy rationales (Lloyd and Penn, 2014), although the balance between these may shift both within and between different administrations. A longer-term social mobility rationale informs the provision of early education, mainly for 3- to 6-year-old children. Promoting children's socio-emotional and intellectual development in this way aims to generate better educational outcomes and improved life chances. Meanwhile, enabling parental (in practice, predominantly maternal) labour market participation is the short-term economic well-being rationale for public investment in childcare support, aimed at strengthening the socioeconomic position of families with young children. Promoting the inclusion of children living with disadvantage, including children with learning and physical disabilities, is a third – social justice – rationale for public investment in early years provision, which is emphasized by the European Commission (Commission of the European Union, 2011). Whereas in principle the Coalition Government appeared to have signed up to all three of these rationales for early years policy intervention and public support, the relative priority accorded to each fluctuated considerably during its period in office.

Improving social mobility and reducing child poverty by focusing support for children in their early years started off as one of the Coalition Government's principal goals (HM Government, 2011). This became evident when, to the surprise of some analysts (Lloyd, 2012), the Coalition committed straight away to implementing Labour's policy plans for increasing to 15 hours per week during term time the amount of publicly funded early education for 3- and 4-year olds, a universal policy approach. Soon the Coalition also increased Labour's original target for the roll-out of free education for 2-year-old children living in disadvantaged circumstances.

Targeting services moved higher up on the political agenda, alongside a rapidly increasing emphasis on interventions targeted at individuals or individual families rather than on structural responses to poverty. This was reflected in the recommendations in an official report on early intervention written by Graham Allen (2011), commissioned when the Coalition took office. These echoed Frank Field's earlier recommendations (Field, 2010) in his review of child poverty interventions commissioned under Labour.

In late 2010 officials from the Department for Education and the Department of Health jointly set out to formulate the Coalition's first early childhood policy statement, at the request of the Minister of State for Children and Families and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health. It was published the following summer in the form of two web-based documents. One, *Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE and DH, 2011a), was aimed at parents; its companion volume, *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years*, was aimed at the professionals commissioning, leading, and delivering services for parents during pregnancy and for children up to the age of 5 (DfE and DH, 2011b).

The purpose of its wide-ranging proposals across health and early education was 'ensuring that the focus of the foundation years is on child development' (DfE and DH, 2011b, 8), in effect promoting social mobility and reducing child poverty. The policy document lacked much reference to the complementary responsibility that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) shares with HMRC for fiscal childcare policy. This complementary responsibility is in contrast underpinned by the economic well-being rationale. This omission could be construed as evidence of path dependence in terms of the remaining split, or of an uneasy interface between separate central government departments' responsibilities for two major aspects of ECEC policy. In its emphasis on the importance of early education in promoting 'school readiness', this first policy document reflected the priority that the Coalition placed on the social mobility policy rationale for its investment in early education, at least at this point of its period in office.

Indeed, this aspect of early years policy development would soon prove indicative of a wider disjunction not only within early childhood policy developments, but also between this and other social welfare policies.

Co-production and the Coalition's ECEC 'policy turn'

The Coalition's first early years policy document was produced by means of a process of co-production, a form of citizen participation in the conceptualization, design, and implementation of public policies, with quite a long history (Commission of the European Union, 2001; Gramberger, 2001). This concept had re-emerged during the three Labour administrations and been translated into a number of different practices as part of Labour's public policy renewal agenda (Barnes *et al*., 2007). This meant that *Families in the Foundation Years* and *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* had been formulated and written in close collaboration with a small group of senior civil servants and senior individuals within the early childhood sector, including the author of the present article, who in late 2010 had been invited to participate in this task by ministers at the DfE and the DH (Lloyd, 2014a).

This group's remit was threefold: to champion co-production as a way of working, to give strategic thought to big policy issues relevant to the forthcoming *Families in the Foundation Years* policy document, and to provide some accountability to the early childhood sector by monitoring and advising on implementation issues, while acting as one of several conduits for feedback from the sector. Even before this policy statement's July 2011 publication, a network of satellite working groups to the co-production steering group had emerged to consider particular policy questions and make an active contribution to policy implementation. However, the contribution of this process to early years policymaking was to prove short-lived.

In the September 2012 ministerial reshuffle, Elizabeth Truss, a Conservative MP, took over responsibility for DfE early years policy from Sarah Teather, a Liberal Democrat. Promoting the provision of childcare was high on the agenda for the new minister, as opposed to early education and wider family support services. It appeared that she wanted to effect a quick 'policy turn' on the relative importance of the various rationales for public support for early years provision. The demise of the co-production process soon after the minister took office can be interpreted as a side-effect of this policy turn. Even though in the Coalition's policy discourse a focus on early education remained, in practice the Coalition's argument shifted substantially in favour of the economic well-being rationale as the main driver for early years policy development from that point onwards. Hence the description 'policy turn' – a notion prevalent in social policy research (Fischer and Forester, 1996) – appears justified to describe the shift in the direction of early years policy development from 2013 onwards.

Working closely with the DWP, Truss commissioned a new early years policy document, *More Great Childcare*, which appeared in January 2013 (DfE, 2013). This publication preceded the 'official' termination of the co-production process, which happened in March 2013. *More Great Childcare* was followed that summer by a third Coalition policy statement, *More Affordable Childcare* (HM Government, 2013). Not only were both policy statements almost entirely focused on childcare policy, but they also lacked any input from the Department of Health or indeed from participants in the co-production process. Centralized early years policymaking dominated by the Coalition's political agenda seemed to have re-emerged after an experiment with co-production (Lloyd, 2014a).

Was this a sign of politics trumping policy? On 8 May 2015, the day of the Parliamentary Election, the Department for Education and HM Treasury published an updated and complete record of the Coalition's early education and childcare policies (DfE and HM Treasury, 2015). Interestingly, it makes no reference whatsoever to the Coalition's first policy document (DfE and DH, 2011a, 2011b). While the 2011 policy document can still be traced on the government's archived web pages, this evidence of an initial emphasis on education has all but disappeared from the official records.

The two 2013 DfE early years policy statements contained proposals for deregulatory reforms within the childcare business environment. The proposals for a staff/child ratio relaxation in childcare settings generated much opposition from within the early childhood sector (Morton, 2013). But other proposals affecting service quality and therefore likely to affect children's outcomes, such as a relaxation of space requirements within childcare settings, did get implemented, while direct access to outdoor play space, a key component of provision quality, remained an optional extra.

It has been suggested that political disagreement between Elizabeth Truss and the then Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, accounted for the dropping of the ratio proposals, rather than the influence of public pressure (Watt, 2013). However, it proved difficult to establish clearly which of the two Coalition partners had a decisive influence on this and other early years policy developments, although, in its 2015 manifesto (Liberal Democrats, 2015), the Liberal Democrat Party did lay claim to being the driving force behind the introduction of the Pupil Premium in England – a subsidy paid to individual schools based on the number of poor and looked-after children attending and first announced in their 2010 Manifesto. This claim by implication extended to the October 2014 announcement of the Early Years Pupil Premium, worth £300 annually, to be spent by providers on improving the quality of free education for disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-old children (DfE, 2014c).

Equally frustrating for the early childhood sector was the Government's outright rejection of most of the proposals in a review it had itself commissioned, the Nutbrown Review (Nutbrown, 2012). This was particularly the case as these were proposals for upgrading the qualifications of the early childhood workforce and introducing a higher bar for working with children, which are widely considered as important ways of improving service quality. Even Professor Nutbrown herself considered that by rejecting her key proposals, the government might be making a mistake that would leave vulnerable young children to bear the costs (Nutbrown, 2013: 10).

Other major critiques of the Coalition's early years policymaking record began to emerge from the centre (Brewer *et al.,* 2014), from the right (Paull, 2014), and from the left (Moss, 2014a; 2014b). All these centred on the Coalition's inability to reconcile or indeed justify competing early years policy rationales. Looking back over the period 1997 to 2014 Moss saw this as 'a story of missed opportunities, a case of more of the same rather than transformative change' (2014a: 12). According to Brewer *et al.* (2014, 172):

> It is not clear whether the main aims are to improve child development, increase parental labour supply or reduce socio-economic inequalities: a clear overarching strategy would help bring some much-needed focus to the debate in this area. And while there is good evidence that high-quality childcare benefits children's development, especially children from less advantaged backgrounds, robust evidence on the impact of ECEC on parents' employment is surprisingly limited. We also know very little about the impact of the policies to support childcare that have been introduced in England in recent years.
>
> (Brewer *et al.*, 2014: 172)

In a paper for the journal published by the right-wing think-tank the Institute of Economic Affairs, Paull (2014: 31) made a similar claim to that made by Brewer and his colleagues at the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

There is a strong case to be made that the problems besetting early years policy formation and implementation are in part due to the structure of the UK's early childhood service system itself, the childcare market (Lloyd, 2014b). While childcare market operations probably pose the most substantial barrier to any policy interventions and consequently to any substantial early years policy paradigm shifts, this is rarely acknowledged by UK politicians (Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Lloyd and Potter, 2014).

The disconnect within and between the Coalition's early years and other social welfare policies

On the childcare side of the early years policy divide, lowering the ceiling on parents' eligibility for childcare tax credit support was just one of several Coalition measures that ran counter to the social mobility policy ideas reflected in the expansion of early education. This step represented a clear clash with the economic well-being rationale, as well as with the social justice rationale underpinning public investment in these services and its infrastructure. This kind of decision reflected, according to Stewart and Obolenskaya (2015: 5), the Coalition's belief that, by investing in targeted support services for lower-income families in preference to a narrow focus on income measures, 'it could deliver a more sustainable way to tackle child poverty and improve children's life chances'.

At first sight the Coalition's position may seem to coincide with findings from OECD research on the greater distributive effects of 'in kind' support for disadvantaged families, such as publicly funded early years provision, as compared to cash benefits (Förster and Verbist, 2012; Verbist *et al.,* 2012). But in the OECD's analyses, these dynamics apply to publicly funded and publicly provided services and not to a marketized system in which poor children and families may have access only to poor-quality services or may be excluded altogether.

Cuts to English LA budgets – leading to a drastic reduction in the number of Children's Centres and diminished real spending on early education, childcare, and other early childhood services – all served to contradict the early rhetoric on the importance of the 'foundation years' with their demonstrable effects on children's outcomes (Stewart and Obolenskaya, 2015).

These contradictory trends within early childhood policy development were matched by a disconnect with other social welfare policies. Tax and benefit reforms, and other policies that increased employment and housing insecurity and fuel and food poverty, have made it more difficult for young children to benefit from good-quality early childhood provision even where they have access. Families with young children have borne the brunt of the welfare policy changes under the Coalition (Stewart and Obolenskaya, 2015). According to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) social mobility and child poverty must be made 'core business' for the next parliament if Britain is not to become a 'permanently divided' nation (SMCPC, 2015: 4).

Right up until April 2015 childcare-related policies, but not early education ones, figured among the Coalition's pre-announced policy changes to be implemented during the next Parliament (Adam *et al.,* 2015). This once again highlighted the Coalition's preference for the childcare policy rationale for investing in early years provision.

Towards the end of their period in office, the two Coalition partners' election manifestoes (Conservative Party, 2015; Liberal Democrats, 2015) introduced an – uncosted – commitment to a substantial increase in the free early education offer. While in the Liberal Democrat manifesto this was for 20 hours and included a roll-out to all 2-year olds, it was 30 hours from September 2017 in the Conservative one and restricted to 3- and 4-year olds. The Liberal Democrats also promised a phased introduction of 20 free hours for the children of employed parents starting at the end of parental leave. Initially this offer would be for only 15 hours.

These pledges could hardly be said to straddle the divide between the early years social mobility and economic well-being rationales. Both the nature and the wording of the 2015 Conservative manifesto commitment, to extend the entitlement 'to 30 hours per week of free childcare' for 3- and 4-year olds in families 'where all parents are working' (Conservative Manifesto, 2015: 27), lent support to the conclusion that, certainly for the Conservative Coalition partner, encouraging work as a route to family economic well-being was a primary objective for investing in early years provision.

While such increases in free hours reduce the costs of childcare needed to cover additional hours, and would therefore go further in enabling parental employment, the policy is nevertheless regressive and likely to disadvantage children whose parents are unemployed or seeking employment. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out (Adam *et al.,* 2015: 10), the lack of clarity in the various manifesto commitments concerning how deficit reduction would be achieved suggests that initiatives such as this would be financed through the proposed annual £12 billion cut in the social security budget. So, whether or not both parents were to find and keep regular employment as a result of this increased offer of free childcare hours, other simultaneous policy changes would lead to income in households with children being negatively affected.

In practice, moreover, finding sufficient places in sustainable and high-quality early years provision to meet this pledge is only likely, at least in the short term, if provider subsidy levels are also raised. This then carries the risk of driving up prices and driving down quality within the childcare market, unless the receipt of such subsidies is made conditional on meeting quality criteria, notably in the area of practitioner qualifications, conditions, and remuneration (Penn and Lloyd, 2014).

The differential rates used by the DfE to fund LAs for the early education entitlement, which are then reflected in local provider subsidy levels, were a bone of contention for childcare businesses throughout the 2010–15 Parliament (Verrill, 2014), while further LA budget cuts are expected under the Conservative Government from 2015. Unless the size of the subsidy is increased substantially, the ability of childcare businesses to deliver this entitlement is seriously in doubt. In their 2014 Green Budget, the Institute for Fiscal Affairs (Brewer *et al.,* 2014: 172) warned explicitly against such an extension of free early education on the basis that 'the case for further extending universal provision of ECEC [early childhood education and care] is in fact not as easy to make as would seem to be implied by the growing consensus in this area'. These political pledges of the Coalition partners thus turned out to be principally politically driven.

Conclusion

So what did the Coalition do to support early childhood education and care provision for young children and their families? Paradoxically, by largely preserving the status quo under Labour, they did more for early childhood education than some had anticipated (Lloyd, 2012). Given that promoting social mobility was the Coalition's primary aim for publicly funding early education during the first half of its period in office, the fact that ECEC quality in disadvantaged areas was lower, unless it was delivered within schools, could be seen as counterproductive (Ofsted, 2014). Uptake also remained lowest among the poorest children, notably children from certain minority ethnic communities (DfE, 2014). The Coalition failed to see this as the natural consequence of their unwavering belief in the operations of the childcare market.

The early education entitlement started out as universal education provision underpinned by a clear social mobility rationale. Abandoning universality in favour of a targeted approach therefore poses difficulties of principle as well as major implementation challenges. Whereas the early education offer clearly put the child at the centre of the policy, the family economic well-being rationale underpinning the offer of additional hours links the Conservative 2015 manifesto offer firmly to parental employment status. Making the offer universal would address this potential inequity.

Almost any ECEC-related fiscal and benefit policy measure introduced under the Coalition worsened rather than improved the economic position of families with young children. After the childcare 'policy turn', some Coalition proposals for deregulation suffered an ignominious defeat, but this did not take away from the fact that provision frequently meets no more than minimum quality standards. The childcare subsidy mechanism is due to be further complicated by the introduction of Universal Credit and may become more unfair as a consequence of the introduction of tax-free childcare.

Path dependence, coupled with the Coalition's pursuit of the market as a strategy to deliver its early years policies, accounts for the UK's early childhood education and care system remaining deficient in accessibility, affordability, and quality. It would have been unrealistic to expect a complete reversal of these conditions under this particular Coalition and in an age of austerity. On the other hand, a more insightful and authoritative approach to improving early education and care market conditions via regulation and funding, in order to compensate for equity failures, might not only have boosted poor children's outcomes, but might also have saved the Coalition money. This is suggested by experiences in other countries operating childcare markets (Penn and Lloyd, 2014). It is worth remembering, though, that by itself, even universal good-quality early years provision does not 'inoculate' against the adverse effects of child poverty (Lloyd and Potter, 2014).

Probably most striking about early years policymaking during the past five years was what it revealed about the Coalition's attitude towards early childhood education and care, and, crucially, towards young children and their families. Young children's rights and interests appear to have been subjugated to the perceived interest of the economy and the government's deficit-reduction strategies. The absence of a consideration of children's rights to quality early years provision and of early childhood as a legitimate phase of life, more than as preparation for later educational outcomes, raises serious concerns about the future direction of early years policymaking under the new Conservative Government.

Note

1. Except where it is important to the argument to distinguish between childcare and early education policies, the term 'early years' is used here to refer to both areas.

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