

Payment By Results – what is the impact on practitioners, researchers, parents and children?

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The Payment By Results (PBR) scheme is being piloted by the English Department for Education with an initial nine local authorities from July 2011 with a further 18 coming on board in September 2011. Whilst the DfE does not propose to undertake payment by results directly with individual Children's Centres, the pilot is intended to encourage local authorities, the commissioners of Children's Centre providers, to explore PBR as an approach in their local areas. The reason given by the Government for this is:

... to incentivise a focus on the proposed core purpose of children's centres: **to improve child development and school readiness among young children and to reduce inequalities**. This includes identifying, reaching and supporting the most disadvantaged families to improve their parenting aspirations and skills and to promote health and well being (DfE, 2011a).

The DfE (2011b) explains further what is meant by child development and school readiness in their statement on the core purposes of Sure start Children's Centres. This is defined as:

Child development and school readiness – supporting personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language from pre-birth to age 5, so children develop as confident and curious learners and are able to take full advantage of the learning opportunities presented to them in school (p.2).

The DfE (2011a) reported that it has consulted on the Payment By Results approach and recognises the following:

- The need to avoid the risk of perverse incentives.
- Measures should be meaningful and simple.
- Measures should incentivise partnership working.
- It is helpful if the measures can assist in benchmarking.

It can be argued that the PBR approach builds upon the outcomes focus that has developed in more recent English government policy. Indeed Hoggarth and Comfort (2010) highlight that 'Whether we like it or not the search for evidence of outcomes is now part and parcel of life in public services' (p.20).

Andreae and Matthews (2006) identify *The Children Act* 1989 and the 1992 *Education Act* as leading the rise in accountability in early years. These Acts resulted in annual inspections of funded nursery education by local authority inspectors, and the OfSTED inspections of maintained sector schools, including nursery schools. Although these inspection processes have changed over time, the focus on accountability and, more recently, on measurement of outcomes and impact has had an effect on public services.

Hoggarth and Comfort (2010) identify positive aspects to having an outcome focus:

1. It has the potential to improve the quality of delivery to service users.
2. It can maintain a focus on the outcomes of an intervention, rather emphasising the amount of effort, work or funding put into an intervention.
3. It can highlight which are the most effective interventions.
4. Having a focus on outcomes can make evaluation more focused as the intended outcomes have to have been clearly identified at the beginning of the intervention.
5. The focus on outcomes can help staff better understand their roles.

However, they also note that:

1. A focus on outcomes alone can inhibit new developments and innovations.
2. A focus on outcomes can lead to local factors being neglected.
3. An outcome focus can influence what work people take on, as they can become overly fixated with the outcomes and not notice or build on other unintended outcomes.
4. There can be a temptation to for programmes to set easily achievable outcomes.
5. The focus on outcomes can lead to an over simplification of the active ingredients of an intervention, missing the crucial details.....

This lists of potential costs to outcomes focus are more detailed and longer than those recognised by DfE (2011a) and require further consideration by those working in early years. I have previously worked as part of a multi-agency Children's Centre's team who supported Children's Centres in the Local Authority. My experience is that emphasis on outcomes for children has grown and developed over recent years.

As an independent researcher, I have been part of developing a proposal for research that evaluates the impact of 'Babytime sessions' for parents and babies aged up to 6 months at five Children's Centres. This research gathered service users' (parents') perspectives of the sessions, and also looked at the outcomes for the babies and parents within those sessions.

During the research process it became apparent that, whilst the focus on outcomes supports accountability, there are other impacts on the practitioners, researchers, parents and children. Some parents questioned the outcomes that were being delivered within the

sessions, highlighting the need to negotiate outcomes. Whilst I recognised many of the positive aspects that Hoggarth and Comfort (2010) identify in that it did maintain a focus on service users feedback, it also led to a consideration of how the perceived outcomes from attending a group such as 'Babytime' can differ between those attending the group, as shown by parents demonstrating surprise that the group could support them in keeping their baby safe. It also helped to identify what was working best within the groups.

In addition, I came to realise that there was an impact on me as a researcher, in that I was in danger of ignoring the active participant child and baby that I held as my usual discourse of children and childhood, and instead was in danger of construing the children and babies in a different way, focusing on the measurable aspects of their development. So what are my thoughts on how an outcomes approach can be best used by those supporting and working within Children's Centres?

1. The workers within Children's Centres need to understand the outcomes, where they come from, and play some part in stating their relevance.
2. Communities themselves, parents and children need to understand the outcomes, where they come from and to be an active partner in agreeing the outcomes.
3. The context should be recognised as playing an active part in any intervention, as in Pawson and Tilley's (1997) realistic evaluation approach. These authors argue that evaluation should be realistic and taken into account context and consider what works for whom and in what circumstances.
4. Use of multiple methods and measures and to use both qualitative and quantitative approaches.
5. To be aware of the tendency to focus on measurable outcomes and to not shy away from those outcomes that are difficult to measure.
6. To remain focused on the child as s/he is today and not to become focused on the 'human becoming' discourse of children and remember the 'human being' today (Qvortrup (1994), cited in Foley (2008)).
7. The need for researchers, Children's Centre managers and commissioners to reflect on practice when commissioning research, not merely reflect in practice.

I would be interested in hearing other people's views on how they maintain a balanced discourse on children and childhood within an outcomes focus, particularly when this is likely to become more important with Payment By Results.

My questions are:

If we accept Hoggart and Comfort's words, in that outcomes focus is part and parcel of public services, what are the positive benefits to an outcomes focus?

What are the potential costs to an outcomes focus in work with Children's Centres?

How can these costs be counter balanced by those undertaking research/evaluation?

References

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