Supporting young children’s well-being in low income areas in England: implications for policy and practice

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Introduction

It is often understood that early years educators’ main duty (supported of course by colleagues from other professions) is to support all young children, but especially those in low income areas, to “achieve the best possible outcomes” (DfE, 2017:10). This phrase, albeit contentious in academic literatures, is often conflated in policy documentation with other terms such as ‘reaching full potential’; ‘thriving’; ‘flourishing’ and ‘well-being’. Yet ‘well-being’, the most ubiquitous of these expressions, has been described as “an empty notion” (Camfield et al, 2009:67) sometimes disguising inequities as much as exposing them. Literatures on well-being in general and child well-being in particular are vast. Yet there appear to be two main problems with them, at least with regard to children. First, many literatures outline the term’s multifarious dimensions but are generally under-theorised (Statham & Chase, 2010). Second, while many publications, in both academic and grey literatures, claim to be defining child well-being specifically, they are in fact defining human well-being with child well-being often conflated with that of adults (Camfield et al, 2009; Macleod, 2015). So, it is often difficult to discern whether the “partial conceptually muddy” (Camfield et al, 2009:65) field of child well-being is actually about children.

To address these problems, at least in part, and to understand what is distinctive about current understandings of child well-being, one needs to understand how, in what ways and for what purposes childhood(s) itself/themselves are conceptualised. Prominent theories of well-being (such as primary goods theory, capability theory and relational approaches for example) are usually applied to adults only but can also be seen to facilitate various social constructions of children.

I suggest that Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter ECEC) policy in England (which operationalises notions of child well-being through the EYFS) draws on John Rawls’ influential Theory of Justice (1971) as it imagines and socially constructs young children as ‘Every Child’ providing them with the means by which to be ‘ready for school’. This early educative process, in theory at least, prepares children to be equally equipped (as in Rawls’ ‘original position’) to take up the opportunities that statutory education provides to achieve these ‘best possible outcomes’ or well-being and their various proxies. Further, ECEC policy is also imagined as drawing on Rawl’s concept of the ‘difference principle’ in that it allows families of two-year-old children in relative poverty, for example, access 15 hours term-time ECEC. And in 2017, 71% of ‘disadvantaged’ two-year olds in England were in provision (DfE, 2017a). In other words, ECEC enables well-being for all children by providing the bedrock upon which to begin the crucial process of providing the opportunities for children to achieve the necessary credentials (their main ‘primary goods’) to acquire employment and to be responsible citizens.

And the increasing investment in ECEC since the early 1990s has been broadly welcomed, particularly for children in low income areas who are considered to be the most likely to benefit from good quality ECEC but the least likely to receive it (Mathers et al, 2014; Gambaro et al, 2014). However, in spite of claims that it is doing “a good job” (Mathers et al, 2014:38) it has nonetheless excited considerable and increasing amounts of criticism. Its measurement technologies (Robert-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016), narrowly conceived curriculum goals (Ang, 2010) based on outmoded linear understandings of child development (Burman, 2017; Fleer 2015; Palaiologou, 2014; Wood & Hedges, 2016) are well documented in academic literatures. Furthermore, other academics have suggested that ‘outcome measures’ in the form of test or profile results, become constitutive of well-being rather than being merely descriptive (Gorur, 2014; White, 2015). One of the consequences of these, it is argued, is that ECEC pedagogical approaches are reduced and play, universally recognized as crucial to young children’s well-being (refs) becomes appropriated to “privilege adults rather than children” (Wood, 2014:5) i.e. ‘edu-play’. Further, childhood itself is colonized by adults as a way of trying to control the future because “children are the raw material for national prosperity, security and even survival” (Burman, 2018:9). In other words, that focusing on young children’s ‘best possible outcomes’ facilitates their social construction as in deficit, as vulnerable only, as adults-in-formation. So ‘well-becoming’ is privileged, it is argued, above well-being.

The latest Good Childhood Report (2018) albeit conducted with children aged 8-17 suggests children’s subjective well-being has decreased since 2010 in the UK. There may be good reason to think that some of the issues leading to children’s self-reported unhappiness may start at younger ages than this report includes. The commonly-held belief that young children do not have (or cannot ‘articulate’) views about their own well-being which, up until very recently, has prevented researchers from including and investigating them, are now being systematically challenged (Andresen & Bradshaw et al 2018). Part of this challenge has involved an acknowledgment of the importance to young children of ‘hedonic’ or ‘states of well-being’ rather than ‘eudaimonic’ or process-oriented understandings, traditionally privileged (Gonzalez-Carrasco, 2018). Debates about limited binary understandings of both of these processes, visible in the field of the ‘new sociology of childhood’ are also contributing to this challenge.

Aim of the study

This investigation therefore set out to explore first, the understandings of young children, parents and educators about what it means for the former to be well-beings and second, the implications of these understandings for the policies and practices of working together. The desired outcomes of this otherwise welcome investment may well be differentially conceived by its main stakeholders in ways which could inhibit working optimally together in the interests of children in low income or disadvantaged circumstances.

Methodolgy

In order to do this I undertook a small-scale qualitative study in a multi-cultural and low-income area of a northern English city involving 32 respondents. Methods included semi-structured interviews with adults and the Mosaic Approach with the young children. Respondents included seven parents, seven early years educators and 18 children aged two to four years.

The research questions were shaped around key concepts emanating from some of the prominent theories of well-being i.e. primary goods theory, the capability approach and relational well-being.

Summary of findings

Interviews with respondents of each of the three cohorts revealed that they have broader and different conceptualisations of children’s well-being than is currently reflected in ECEC policy.

They emphasised that children’s well-being is mutually co-created and that young children are capable self-and-other authors. Unsurprisingly, findings from the children’s data suggest that they are ‘beings’ in the here-and-now with little or no future intentionality but rather immersed in trying to get their needs met and their abundant curiosities satiated in a range of often ingenious ways. This necessitated relationships with others. Early years educators, on the other hand, while cognisant of and empathic to children’s ‘beings’ were immersed in trying to support children’s individual trajectories and future beings, motivated to do so by the EYFS curriculum and inspection pressures. These future well-beings were conceptualised on the whole as productive, routinised and compliant, readily adaptive to their learning/work environments. That said, there were misgivings among early years educators about policy injunctions to support children with SEND, for example, to achieve a ‘good level of development’ when they might never achieve it (or certainly not within the expected timeframes). This was in tension with the EYFS’ ‘characteristics of effective learning’ which they felt many children might have in abundance. Likewise, parents, on the whole, were equally but differently compromised by the tricky balance of supporting their children’s well-being and becoming. Motivated by their own experiences and struggles in high poverty contexts, some of them valued ECEC as an opportunity to begin the process of providing children with the credentials to get ‘good jobs’ and were fully supportive of policy imperatives. So sometimes “learning fun” was privileged above “playing fun” by parents. However, not all parent respondents bowed to policy pressures. Some parents resisted the powerful injunctions to speedy ‘development’, not wanting to force their children, perhaps instinctively protecting them from different judgemental measurement regimes.

Further, knowledge creation and the well-being that might be derived from its pursuit were often seen to be co-created by the children in this study. In other words, children’s learning could not always be individually assigned. This speaks to understandings of well-being consistent with those suggestive of its happening between and within the interstices of relationship i.e. of relational approaches (White, 2015). Some early years educators were not confined by the EYFS’ individuating agenda. One setting, for example, had introduced its own values (not just skills) some of which emphasised community and collaboration albeit without the participation of the children in their formation.

Children’s well-beings were also seen to be interdependent with those of their families and their environments. Children (and their significant others) who live (and work) in low-income areas were particularly compromised by the conditions and experiences to which they were exposed and for which they may not have been adequately equipped or prepared. These were confounded by the EYFS’ privileging of individual children’s trajectories and focus on home-school learning environments only. One of the consequences of this was a potential foreclosure of all their capabilities.

So, for example, all three of the respondent cohorts described the importance of playing out to their (children’s) well-being. However, parents reported that being outside was often “dangerous” for their children. Witnessing and experiencing some of the effects of being outside in this particular low-income study area, worried most of the parent respondents as they were seen as leading to increasing children’s opportunities to choose crime and anti-social behaviour as life-style choices or be the victims of them. This speaks to understandings of well-being consistent with those indicating the unequal opportunities for some people to convert ‘primary goods’ into valued ‘functionings’ and the impacts these may have on their capabilities (Sen, 1999). However, some early years educators believed that parents did not understand the value of taking their children to the park, for example, thereby misrecognising some of the challenges that residents in this area were dealing with on a daily basis. So too, some early years educators prompted by EYFS injunctions to privilege children’s well-being only, also misrecognised that some parents’ own capabilities had been compromised by their social and material circumstances. Yet having a sense of agency (self-or-other authoring) was seen to be restricted for the parent respondents in my study, and hence, for their children. These multiplicities of mutually compounding barriers were further confounded, for some of the parents, by their intergenerational nature. These, in turn, were exacerbated by other governmental policies (transport and housing, for example) that intersected with families’ lived experiences, but not recognised in ECEC policy.

Further, and consistent with studies reporting deficit views of parents in low-income areas, some were understood as wholly responsible for not understanding the route out of poverty. This contrasted sharply with parents’ own experiences of dealing with its multiply compounding impacts. This suggests that some early years educators may not have adequate training or support to have fuller understandings of the causes, conditions and consequences of poverty. That said, some early years educators in this study did have wider structural understandings of poverty that contributed to responsive practice.

Conclusions

My study suggests that ECEC policy and practice, as it is currently conceived and implemented, while offering some important benefits to young children’s well-being (and those of their families), for the most part undermines it. All children are affected, but those who live in low-income areas are affected the most. My findings also suggest that prevailing social constructions of children generally but those in low income areas in particular enable approaches to their well-beings that necessitate their control and justify their surveillance, thereby instrumentalising them to take up particular roles in society’s socio-economic structures. ECEC policy and practice, privileges the development of particular ‘functionings’ which, in combination with other policies, often reproduce children from low-income or disadvantaged families, as particular ‘beings’ and ‘becomings’ with defined and limited ‘doings’ which foreclose their capabilities.

Implications for policy and practice

In order to redress educational and social injustices perpetrated against young children and those most closely associated with their care, ECEC policy and practice needs to be less focussed on limited and limiting measurement technologies, narrowing gaps in attainment and individual trajectories and more on first, acknowledging and developing children’s existing learning environments as well as their dispositions and characteristics by drawing on their knowledges and experiences as well as those of their key carers. Second, revising the existing EYFS curriculum to broaden its scope to include shared values of ‘being’ and ‘belonging’ rather than just the acquisition of skills and credentials deemed necessary for individual becoming. Third, joining up social policy areas such as transport, leisure and housing, for example, to account for the impacts of wider social and material environments and to ensure that these are good enough for children (and their significant others) to continue to learn instead of focussing on the narrow and narrowing agenda of children’s school readiness.

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