

Child rearing is too important to be left to the market ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"Early years" is the most freighted term in politics, deployed to convey so much. For me, the phrase conjures an image of toddlers, hefting great boulders of public policy intention – like dutiful dwarves in fairytales. At election time, you see it dredged out to convey the following: first, this party is "family friendly", which really means "women friendly". Even though men are, last time I checked, intimately involved in the creation of children, and tend by modern mores to consider themselves responsible for the rest of the child's life, the provision of care for children is an issue for a lady-voter; something to pique her interest after she's been turned off by the conversation about defence spending and economic stability.

Also, early years – when attached to the word "intervention" – is a way of talking about deprivation without sounding as though you might do anything to tackle its structural causes, while at the same time avoiding the trap of callousness. You care, of course you care: who would blame a poverty-stricken three-year-old for failing to extend their vocabulary to match that of their peers? But your answer never relates back to the deprivation itself, rather, it suggests ways in which the state can make up the household deficit with thrifty, well-costed interventions. You have thereby established yourself as a caring, practical politician, who can meet a knotty problem head-on. It would be great if these interventions served more than a political purpose and made a difference to the children themselves, but you can't have it all.

Last week the Nuffield foundation produced a report into the efficacy of early-years childcare and education. It found the demonstrable effects of the policy to be "modest". Looking particularly at disadvantaged groups, it observed "some evidence that the impact of increased free entitlement on outcomes at age five was larger for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds", but that this effect faded during primary school. The report highlights, furthermore, the fact that you can't really reach a blanket conclusion about the influence of early years intervention, since provision varies. I want to say "varies wildly" but, to stick with the report's sober language, it merely divaricates: state provision – especially attached to primary schools – is better.

"No primary school can undo the effect that being hungry has on a child's ability to learn"

The conclusions were that more research is needed before more money is committed; the oft-used phrase is "far from conclusive", and there's a reason for that. Early years interventions tinker at the edges of deprivation, while never considering what's at its core. The seminal study on how disadvantage affects children's educational attainment – and nobody denies that it does – is the 30 Million Word Gap, a 2003 American study that found high-income families talking more to their babies than poorer ones (a difference, by the age of three, of 30 million words). Policymakers have, on both sides of the Atlantic, fallen in love with this study, as they conceive ways in which that gap could be filled by institutions – mandatory parenting classes, graduate nursery staff, the simulation of conditions outside the home in which highly educated people talk a lot. This is accompanied by a complete myopia (I don't want to call it deliberate; who knows what politicians do deliberately?) around what deprivation is: hunger, homelessness and poor housing, feelings of inferiority and hopelessness.

It is blindingly obvious to a teacher that a primary school cannot erode or undo the negative effect that being hungry has on a child's ability to learn. A child with pressing housing concerns or very over-worked parents may find it difficult to concentrate. No wonder the effects of the nought to three years fade; these are real practical hurdles to a fulfilling human life. You do not need a sociologist, or a longitudinal cohort study, to find these correlations, as plain as the nose on your face.

And yet we contrive to have debates, and frame policy, around very complex secondary factors, boldly ignoring the very obvious primary ones. The reason is, I believe, moral: there is a fundamental ethical difference between believing in social mobility – opportunities for anyone, so long as they try hard enough – and believing in social parity – a decent life for people, however much they achieve, given that regardless of what happens somebody will end up at the bottom, and their welfare is as meaningful as anybody's.

If mobility is the only goal you can accept, then to consider too deeply what being poor really feels like for a three-year-old is risky. You may end up caring about the family; you may actually end up thinking that none of them deserve to be hungry, even the ones who aren't even children any more, and whose rubbish vocabulary is the root of the problem.

There's a misconception even more fundamental. The Nuffield's research is laudable, mainly for puncturing the claims about early years care that allow politicians to ignore more fundamental questions of social justice. But it is constrained by an even more fundamental misconception, which is that public policy could ever be cost-benefit analysed in this way – the infinite variegations of a human life crunched down into inputs and outputs; a toddler's interaction monetised by the GCSEs achieved down the line. Payment-by-results culture is a necessity of any market or quasi-market system: you can't quantify value if you're not prepared to devise a set of measures of efficacy. But if we accept that the public sector does this best, why do we endlessly scratch around for the proofs to satisfy the market? We should work instead to the principles of cooperation: that pre-school children get the greatest benefit from universal provision, and the proof of its excellence is that everyone wants to use it.

-reprinted from the Guardian

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