UNDERSTANDING EARLY YEARS POLICY

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1

WHAT IS POLICY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES

- the role practitioners can play in influencing policy development and implementation
- the significance of policy
- three levels of policy-making: the basic assumptions about values and facts that usually underpin policy decisions; the broad objectives; and the detailed arrangements required to meet those objectives
- the characteristics of policies
- written statements of policy
- controversy in the debate on policy.

Working with young children every day is fascinating and demanding. It is easy to see why so many early years practitioners remain entirely focused on the task in hand and do not spend time discussing policy, which is typically seen as something produced by people in suits somewhere else that just has to be implemented. A common joke has the person in charge explaining: 'There is no reason for it – it's just our policy'. Those who are actually working with children and their families may feel they can do little but put up with the consequences of changes in policy. Thinking about them and their implications is for someone else to do.

This book takes a different approach. We believe that the policies adopted by those in power make an enormous difference to the way practitioners are able to work. We also argue that policies are not just conjured up out of thin air. People who make policies have reasons *for* what they do. We may not agree with them, but they are reasons, not mere whims. We need to understand those reasons in order to implement more effectively those policies that appear to be useful and to challenge more effectively those that do not. We want to argue against the sense of helplessness. Practitioners can do more than just cope, particularly when policies are not seen as appropriate or effective.

Among the sources of policy are what practitioners themselves have to say, and they can have a considerable impact on the way that policies are implemented. An effective practitioner will give time to thinking how he/she can help policy develop in useful directions. This can take varied forms, from responding to consultations at a national level to implementing policies at a local level in a way that takes account of the local context.

What is policy?

Levin (1997) points out that the word 'policy' is used in several different ways and identifies four of these. The examples given are not from Levin himself, but have been chosen because of their relevance to our overall subject:

- A stated intention – for example, in 2013 the government consulted on its intention to simplify the childcare registration system and strengthen the approach to safeguarding. This was confirmed in 2014 and led to a number of changes, including the updating of the Childcare Regulations (2014) and the amendments to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) with a new statutory version from September 2014.
- Action taken on an issue by those with responsibility – for example, the issuing of new guidance on the transition to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) system covering children and young people aged 0–25 years old. Sometimes the word 'policy' is used to cover all the actions the government or some other body has undertaken in a particular field. Thus, we speak of 'the government's SEN policy', meaning everything it has done in relation to SEND.
- An organizational or administrative practice – for example, if the government sets up a funding regime for early years settings, there will be policies governing the type of setting that is eligible to receive the money.
- An indication of the formal status of a course of action – policies on, for example, childcare are to be found in documents that have some status, such as a government Green Paper or a manifesto published for a general election by a political party.

Although the word does carry different meanings and it is important to be aware of these, there are common elements. Levin states that any policy will entail:

- belongingness: a policy will belong to some body or another – a political party, a government department, an individual setting, and so on
- commitment: a policy entails a commitment to a particular approach or course of action on the part of that body
- status: the fact that a proposal or set of ideas is described as a policy suggests that it has been formally adopted in some way by the body that owns it
- specificity: a policy will entail specific ways of dealing with specific issues, although the extent to which it is specific on the detail will vary.

These four attributes of policy reflect the fact that policies are considered. People do not usually do things in a completely random way in their everyday lives. The same

is also true of policy-makers. We define 'policy' as: an attempt by those working inside an organization to think in a coherent way about what it is trying to achieve (either in general or in relation to a specific issue) and what it needs to do to achieve it. And an organization can vary from a large government department (e.g. the Department for Education) to a professional association (e.g. British Early Childhood Education Research Association (BECERA)) or to a school or private nursery. Social policy is also set in an historical context, which has been influenced by successive governments since the inception of the welfare state and in an increasingly complex environment with devolved national and local governance (Blakemore and Griggs, 2013).

Such thinking is conducted at three levels (although any policy statement may focus on one or two of these):

- basic assumptions about the relevant facts and the values that should inform the approach to them
- broad objectives
- detailed arrangements required to meet those objectives.

In many statements of policy, the underlying values and principles about what are described as the facts of the situation are presented almost as factual, as though there can be no argument about them. This is because such statements usually come from people in charge and, however much they may have consulted people before issuing the document, they now want to get on with things. It should become clear, in the chapters that follow, that the facts of the situation and the values people bring to bear on them are constantly changing and are often matters of controversy. It is also the case that the distinction between values and facts is far from clear much of the time and people may state as matters of fact things that merely reflect their personal beliefs. In short, we should not take for granted the basic assumptions about values and facts that usually underpin policy decisions, even when there is wide consensus on these, perhaps especially when there is consensus.

In the same way, we need to look critically at the second level of policy-making – the broad objectives. Objectives have to be defined clearly, otherwise the policy-makers do not know whether they have been successful and cannot think clearly about the further measures their objectives might imply. However, clarity is not always in evidence in actual policy documents.

Policy-makers will often argue in favour of a policy on one set of grounds while also having other considerations in mind. For example, both the Coalition and Labour governments from 1997 to 2015 often adopted policies that have restricted the powers and autonomy of local councils. There is an inevitable tension between central government, which wishes to set policies for the nation, and local authorities (LAs) that have to implement policies (especially as the political party controlling a local council may be the one in opposition in Parliament). Yet, it is difficult to identify a situation where a government has stated explicitly that restricting the autonomy of local government is one of its major aims. Instead, governments are more likely to argue that proposed policies are designed to secure greater fairness, effectiveness or efficiency in the delivery of services.

Clarity can also be undermined by ambivalence on the part of policy-makers. For example, a policy designed to give more families access to affordable childcare may look to give parents greater freedom of choice or to reduce dependence on benefits by assisting parents to return to work (so that it is expected most parents will take up these opportunities). Yet it may be the case that the policy is not described consistently in terms of either of those alternative objectives in spite of the fact that they can be in conflict with each other.

In a large organization, such as the national government, there can also be actions in different areas of policy, which may or may not lead to coordinated actions in different areas of the education system. For example, at the time of the 2015 general election, the Conservative Party, who secured a small majority and formed the subsequent government, had policies (enacted through the parliamentary process) intended to promote:

- the expansion of funded childcare provisions in England for families with working parents to 30 hours (for families where a parent does not work or with high income levels, the level of funded provision will remain at 15 hours for 38 weeks of the year); as childcare is devolved, measures in other countries of the UK are dealt with by devolved government
- the provision of more and clearer information on childcare provision in each local area
- the intention to speed up the adoption process for children and the expectation for local authorities to work more effectively together to remove geographical boundaries
- further devolution of powers from central to local government through elected mayors, mainly in city areas, but with potentially extended boundaries across traditional local authority areas.

At the same time, it intended to fund the growing demand for post-16 education among young people, partly by depending more on employers as trainers and employers of this group through apprenticeship schemes, as announced in the July 2015 budget. A case could be made for each of these policies, but there is often tension between them, as discussed further in Chapters 8 and 9. For example, the majority of work is organized on a local authority basis but there is clear evidence of these barriers being eroded in some areas (e.g. adoption). There are also changes in governance at a local level with local devolution, including the election of mayors with substantial powers over many aspects of local services, focused on large cities in the north of England.

The third level of policy-making is that of the detailed arrangements that need to be made if the broad objectives are to be achieved. The law may have to be changed. Organizational structures may have to be put in place. New funding may have to be found. Particular efforts may have to be made to secure support for the broad objectives. Chapter 5 gives many examples of these and other aspects of implementation of policy.

There are always choices to be made in determining what kinds of arrangements will best meet the stated objectives. For example, if it is decided to make it easier for parents to afford childcare, this can be done by:

- measures (such as Child Tax Credit) to support family income and support parents to find the money for childcare
- subsidies paid directly to independent childcare providers or subsidized provision by local authorities or other parts of the public sector.

Whichever of these is chosen (and governments often adopt measures that have elements of both approaches), the arrangements are likely to be connected with the way in which broad objectives are conceived and with objectives in other fields (such as general economic policy).

Policy-makers might also want to offset possible disadvantages in one set of arrangements by creating others without changing the first. For example, the recent Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government sought to increase access and improve the quality of childcare in England by:

- raising the status of the workforce by introducing new qualifications and enhancing the standard of level 3 qualifications (e.g. through Early Years Teacher (EYT) and Early Years Educator (EYE) status)
- making the EYFS a statutory requirement and putting a greater emphasis on learning and development (which is increasingly expressed in terms of school 'readiness')
- focusing on the quality rather than the quantity of practitioners through amendments to required staffing ratios in early years settings
- improving the regulatory regime by simplification of the Ofsted registration function and focusing on child outcomes more explicitly in inspection judgements
- offering more parental choice in choosing childcare.

So far, this chapter has focused primarily on a discussion of government policy, but if policy is the attempt to think coherently about objectives and the means to achieve them, then policy-making is something that will occur at every organizational level.

Politicians in government will have their own policies, but the UK is not a tightly controlled hierarchical organization where the prime minister decides what he wants to happen and everyone does as he wishes. As described in Chapter 4, the policies of government are heavily influenced by the views of a wide range of organizations as well as by the media and the general public. A new phenomenon to influence policy-making at governmental level has been Coalition government, where two parties have had to work together to command an overall majority in the House of Parliament. The impact of this on policy is that it has to broadly reflect the Coalition agreement (which was drawn up following the result of the 2010 general election). This agreement sets out the position of each party on overriding policy objectives and subsequent policy had to reflect this. Once policies have been determined, the government is dependent on many different agencies, and, again, the general public, for their successful implementation, as discussed further in Chapter 5.

It is also important to bear in mind that in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), the national government and Parliament have direct responsibility mainly for England, and the devolved regimes in other parts of the UK now take the lead on this issue in their own countries, as described in Chapter 6.

Different departments of the Civil Service and government agencies such as Ofsted (or Ofsted's equivalents in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) will need their own policies to work up the general directions from the politicians into detailed organizational and financial arrangements.

Local authorities and the National Health Service (NHS) will have their own policies for young children. The Labour governments of 1997–2010 took various steps to secure cooperation between them, but the Coalition Government that came to power in 2010 had strong reservations about some of the mechanisms it employed. An example of this was the demise of many Children's Centres and local Sure Start schemes due to funding cuts in local authorities. Different spending priorities can also impact on how policy is implemented. For example, funding for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is often split between the NHS and local authorities, and the priorities of each organization can impact on how policy informs practice.

Early years settings will have their own policies and procedures on a whole range of practice issues. In some cases, the individual setting will be part of a wider organization, such as the education department or one of the national nursery chains, and will have policies common throughout the wider body. At this level, settings can be seen as just implementing policy. However, it is the setting that has the most impact on how policies are implemented in practice, and this in turn can impact most directly on public views and the response of other organizations, which in turn inform the response of government, making clear the cyclical nature of policy development.

ACTIVITY

Take one of the early years policies of the government or of your local authority as an example (e.g. Free Early Education Entitlement (FEEE)).

Describe the effects of that policy on any setting with which you are familiar.

The policy could be relevant to the general situation of the setting. It could have helped to make the setting more or less financially viable than it would otherwise have been or it could have affected the type of service offered (for example, the age range or the number of children with special needs received). The policy could also have affected daily practice in a variety of ways.

How has the policy come to have those effects? Have they always been what the policy-makers intended?

What are the characteristics of policies?

If a policy is the outcome of an attempt to think clearly and coherently about a particular issue, then it should have certain characteristics:

- The underlying assumptions about values and facts will be apparent.
- The broad objectives will be clear. It will be obvious who is intended to benefit from the policy and in what way, and objectives will be compatible with each other.
- The costs will be known and accepted by those responsible for implementation.
- Structural, financial and other arrangements will be made that are best designed to meet those objectives. Resources of all kinds will match the objectives adopted.
- The implications for day-to-day practice will be clear or, at least, the basis will be laid for those implications to be determined.
- Plans will be in place for communicating the policy and its implications to all those who need to know about it.
- The body making the policy will ensure that this particular policy is compatible with other policies on related topics that it has in place.
- The implementation of policy will be reviewed periodically in an effective way, so that policy can be modified if necessary.

Of course, many policies fail to meet all of these requirements all of the time. No one is perfect.

To take one example, those outlining a policy may be clear as to the identity of those it is hoped will benefit, but less clear on the identity of those who may be put at a disadvantage (a key part of the costs). Thus, it may be understood but not clearly stated that:

- tax advantages are being given to families with young children, *but* these will not be shared by other taxpayers
- financial assistance with childcare costs must be as simple as possible for parents, *but* this may mean additional paperwork or delays in payment for providers
- minimum standards will be required of early years services, *therefore* those unable to reach those standards will be forced to cease operation
- services may be required to cooperate more closely to the benefit of users *and* this may mean a loss or renegotiation of professional identity and status for some particular groups of staff.

Of course, the claim will often be made that *in the longer run* the whole of society will benefit from the improvements the policy will bring, so that the short-term disadvantages to some people are acceptable.

Written statements of policy

Policies are normally formed as a written document, although often in different formats at different levels – for example, written policy at national level which is sometimes

enshrined in law through an Act of Parliament; written policy at local/national level that is presented as regulations or guidelines; written policy at institution level (e.g. a setting's special educational needs policy) that is informed by Acts, guidelines and/or codes of practice produced at a national and local level. This is not, however, always the case. Custom and practice can govern what is done in the absence of any written policy. Sometimes custom and practice can be more powerful than written policy and can guide practice in different directions to that of the written policy. This is true of central and local government, but is often more obvious in the case of an individual setting. A nursery may have a written policy that it should promote close cooperation with parents, but this policy could be undermined by administrative or security practices or the use of professional jargon that have the effect of 'freezing out' parents.

Sometimes policy can be created by inaction rather than action. A kind of negative policy creation can take place. For example, the absence of measures designed to make a setting inclusive and welcoming to children with special needs or from minority cultures can become, in effect, a policy to be exclusive and discriminatory, even though no one would state that it was intended (or, probably, even think it).

Policies should be clear about all the aspects defined in the previous section. Written statements of policy help to achieve this in two ways:

- The process of composing a written statement can itself help to clarify ideas that may be shared but not sufficiently articulated, or uncover disagreements that had not previously surfaced so that these can be resolved.
- A written statement is an essential step in communicating the policy to others, even though it is not usually adequate in itself. For practice to reflect the policy, it needs to be adopted and implemented by practitioners.

Written policy statements can take three basic forms:

- general statements that focus on the underlying assumptions and broad objectives and may be seen more as guidance
- those statements that spell out the assumptions and objectives in more detailed terms – this might include the identification of issues and possible ways forward on which the policy-makers' views are still tentative and on which they wish to consult
- detailed statements about the manner in which policy will be implemented – this form of policy is often statutory (it has been enacted through parliamentary statute and is a legal requirement).

Written policies are only useful to the extent that reference is made to them on a regular basis and their effectiveness is monitored and reviewed. Again, it may be easier to consider this at the level of the individual setting. Childcare inspectors have sometimes found that settings have excellent sets of written policies and procedures of which the staff seem completely unaware. This is pointless. The important thing is the quality of the experience of the children, not the quality of the document in the manager's office. The procedures are only important to the extent that they are helpful to staff and both govern and reflect their responses to the situations they encounter.

This is why it is dangerous to leave the composition of policy documents to a few experts. If a group of parents new to this kind of thing are trying to set up a pre-school in the local church hall and struggling to raise funds and do the other things they need to do, it may seem helpful if someone from outside offers to produce all their policy documentation for them. In the long run, it can be a recipe for disaster.

ACTIVITY

Select a policy statement from a setting in which you are working or have worked (including work as a volunteer or student on placement) and consider the following questions:

- Have you read the policy statement?
- Have you received any kind of briefing or training in its implementation?
- Were you involved in any way in the drafting of the document?
- Do you understand the reasoning behind the requirements it makes of staff?
- Are there any changes you would like to see made to the statement? If so, which changes and why?
- Do you understand what the policy statement requires you to do as a member of staff?
- Does your ability to understand the policy statement depend on your involvement in developing it?

Controversy in the debate on policy

Chapters 2 and 3 provide accounts of the development of government policy up to 2010, concluding with the end of the Labour Government and developments from May 2010 onwards. Chapter 4 deals with the influences that lead to broad changes in policy, while Chapter 5 explores the ways in which policies are put into practice through changes in the law or administrative arrangements. Our main focus is on what are conventionally called early childhood services (day care for young children, pre-school education, playwork and some support services for parents). We also say a little about services that cater for all children, but do not usually have special agencies for younger children, such as child protection services. We say very little about some areas of general policy that also have an important impact on the lives of young children – economic policy, the welfare benefits system or management of the built environment, for example. All four chapters underline some of the problematic aspects of policy. It can be easy to present the development of early years services as something inevitably moving in a single direction, with the main question being how quickly we will get to what is seen as the desired state of affairs. It is a key message of this book that change is a more complex process than that.

In the year or so before the general election of 2010, clearer differences began to emerge between the two major parties, with, for example, Labour showing itself willing to make Sure Start Children's Centres an increasingly universal service, while the Conservatives wanted them to focus on those families most in need. In March 2015, the government announced in the Budget a commitment to spend an extra £1.25 billion over five years on CAMHS. The Liberal Democrats argued that they had championed this and it followed the publication in the same month of a taskforce report into CAMHS. Again, this shows how differences between political parties can influence policy. It remains to be seen in the years following the 2015 general election whether this commitment becomes a reality as announced at the end of parliament, under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition, and the current Conservative majority government.

There are also controversies among the general public and practitioners around issues such as the possible disadvantages of day care, the role of different professions in early years services, the best ways of working with young children to help them benefit from later schooling and whether the state should or should not interfere more in family life (Simpson and Envy, 2015).

All of these disputes are important and, at the time of writing, it is still unclear whether the Conservative Government will take policy in a significantly new direction in relation to any of these issues.

SUMMARY

- There is nothing simple about the subject with which this book deals. However, that is not a reason to run away from policy issues and attempt to concentrate exclusively on the day-to-day job with all its problems and rewards.
- Policy is important because we have to think about what we are trying to do and why and how we are doing it.
- There are opportunities for influencing policy.
- If we ignore policy issues, they will not go away. With or without our participation, people will make decisions on the organizational context in which early years practitioners operate, the qualifications they need, their pay and other conditions, the resources that will be made available and, above all, what they should be doing with the children day by day.
- Children need more than our enthusiasm. They need us to think about what we are doing. In the end, that is what 'policy' means.

FURTHER READING

The field is changing rapidly, but earlier publications are still useful in spelling out some of the general issues and showing how far things have (and have not) moved in the recent past. Among books that can be recommended are:

Pugh, G. and Duffy, B. (eds) (2014) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years: Working collaboratively for children* (6th edn), London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Robertson, L. and Hill, D. (2014) 'Policy and ideologies in schooling and early years education in England: implications for and impacts on leadership, management and equality', *Management in Education*, 28, 4, 167–74.

Policy advice documents can also be a useful source to identify potential strengths and limitations of current policy. Professional associations, such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA), the British Early Childhood Education Research Association (BECERA) and the Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators (TACTYC), often produce policy advice papers that can assist this critique and make suggestions for further development. For example:

BERA (2014) *Policy Advice and Future Research Agendas: Early Years*, BERA/TACTYC. Available at: http://tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/BERA-TACTYC-Advice-document.pdf (accessed 19 October 2015).

It is also worth looking at early years policy in the context of wider social policy. Levin, P. (1997) *Making Social Policy*, Buckingham: Open University Press, was quoted earlier in this chapter. It will help you to understand the complexity of policy-making as a human endeavour, although it was written too early to reflect the changes in ECEC policy prior to the Labour government of 1997. More recent advances in educational social policy and the impact of devolved governance are relevant. There are chapters covering this in Blakemore, K. and Griggs, E. (2013) *Social Policy*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

For those who want to keep up to date on developments in ECEC policy, there are different sources:

The weekly publication *Nursery World* has useful news items and a lively letters page, and often covers significant policy issues in its longer articles.

Government websites are an important source of official information, as are the websites of such bodies as your local authority children and families pages and national voluntary organizations, such as the Day Care Trust. (See 'Useful Websites' earlier in this book.)

An increasingly helpful source of the latest policy information is the social media site Twitter. Following relevant organizations (e.g. Children's Commissioners (for each of the countries of the UK); DfE; DfES Wales; Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Nursery World; Ofsted; Pre-school Alliance) can provide access to the latest policy documents and debates.