Early Childhood Services in England: Policy, Research and Practice

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The years since the adoption of the UNCRC and the passing of the 1989 Children Act in England have seen an increasing focus on the rights and well-being of children. In more recent years this has led to an expansion in services for young children. Early childhood remains high on the policy agenda, as governments of all political persuasions pay lip service to the importance of the earliest years of life. A range of research has fed into legislation and curriculum frameworks, and the centrality of children’s active participation in decisions that affect their lives continues to inform best practice. But more recently this has also been a time of growing inequalities, of changing political priorities and of considerable reduction in public spending. Opportunities have been missed to create a more coherent strategy for young children and their families, and many of the more positive developments of the past decades are at risk. This chapter considers what has been achieved over this period and the challenges that are faced in sustaining and building on these achievements.

A historical perspective

The year 1989 was an important one for children in England. Not only was this the year in which the United Nations (UN) adopted the UNCRC (signed by the UK in 1990 and ratified a year later) but it was also the year in which the Children Act in England changed the standing of children in relation to the law. For the first time the welfare of children was to be paramount, and it was recognised that they should have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The act also required local authorities to identify children “in need”, and to safeguard and promote their welfare. The UK was part of a group of countries involved in drafting the UNCRC, at the same time as the cross-party Children Act was going through its long gestation period, but despite this the focus on well-being, on the welfare of children and on the right to protection has often been stronger in England than the right to entitlement or participation. In their ongoing work for UNICEF on the
well-being of children, Bradshaw, Hoelscher and Richardson (2006) point out that the four general principles of the UNCRC – non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interests of the child (Article 3), survival and development (Article 6) and respect for the views of children (Article 12) – fit closely with the conceptualisation of child well-being. For young children in particular, the English legislation has prioritised children’s issues and led to improved outcomes informed by children themselves, but there are many areas in which the UK government has failed to address issues that affect children’s rights more generally, particularly in relation to the continuing legality of corporal punishment, the unlawful use of restraint in detention, and the continuing low age of criminal responsibility (Children’s Rights Alliance for England, 2013). It is worth noting that Wales has already incorporated the UNCRC into its law, and Scotland is currently passing a form of limited incorporation (see Scottish Government, 2013a), while England has yet to do so.

We need to start the journey rather further back to understand the impact of these developments on services for young children. Since the establishment of the first nursery school by Robert Owen, in Scotland in 1816, the development of early education in the UK was until recently remarkably slow by comparison with much of mainland Europe. In 1870, publicly funded education became compulsory at the age of five years, but, from the earliest days, children as young as two years were admitted to primary schools. The work of Rachel and Margaret McMillan in Deptford in the early 1900s, and of Susan Isaacs in Cambridge and at the London Institute of Education in the 1920s and 1930s, while influential within the world of nursery education, did not persuade politicians of the value of making such provision more widely available. During the course of the 20th century, successive governments supported the principle of free nursery education but seldom found the resources to fund it. Even with the gradual establishment of nursery schools and, during the First World War, some public daycare centres, the predominant form of early education in the UK was for 130 years state primary schools. The lack of appropriate provision within the education system led to two parallel developments during the second half of the 20th century: on the one hand, the emergence during the 1960s through the voluntary sector of the playgroup movement; and, on the other, the growth of full daycare to meet the needs of working parents, initially through childminding and, additionally since the 1990s, through private-sector day nurseries. This legacy is important in understanding the state of early childhood services at the beginning of the 21st century.

Despite the publication of a number of prestigious national reports, notably the Rumbold Report *Starting with Quality* (Department for Education and Science, 1990), there was a lack of political conviction that young children mattered and a view that children were the private responsibility of their parents. But there were also unclear and conflicting messages about what was required. Should an early-years policy be most concerned about