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Networks, Connectedness and Resilience: Learning From the Children's Fund in Context

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During the past decade, expectations placed on child welfare services in the UK have moved away from individualised provision geared to meeting the needs of specific children at risk, to consideration of the broader context for children. The introduction of a series of national programmes aimed at addressing social exclusion and tasked with stimulating new approaches to enabling better outcomes for children formed the background for the recent legislation and guidance for local children's services. The Children's Fund was one of a raft of New Labour social policies promoting partnerships between statutory and voluntary organisations in order to address the cross-cutting issue of social exclusion. It was announced following the UK 2000 Spending Review and drew from the Policy Action Team12 (PAT12) Report, 'Young People at Risk' (SEU, 2000). Funding started in January 2001 and continues until 2008 with a total allocation during this period of £960 million. Like most special policy initiatives instigated following 1997, the establishment of the Children's Fund was accompanied by both national and local evaluation requirements. The National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF) was undertaken by a team from the Universities of Birmingham and London and this themed section draws on selected findings from that evaluation. Overall results are reported in Edwards *et al.*, (2006).¹

Unusually in the context of New Labour special initiatives, the Children's Fund programme required all 150 top tier local authorities to develop partnerships to deliver a prevention programme designed to meet local needs and circumstances. The programme was implemented in three waves, with the first wave comprising those authorities with the highest levels of deprivation and wave 3 constituting the more affluent areas. Within this universal approach, individual partnerships adopted different approaches to targeting preventative activities (Hughes and Fielding, 2006), drawing different conclusions about the comparative merits of locality versus social group targeting, as well as about the evidence on which such decisions should be made. The design of NECF reflected both area-based and social group-based targeting, with some case studies focussing on services provided within a specific area and others looking at strategies for working with the most marginalised groups of children and their families: refugee and asylum seeking children, children from black and minority ethnic communities, Gypsy/Traveller children, disabled children and those considered to be at risk of crime and anti-social behaviour.

In common with other policy initiatives, whilst local partnerships were invited to design and develop programmes suited to local circumstances, they were expected to

deliver on nationally determined objectives. At the inception of the programme, the Children's Fund *Guidance* (CYPU, 2001) described the Children's Fund as:

a central part of the Government's agenda for children and families and aims to make a real difference to the lives of children and young people at risk of social exclusion. (CYPU, 2001: 2).

The *Guidance* went on to specify the following overarching objective:

to provide additional resources over and above those provided through mainstream statutory funding, specific programmes and though specific earmarked funding streams. It should engage and support voluntary and community organisations in playing an active part and should enable the full range of services to work together to help children overcome poverty and disadvantage. (CYPU, 2001: 6).

Seven sub-objectives identified desired changes in individual child-level outcomes, linked to education, health and anti-social behaviour, and work at the level of the family and community, with outcomes associated with accessibility, service user involvement and capacity building. Following publication of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), *Every Child Matters: The next steps* (DfES, 2004) and the subsequent 2004 Children Act, Children's Fund programmes were expected to deliver on the five outcomes widely known as 'staying safe', 'being healthy', 'enjoying and achieving', 'making a positive contribution' and 'achieving economic well-being'.

Although the broad objective of the Children's Fund has been to develop collaborative services that aim to reduce or prevent the social exclusion of children and young people, the specification of sub-objectives focussing on individual children and families evidences the influence of the literature on risk and resilience in determining the expected approach to be adopted by partnerships. Although this literature identifies risk and protective factors operating at the levels of the individual, families and communities, most practices that have sought to apply this evidence have focussed on individuals and families rather than communities (see e.g. Prior and Paris, 2005). In the context of the Children's Fund, this approach was reinforced by the model of 'prevention' that was used in providing guidance to partnerships. This was based on Hardiker *et al.* (1991) and Hardiker (1999) and defined prevention in terms of the level of service input required by reference to the acuteness of need. Both influences served to focus attention on individual children rather than on the processes by which they came to be excluded. Overall Children's Fund partnerships emphasised commissioning services that were intended to build resilience and reduce risk at the individual level, rather than to address factors within the environment – including the 'communities' of locality, school, and social group that can both contribute to and act to prevent such exclusion (Edwards *et al.*, 2006: chapter 6).

Our analysis of the practices through which Children's Fund partnerships sought to deliver the programme's objectives caused us to reflect on the significance not only of resilience, but also on ways of conceptualising the connectedness that might be considered the antithesis to 'exclusion'. Social capital has been influential within official discourses of social cohesion and social inclusion. Although not explicit within the framing of Children's Fund objectives, sub-objective seven – 'To involve families in building the community's capacity to sustain the programme and thereby create pathways out of poverty' – can be understood as an aspirational expression of the 'linking' of social

capital through which enhanced connections between families and statutory agencies might enable access to power and resources to achieve change. Overall NECF found very limited evidence that this objective was being achieved. In this issue, Beirens *et al.* and Mason and Broughton consider the significance of different forms of social capital in work with refugee and asylum seeking and Gypsy/Traveller children and their families, although they come to rather different conclusions about the effectiveness with which the strategies adopted reflected an awareness of the importance of working with, and on, the connections between social groups.

The concept of 'network' does not have the same profile within social policy, although it has been used in a variety of contexts to understand, for example, differences in older people's experiences of inclusion or isolation, factors that mediate between poverty and experiences of health and well-being, and the significance of friendships amongst children (Wenger, 1997; Cattell, 2004; Morrow, 2004), as well as to account for mobilisation within social movements (Diani and McAdam, 2003). As Folgheraiter and Morris and Burford explore in this section, effective practices require an understanding of the location of children and their families within social networks within which problems are both experienced and can be resolved. A similar approach is evident in the practice of restorative justice that Barnes and Prior consider in their review article. But this necessitates a view of children as social actors, capable of shaping their world in the present, rather than as future citizens to be shaped to fit social expectations of responsible adulthood. And as Mason and Broughton show, a focus on 'partnership' requires an assessment of the effectiveness with which practitioners are able to develop and use their networks in work with those using their service. The Relational Social Work approach advocated by Folgheraiter emphasises that it is not sufficient simply to identify all those who may have a role in problem solving and to put them into contact with each other, but that there needs to be a conscious facilitation of such networks towards the desired ends. Morris and Burford argue the need to enable a shift in practice to recognise the strengths that networks offer, and to understand the professional resistances to such approaches.

As Edwards argues in this collection, resilience can be understood as an interactive concept rather than a characteristic of individual psychology and she outlines the type of collaborative practice most likely to generate the 'responsible agency' necessary to 'disrupt trajectories of exclusion'. Evans and Plumridge link increases in the resilience of disabled children with opportunities for them to extend their networks amongst both disabled and able-bodied peers and with practices that work with children in the context of their families, rather than as individuals; although their article also highlights the limitations in strategies that fail to engage with exclusionary practices and do not remove disabling barriers.

In their review article Barnes and Prior also consider the significance of 'care' as a concept necessary to understand how connections may be supported and developed in contexts of vulnerability, and the basis on which family members negotiate the right thing to do in difficult circumstances. Care has tended to be devalued as an emphasis on rights has been promoted. There was no explicit reference to care within the Children's Fund objectives and it may well have been resisted if there had been. But the conclusions of the 'Care Values and the Future of Welfare' (CAVA) research reviewed here highlight its importance to child and family policy. Strategies to prevent the exclusion of children in the present and in the future would benefit from a perspective that recognises the significance

of care in the context of family relationships, within informal support networks and in the nature of the practices adopted by paid workers.

The CAVA research also emphasises the importance of understanding the way different social and cultural contexts mediate the conclusions reached about the best way to care within diverse family groups. The three articles in this section that consider Children's Fund work with different groups also indicate the very different factors that children and their families have to negotiate in seeking to establish the social and inter-personal connections that provide them with support. Strategies and practices intended to address the factors that contribute to social exclusion need to engage with the different dynamics of exclusion. For example, spatial exclusions are significant for disabled children, Gypsy/Traveller children and children who are refugees or asylum seekers, but both the nature of the process and the appropriate responses are very different (Barnes *et al.*, 2006; Beirens *et al.*, 2006, Mason *et al.*, 2006). And as Morrow's (2004) research demonstrates, the experience of place and of friendship are closely linked for children. Responses that recognise the significance of networks in enhancing children's well-being also need to recognise the diversity of factors that can enhance or impede network development.

Amongst the overall conclusions of NECF was that:

The focus of the Children's Fund local activity has been predominantly on building the resilience of children and their families. Evidence shows limited focus on changing mainstream provision to better meet the needs of children at risk of social exclusion and some pessimism about the sustainability of a focus on prevention. Future developments of local preventative services will need to consider from the outset the roles and expectations being placed on mainstream providers when considering how best to respond to the experiences of children and young people. (Edwards *et al.*, 2006: 228).

We can add that those expectations need to embrace an understanding of children in their social networks and of ways of conceptualising the connections and disconnections that can enhance or act as a barrier to their personal and social well-being. And such conceptualisations need to encompass the values that inform the decisions about how people live together, and the aspirations they have regarding the quality of their relationships.

Notes

¹ The National Evaluation of the Children's Fund was commissioned by the UK Government Department for Education and Skills 2003–2006. The views expressed in this and other articles based on NECF are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

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