

On the case of early intervention

How could anyone be critical of the 'mom 'n apple pie' that is 'Early Intervention' – helping society's most disadvantaged children? Perhaps, because it allows the government to avoid tackling real issues?

TO BE clear at the outset: I am not arguing here that Early Intervention (EI) is necessarily wrong, or has consciously dubious motivation; but I will be proposing that EI can only have, at best, limited impact when the real 'root causes' of (intergenerational) deprivation – i.e. society's gross structural inequalities – remain unaddressed; and that, if focusing on EI distracts attention from these inequalities, then politicians must not be allowed to get away with the pretence of addressing poor life-chances, when in reality they are doing very little to alleviate them.

Britain's policy-makers have recently been enthusiastically embracing EI as an appropriate response to children's unequal life-chances and associated social problems, invoking rhetoric like 'giving everyone the best start in life'. But is this enthusiasm due to an admirable ethical concern that cuts across the political spectrum, or is it more to do with giving the political parties, who lack the courage to address our grossly unequal society, an expedient pretext for ignoring the real causes of children's grossly unequal life chances?

Plans for the government-funded Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) were announced by government minister Iain Duncan Smith in March 2012, as part of his Social Justice Strategy, calling for early intervention to tackle social breakdown; and the EIF's 'Spending on Late Intervention: How We Can Do Better for Less', was launched at their Westminster conference on 13 February. Their analysis argues that 'picking up the pieces' from children's social problems costs around £17 billion annually – including £4 billion on benefits for 'NEET' 18 to 24-year-olds, and £1 billion on mental health or addiction problems. The rhetoric of 'root causes' recurs frequently, with, for example, EIF chair, MP Graham Allen, saying that public services need to 'urgently' shift towards addressing 'the root causes of social problems'.

In political circles, EI has rapidly become an unquestioned orthodoxy. At the conference, subtitled '...Right for Children, Better for the Economy', and organised in partnership with Capita One (part of the private company Capita Business Services Ltd, Bedford), key-noters included education secretary Nicky Morgan, and her shadow, Tristram Hunt. Morgan spoke of 'do[ing] all that we can to ensure that every single child in the country *has an equal chance to succeed in life, no matter their background or family circumstances*' (my italics). But is this not a flagrantly disingenuous aspiration?

This uncritical cosy consensus takes 'intervention' as a given (the only variable being when it happens) – rather than viewing such 'intervention' as only being necessary because of the massive structural inequalities in our society, generated by the neoliberal economic system ('root causes', anyone...). Thus, there is one deafening exception when it comes to addressing these much-vaunted 'root causes' of children's social malaise – (viz.) any intervention in the economic system itself, whose operation is responsible for generating society's obscenely high levels of inequality.

Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack's new book *Breadline Britain: The Rise of Mass Poverty* (Oneworld Publications) shows poverty in Britain at a post-war high, with ever-more children with their basic needs unmet – in the world's sixth-richest country. Child poverty, they find, is caused by recent massive upheavals that have shifted power from working people to private corporations, with 'the new working poor' being subject to low-pay, highly stressful working conditions, zero-hour contracts and downward social mobility. Political choices taken by successive governments are indicted as a prime cause of this malaise.

Nicky Morgan omitted to remind the conference that her government is currently pursuing a root-and-branch 'reform' of Britain's welfare system, imposing the first rolling set of benefit-level reductions for 80 years, and with the poors' living standards rapidly declining. In this context, the superficially reasonable-sounding rhetoric surrounding EI begins to sound far less 'warm and fuzzy' – and, at worst, becomes an irrelevant distraction. It is these appalling structural realities that politicians' cosy consensus around EI, 'universal childcare' and early education are serving to distract us from addressing, or even thinking about.

There will be no shortage of academics and professionals eager to jump on board the EI bandwagon, with the government bank-rolled largesse that it promises. Yet, as long as politicians refuse to address the fundamental structural inequalities generating these social problems, any complacent pretence that children can be enabled to have 'an equal chance in life' through EI is little more than meaningless, misleading froth.



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Useful resources

- For more information about the Early Intervention Foundation, visit: www.eif.org.uk/