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What is Policy and Why is it Important?

Chapter 1

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 the 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.

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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. A good practitioner will give time to think how he/she can help policy develop in useful directions.

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 1999 the government announced its intention to transfer responsibility for the regulation of childminding and day care in England from local authorities to Ofsted – the Office for Standards in Education).
- ▶ Action taken on an issue by those with responsibility (for example, the issuing of new guidance and regulations on the early years curriculum or young children's day care. 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 childcare policy' meaning everything it has done in relation to childcare).
- ▶ 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 says 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.

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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.

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.

2 In many statements of policy, the underlying values and statements about what are described as the facts of the situation are presented quite baldly, 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 further measures their objectives might imply. However, clarity is not always in evidence.

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 Labour and Conservative governments have 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 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, they are more likely to talk about policies that have

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that effect as being designed to secure greater fairness or effectiveness 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 be designed to give parents greater freedom of choice or to reduce dependence on benefits (so that it is expected most parents will take up those 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 inconsistency between policies arising in different contexts. For example, at the time of the 2005 general election the Labour Party had policies intended to promote:

- ▶ the recruitment of more older people into the childcare workforce
- ▶ the continuing contribution of private providers of day care operating on a small scale (with one or two settings) and of the voluntary and community sector
- ▶ the development of a better qualified childcare workforce.

At the same time, it intended to fund the growing demand for post-16 education among young people, partly by depending more on employers for the training of older employees.

A case could be made for each of these policies, but there was a clear tension between them, as discussed further in Chapter 7. Smaller-scale providers (as opposed to local authorities or large commercial organizations) could not afford to fund the training of their older staff or to recruit older staff for whose training they would have to pay. This meant that the developing policy on the funding of post-16 education was restricting the scope for recruiting older people into the childcare workforce and training them. The government of Tony Blair spoke, when it came to power, of wanting to create 'joined-up government', but found this was more difficult in practice than it had anticipated.

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 4 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:

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- ▶ measures (such as tax credits) to make it easier for parents to find the money for childcare
- ▶ subsidies paid directly to independent childcare providers or subsidised 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 Labour Government sought to prevent the expansion in childcare in England from leading to a decline in the quality of what is on offer by:

- ▶ giving financial support to training and providing other quality-enhancing measures in the early years field
- ▶ issuing curriculum guidance
- ▶ issuing national standards on care
- ▶ enforcing care and education standards in England by giving Ofsted regulatory powers in these fields.

So far we have been talking about 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 3, the policies of government are heavily influenced by the views of a wide range of organizations as well as the media and the general public. 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 4. It is also important to bear in mind that in the field of early education and childcare, the national government and Parliament have direct responsibility mainly for England and that the devolved regimes in other parts of the UK now take the lead on this issue in their own countries (as described in Chapter 5).

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.

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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 has strong reservations about some of the mechanisms it employed.

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.

Activity



Take one of the early years policies of the government or of your local authority as an example.

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.

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- ▶ 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 given a written form. 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 take things in a different direction. 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 there should be close cooperation with parents but undermine that policy by administrative or security practices or the use of professional jargon that have the effect of 'freezing out' parents.

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Sometimes practice is not so much about what people do as what they do not do. A kind of negative policy creation can take place. 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 that 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). The others include, of course, those joining at a later date the body for which the policy was created.

Written policy statements can take three basic forms:

- ▶ general statements that focus on the underlying assumptions and broad objectives
- ▶ policy statements that spell out those 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.

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

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offers to produce all their policy documentation for them. In the longer, 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

The next chapter gives an account of the development of government policy up to 2011. Chapter 3 deals with the influences that lead to broad changes in policy, while Chapter 4 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 the management of the built environment, for example. All three 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.

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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.

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.

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

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 chapters that follow will offer suggestions on further reading on some of the particular topics with which they deal. 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:

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Penn, H. (ed.) (2000) *Early Childhood Services: Theory, Policy and Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pugh, G. and Duffy, B. (eds) (2010) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years: Working Collaboratively for Children* (5th edn), London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

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 early childhood policy since Labour first returned to power in 1997.

For those who want to keep up to date on developments in early years policy, there are two important 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 early years team and national voluntary organizations, such as the Day Care Trust. (See Useful Websites after References at the end of this book.)