

Prevention and early intervention with young children: the Sure Start programme

Karen Clarke suggests that the focus of Sure Start programmes on poor parenting ignored the effect of poverty on families.

The Sure Start programme, announced in 1998, is a key element in New Labour's long-term strategic approach to reducing social exclusion. As Ruth Levitas (2005) has pointed out, the term social exclusion is an ambiguous one. It appears as both the cause and the effect of a whole host of social problems such as juvenile offending, teenage pregnancy, educational failure and unemployment. The ambiguities in the concept have resulted in multiple interpretations of the term in different contexts, with different implications for the policies necessary to eliminate it. Social exclusion may be seen as a consequence of structural inequalities that need to be addressed through redistributive policies which will ensure greater income equality. Alternatively it may be seen as the consequence of individual exclusion from the labour market, requiring policies that bring about social inclusion through ensuring that all adults have access to opportunities for paid employment. A third perspective, put forward in the work of authors such as Charles Murray (1990), is that social exclusion is the consequence of the individual moral failings of the socially excluded and needs to be addressed by changing their culture and values.

New Labour's policies on social exclusion have been dominated by a conceptualisation of social exclusion that focuses on paid work as the route to its eradication, and a view that the role of the state is to invest in education and training to maximise employment opportunities. Its welfare policies have placed a very strong emphasis on the duty of all adult citizens to undertake paid work. Much less attention has been given to reducing inequality by redistribution, and the gap between rich and poor has remained unchanged, or even marginally increased under New Labour (Dorling et al 2007). However, in its policies to address the longer term causes of social exclusion the focus is on preventative interventions aimed at young children in poor families, in an approach which appears, at least at the level of the national framing of policy, to see the problem as a consequence of deficient parenting practices.

The New Labour government was elected in 1997 on the back of a manifesto that emphasised the importance of education above all else as the means of achieving equality of opportunity. But it was confronted with clear evidence of how class inequalities affect educational attainment - differences in attainment of developmental milestones were identified in children as young as 22 months. Evidence presented by academics and voluntary organisations to a series of seminars organised by the Treasury as part of the first Comprehensive Spending Review in 1998 pointed to the need for interventions with deprived families before their children reached school age.

The Sure Start programme was based on the American Head

Start programme set up in the 1960s as part of the 'war on poverty'. Evaluations of this and similar programmes indicated that they were of long term benefit to children. Criminality, early parenthood and unemployment were all significantly reduced, which concomitantly meant the state saved money when it invested in such preventative programmes.

Between 1999 and 2004 over 500 local Sure Start programmes were established in the UK, through a series of six funding rounds, at a cost of over £2 billion. Each local programme was situated in an area of high deprivation and offered a range of services to families with a child or children under four, living within strictly defined geographical boundaries (normally covering 400-800 children living within 'pram pushing distance' of the Sure Start centre). Within each area the services offered were universal, and the programme thereby sought to avoid any stigma being attached to their use. The aim of the programme was:

'To work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children - particularly those who are disadvantaged - so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children.' (Sure Start 2002: 19)

The programme represents an important shift of public resources to pre-school children, whose care and welfare had previously been seen by both Labour and Conservative governments as the private responsibility of parents, unless the child was suffering abuse or neglect. The funding has been used to establish a wide range of support and advice services for families in poor areas, including day care, additional health visiting services and play facilities. The programme has been well-received in the areas where it has been introduced, and has now been rolled out nationally with the announcement in 2004 that Children's Centres, offering services for pre-school children, are to be established in every ward by 2010.

There was no national 'blueprint' for what services should be included in the local Sure Start programmes. Local programmes have been free to determine the particular form and content of their services to reflect local needs. However, a series of Public Service Agreements and Service Delivery Agreements linked to the four aims of the programme set performance targets for the programme nationally and these in turn give a clear message not only about the priorities for the programme but also, through the linking of the performance targets to the aims, an implicit message about the causal mechanisms that underlie social exclusion. The targets focus on individual parental behaviour as the key to improving children's health, education and development to the apparent exclusion of other contextual



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Sure Start has been Labour's early intervention flagship programme

factors, and linked very broad aims to highly specific target outcomes:

- Improving social and emotional development (to be measured by a reduction in children re-registered on the Child Protection Register)
- Improving health (to be measured by a reduction in maternal smoking in pregnancy)
- Improving children's ability to learn (to be measured by a reduction in children with speech and language difficulties)
- Strengthening families and communities (to be measured by a reduction in workless households)

In this way, broad preventative aims become associated with the micro-management of parental, and particularly maternal, behaviour and a highly complex and relatively untheorised process leading to social exclusion becomes reduced to the modification of a very specific set of maternal behaviours, such as breast feeding or smoking in pregnancy. The focus on individual parental behaviours in a way that is de-contextualised, carries the danger of seeing these behaviours as indicative of inadequate parenting, and seeing parents in poor areas as being the cause of their children's later social exclusion.

Evidence from the national evaluation of the Sure Start programme has indicated that the programme has had limited effects, benefiting less deprived families but having an adverse

impact on the most deprived families (Belsky et al 2006). In order to adequately address the causes of poverty and the other disadvantages and problems which follow from being poor, parents need support which goes beyond advice, information and instruction on parenting roles, and the provision of early education opportunities, and addresses to a much greater degree than has been done so far, the material inequalities which make parenting in poor areas such a difficult task.

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