Childhood, youth and the economy
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Priscilla Alderson *argues that government policy increasingly locates children and young people as part of the formal British economy.*

The government's agenda for children, Every Child Matters (ECM), is widely welcomed and praised.[1] This article raises less publicised concerns about ECM however. Children's and young people's lives are becoming highly constrained in Britain. An example of typical childhood in Stavenger Norway in the 1900s illustrates this. Albert Parr remembered how, when he was four years old, he enjoyed walking on his own for five or ten minutes to the station, buying a ticket, watching the trains and riding over the long bridge to the harbour. He looked at the boats, sometimes went to the fisheries museum, passed the park where the band played, went to the shops or the fire station, explored the fish market, selected, haggled for and bought some fish, and returned home.[2] Older people in Britain remember these freedoms in their own childhood, which are still typical for young children in the majority poorer world today. In the Sudan, children combine work and play, contacts with other villagers of all ages, and expeditions across wide areas searching for food and fuel, usually, it seems, with relish and enjoyment.[3] Like Albert they enjoy basic rights enshrined in the UN 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child: freedom of association and peaceful assembly (to wander independently around the neighbourhood and markets, meet friends and speak to adults); direct access to many kinds of information; respect for their worth and dignity; and 'due account' being taken of their views in matters that affect them - by their parents' trust, by the adults they encounter on their daily rounds, and by the whole community, who, in many respects, treat them as equal citizens.

In contemporary Finland, eight-year-olds look after themselves all day while their parents are at work, greatly increasing children's and parents' freedoms and reducing the burden of childcare costs. In Britain, however, such independence would be perceived as exposing the child to the threat from traffic or 'stranger' danger, or as too threatening to public order; the responsible adults would risk being seen, and possibly sued, as negligent. Young people are regarded, and often regard themselves, both as dangerous threats and as dangerously threatened. Young men are the group most likely to attack or to be attacked violently in the streets (although records are uncertain, since the police record crimes committed by young people aged under 16, but seldom crimes committed against them). There is great concern - appropriately - about young people's knife fights; but there is much less concern about the (mainly adult) car drivers who kill on average ten people every day, or the three young men who take their own lives each day. In England there is still no law to prevent parents from smacking their children, although all other age groups have legal protection from assault, and in spite of the fact that, in extreme cases, smacking can escalate into the kind of violence that kills one or two children at home each week.

Some of the children I have interviewed in primary schools have been confused about whether the high security around their fortress schools was to keep bad people out or bad children in. The government appears to have similar anxieties, having greatly expanded everyone's opportunities to become law-breakers by creating more than

3000 new offences since 1997. In that year the number of young people in prison doubled.

I was surprised at how fearful the children I interviewed were of being murdered if they ventured out into local streets and parks - since the murder rate of children outside their homes, about six per year, has hardly changed over the last thirty years. This relative rarity may partly account for the intense mass media interest in these sad events. The British panic over paedophiles, stirred up by the tabloids, especially before school summer holidays, always evokes speedy responses from politicians about punishing and imprisoning the offenders. Yet the greater, unmeasured, effect is that millions of children become virtually imprisoned at home unless adults escort them outside. The rare unaccompanied young child may then come to be seen by predators as almost 'fair game' and will not have the security of belonging to those large groups of confident streetwise children seen in old photographs playing in city streets. Green areas on housing estates are labelled 'no ball games', and shop notices demand 'two children only at a time'. The police disperse groups of young people caught 'hanging about' in public places, as if the impulse to mix in communities and friendship groups is a crime. Towns and countryside, with their empty playgrounds, often look as if the Pied Piper visited yesterday.

Anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) and 'voluntary' Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) - disproportionately enforced on young people - serve to blur the difference between criminal activity and behaviour as minor as dropping litter, now an arrestable offence. And ASBOs can be enforced following hearsay from absent witnesses who claim to *feel* anxious or harassed, claims that require no supporting evidence. This means that, in the absence of due inquiry and process of law, authorities enforcing ASBOs may unwittingly be endorsing unjust accusations, racism and conflicts between neighbours. Furthermore, young people with ASBOs are not only denied the right to a fair trial; they are also denied the ancient right to anonymity, still respected for minors in the criminal courts. Being 'named and shamed' in local newspapers and leaflets delivered to households is part of the alienating punishment of ASBOs. Breaking the terms of an ASBO, such as an evening curfew or a no-go area, is an imprisonable offence, no matter how minor or tenuous the original grounds for the ASBO were. Disadvantaged young people are most subject to ASBOs/ABCs - those who are most visible on the streets because they do not have gardens, or parents who chauffeur them around and pay for entry to the now largely privatised local leisure amenities. Disadvantage and youth are highly associated. In spring 2006, 41 per cent of London children were living in poverty.[4]

Prisons and police surveillance are now encroaching further into areas of children's lives, such as attendance at school. The police used to have the power to drive away in their cars only people who had asked for help or were suspected of a crime. Now, during twice yearly 'truancy sweeps', the police can drive away any children found on the streets during school hours - although most of those accused of truancy have been found to have valid reasons for being out of school (see www.arch.org.uk). Parents may now be imprisoned if their children 'truant', but the effectiveness of this punishment is questionable: the first mother to be sentenced on these grounds was later re-imprisoned for the same offence.

The main purpose of this article is to question why the government, the mass media and influential public opinion condone, and even demand, such measures. With more CCTVs than anywhere else in the world, and more people per capita in prison than anywhere in Europe, why are the English so fearful? What is the spider spinning these webs of anxiety, antagonism and control? My suggestion is that the main rationale and driver are the values that underlie current economic policies. Therefore, before going on to consider the government's broader child and youth policies, I will outline some alternative economic analyses, as a means of clarifying underlying values.

Alternative economics

Feminist economists use images of a cake or an iceberg to depict their alternative views of society (adapted in Table 1).[5] Layer 1, the formal market economy, and layer 2, government services, are the taxed, regulated, tip of the iceberg, the part that interests mainstream economists. Feminists challenge the belief that layer 1 alone produces the wealth required to sustain societies. They argue instead that the top two layers rely on the wealth produced by all the other unregulated and unpaid layers, although these are largely submerged and invisible in economic analyses. Young adult workers, for example, do not arrive ready trained, but have been supported by decades of family and homecare, relationships, education and community experiences, which continue to sustain them throughout their lives. Raw materials from layer 6 are not, as calculated by mainstream economics, cost-free apart from the price of obtaining and transporting them: they are the planet's precious and often irreplaceable resources, and part of a common heritage - as, for instance, indigenous people in oil-rich and water-poor areas are claiming.

Table 1 The cake or iceberg model of economics

Formal regulated economy
1. Private commercial sector
2. Public tax-funded sector, law, state services
Unregulated economy
3. Homeworking, informal sector, poor majority world workers
4. Underground economy (black market)
Unpaid and uncosted layers
5. Housework, subsistence work, family and communal reciprocity
6. Nature

The cake/iceberg image offers a range of ways of analysing feminist and ecological economics. However, this article concentrates on using the image to consider the economics of childhood and youth. ECM involves moving children and young people more firmly up into the top two layers - 'the System', in Habermas's terms, and away from layers 3 to 6, 'the Lifeworld' of private and civic life.[6] ECM suggests great faith in the top two layers as the most responsible, reliable and appropriate arena for childhood and youth, with mistrust of the comparatively unreliable, possibly dangerous, informal lifeworld layers. As Habermas warns us, in neoliberal societies, the 'System' colonises and absorbs the Lifeworld, and it does this partly by turning social and political issues (such as childcare and education) into technical ones. Deregulation of the market withdraws practical welfare state support for citizens, but it also advances the power of the state and the economy to invade and control public and private life. People are increasingly treated not as active determining citizens, but

as passive clients of state services, and consumers guided by the mass media. Habermas argues that, within the System, shared meanings and understandings and social bonds are liable to fragment into social disintegration, and feelings of helplessness, alienation and demoralisation. The next section summarises some aspects of ECM, before considering the relevance to it of the analysis in the theories outlined here.

'Every child matters'

The lead author of much government child policy is the Treasury, with the Department for Education and Skills (of employable future workers) (DfES), Department for Work and Pensions, and Department for Trade and Industry. Central to ECM by 2010 will be the planned 3500 children's centres, based in or near schools and providing care for all children (whose parents choose it), from their early months up to 14 years. Detailed targets and inspections for programmes managed from Whitehall will assure 'quality' in all paid services provided for children from birth onwards. Extended schools will be open from 8am to 6pm, 50 hours a week (longer than European working hours for adults), throughout the year, so that the 'childcare market' can meet the 'needs of the area' for fully employable parents. The schools will be 'one stop shops', offering education, health, social and employment-seeking services. All children's detailed records will be kept on national computer databases, for multidisciplinary teams to access, in order to promote comprehensive care.

Billions of pounds will fund the databases and the layers of management, administration, planning and inspection that the programme requires; these will be led by a Treasury and DfES Taskforce, 'to raise quality and ensure value for money', aided by a Transformation Fund, National Remodelling Team, Comprehensive Performance Assessment star rating, Annual Performance Assessment and Outcomes Framework, regional change advisers, Local Authority and Health Authority committees working with voluntary and statutory services and lead members, Local Safeguarding Children Boards, School Workforce in Schools Directorate, Children's Workforce in Children, Young People and Family Directorate, a pilot at National College for School Leadership, teams of ten on Multi-Agency Team Development Programmes, Children's Trusts, Directors of Children's Services, Local Strategy Leaders, Joint Commissioning and Budgets, Integrated Front Line Delivery Multi-agency Teams, evaluators, consultants and trainers, New Relationships with Schools, School Improvement Partners, OFSTED and Joint Area Reviews. There is already concern about the present dearth of skilled qualified care and education staff, even before all these layers, as well as the extended schools and children's centres, are fully staffed. State and commercial services, layers 1 and 2, will work together, to provide comprehensive services. It is likely that sooner or later parents will pay for most of the direct childcare. ECM aims to provide tailored care and education for every child. Yet how will flexible, spontaneous, individual interactions between creative children and trusted responsible professionals be possible beneath all these layers? And, if flexibility really is valued, are so many tiers necessary?

ECM is designed to increase the employment of mothers; £5 billion are said to be lost annually through mothers staying at home with their children. Extended schools will provide the necessary alternative childcare, and employ advisers to help women to find paid work. Ministers emphasise that parents can choose how many hours per week their children stay in the extended centres - children's choices are not mentioned

- but pressures to take up full-time childcare may grow. Employers might assure any parent who wants to work part-time that this will be unnecessary given the local childcare services. Employers may pick the parents prepared to work the longest hours, and need no longer be concerned with their employees' childcare or family life.

Having established the expensive all-day childcare places, the schools will need to fill them as cost effectively as possible, and may refuse to admit part-time children. At present, some head teachers are enthusiastic about extended schools and 'wrap around care', but others feel forced into establishing them for fear that neighbouring schools with nurseries will absorb all the local future pupils, or at least all the most eligible ones. Similarly, the choice of many parents for preschool services for their 2 and 3 year olds is already based on their links to primary schools, and not necessarily on which preschools are best for their children at their current age, and this trend is likely to reach back into babies' early months on choice of nurseries. Willingly or not, parents and providers are likely to be led by market forces into ever longer hours of formal childcare, and ever longer parents' working hours to pay for them.

Government success is measured by growth of the Gross National Product (GNP), which thrives when parents are employed and pay others to care for their children, and to do many tasks that people who stay at home tend to do - cleaning, ironing, gardening, cooking, mending, decorating. Buying a McDonald's (layer 1) looks good for GNP; growing and cooking your own vegetables and sharing them around the neighbours (layers 5-6) do not. And, along with the 'goods', such as education, healthcare, housing or holidays, costly 'bads' also look good in the GNP - dealing with crime, accidents, illness, pollution, refuse and disasters. Above certain poverty levels, paradoxically, a rise in GNP and average household incomes can involve the steady rise in the 'bads' of infant mortality, child abuse and poverty, teenage suicides, drug use, mental illness and high-school drop-out rates - as the US annual Index of Social Health has shown since 1977.[7] Economic wealth does not necessarily increase social well-being, justice or equity, and it is not speedily 'trickling down' in Britain, the least equal society in the European Union. With higher unemployment rates than in 1979, London had a 23 per cent increase in its billionaire residents in the year up to April 2005. The top 1000 richest people in Britain in 2005 owned £249,615 billion, whereas in 1997 they owned £98.99 billion. The share of the national wealth for the poorer 50 per cent of British people was 10 per cent in 1986, but this fell to 5 per cent by 2002. The price of homes in London doubled between 1996 and 2001, benefiting older homeowners and disadvantaging young families.

The Treasury's main concern, to promote economic enterprise (layer 1), assumes, as mentioned, that this is the primary means of funding levels 2-6, and promoting social welfare. In the past, at least in theory, each government department debated and competed through the Cabinet for funds from the Treasury, by defending the specific advantages of excellent health, or education, or welfare services. Today, the Treasury tends to define an economic type of excellence for each department, and funds them to meet many detailed targets towards achieving key objectives. Excellent education is said to enable every child to become a highly qualified, high-earning adult. (The economy in fact depends on the vital work of many very low-paid workers - doing childcare or recycling for example - who tend to be blamed for having missed educational opportunities, rather than there being any questioning of their poor pay and working conditions, but this is beyond the scope of this article.) Government

policies, from pensions, health services and crime to gambling, drinking and the Olympics, primarily promote the System: the market of layer 1 and the tight regulation and surveillance of layer 2. This logic involves moving childhood away from the Lifeworld and into the System, for example, into extended schools. The next section reviews how the government justifies this policy.

Repositioning childhood and youth into the System

The government advocates extended schools through numerous strategies to support two main claims: that layers 1-2 offer the best care and education, and that layers 3-6 are inferior, negligent or dangerous.

In layers 1-2, extended schools are intended to promote enterprise by enabling all children to 'reach their full potential', and to end child poverty by increasing parental employment and reducing the numbers of 'workless households' (a phrase that denies all the vital work performed at home). ECM emphasises five outcomes, said to matter most to the children and young people consulted: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being. (Examination and school attendance records illustrate 'enjoying and achieving', rather than measures that children might be expected to enjoy.) Multi-disciplinary teams based in the schools are intended to provide all-round care for families, and detect, identify, prevent or treat emerging problems. The schools are welcomed by the National Children's Bureau and by charities such as 4Children, as 'fantastic places for children to be'.

The critical, innovative and advocacy voices of the children's charities have been muted since they have become involved in, and identified with, government policy-making, and with providing government-funded services - in effect when they moved from civil society (layer 3) into the System. Women tend to be the main advocates for children, but the strong, organised lobbies usually involve successful women employed in layers 1-2, primarily concerned with increasing formal childcare, not women who spend more informal time with children in the Lifeworld. When 'childcare' is mainly theorised as labour, children are theorised as work objects instead of persons, and meanings of care as love within intimate interdependence, central to the Lifeworld, risk becoming obscured, opening the way for System efficiency to be favoured over Lifeworld informality.

The second part of government strategy is based on the dangers and deficits that are perceived in layers 3-6. Children and young people, as discussed earlier, are regarded both as threats to, and as threatened by, their neighbourhoods. 'We must reclaim the streets from yobs,' declared a recent Home Secretary. Such fears resonate with broader concepts of childhood and youth as irresponsible, irrational, volatile, unreliable stages, requiring firm control by rational, stable, reliable adults. In Table 1, Nature, at level 6, is furthest from the System, and may be seen as potentially the most volatile and untamed layer. Theories of child socialisation, development and education envisage the child gradually mounting stages from untamed nature towards civilised adulthood, schools being primary agents for this weaning.

Extended schools aim for faster and more thorough development of children towards regulated reliable adulthood. They also remove children from hazardous natural environments (rivers, beaches, hills, forests) and into closely controlled built

environments. Valued memories of freer childhoods, celebrated in children's and adults' fiction and poetry, are forgotten or fantasised. Ofsted standards for outdoor play space are vague, and market choice, which encourages the expansion of popular schools, leads to new classrooms being built on shrinking playgrounds in order to fill them with more children. Thousands of playgrounds and playing fields have also been sold, and politicians appear to favour indoor sports centres over the natural spaces that are valued by young children, who play out in all weathers if they have the opportunity.

Deep beliefs about children's dependence shape our language and thinking, for example in ascribing agency to adults who 'pick up' or 'drop off' their children at school (rather than children 'going' to school). The aphorism that 'we spend their first year teaching children to walk and talk, and the next 20 years telling them to be quiet and sit still' also assumes adult agency, although it acknowledges young children's energy and restlessness - running, jumping, climbing, wriggling - which adults restrict and discourage, despite the increase in childhood obesity. Again the solution to obesity is framed around adult agency: paid experts 'deliver' compulsory physical education sessions for children (the System), instead of a solution being sought through Lifeworld freedoms to meet friends and play vigorously in natural surroundings, in tune with children's bodily needs and impulses.

As well as anxieties about dangerous children and young people, or about natural spaces, or neighbourhoods that offer only patchy and unreliable childcare, there has also been an increase in the propagation of fears about families as primary sources of abuse and crime. Parents and guardians are held to be responsible for children's failings, and to need training and supervision. Adverse statistical associations, purporting to be linear cause-effect patterns, are drawn between lower family income and recorded ill health, accidents, negligence, teenage pregnancy, smoking, stress, weaker social contacts, lower educational achievement and lower aspirations. Research is quoted to 'prove' that young children do better at nurseries and later at school, while their mothers go to work. For every $1 spent on nurseries, $7 will be saved on juvenile justice, it is claimed. The source for what has been described as this 'highly conjectural figure' is the US Perry High/Scope trial from the 1960s, with very disadvantaged black families.[8] For many reasons, the findings do not extrapolate well to Britain in the 2000s, and the use of such tenuous data suggests ideological rather than scientific foundations for current child policies.

The central symbol for every child in ECM is Victoria Climbié, although it is acknowledged that she is in an extremely rare group (ECM, figure 1). Of the 11 million children in Britain, each year 50-100 die from neglect and abuse. Of the rest, 25,700 are on child protection registers; 59,700 are 'looked after' by local authorities; 3-400,000 are 'in need'; 3-4 million are 'vulnerable'; and 7-8 million are presumably 'safe'. However, ECM treats all children as potentially at risk - of becoming criminals, of not fulfilling their (economic) potential, and of being abused, with the implication that these threats are posed by the Lifeworld and resolved by the System.

Sound policies?

Efforts to increase the well-being, opportunities and reasonable safety of children, and to reduce child poverty, are to be welcomed. There are also some excellent schools, which many children happily attend for extra hours. However, my argument is that,

besides offering benefits, current policies raise questions, which require serious reflection. For example, concepts of parents as the consumers of childcare and education implicitly reduce the children to products. Are schools the benign and appropriate centres for all child services? Schools confine children into year groups, with constant noise and bustle and impersonal mass care. If children meet all week only those adults who are paid to teach and control them, how might the infinitely varied intergenerational contacts that sustain communities become fragmented and lost? Will 'holiday clubs' mean arriving early at school, where 'play' has been hijacked to serve adults' educational agendas, and with no time for the dawdling and pottering at home that children enjoy? Schools have cut lunch and play times, to extend teaching hours - measures that can be seen as stemming from a 'child-centredness' that is concerned with the child's mind and neglects the body.[9] Bodily needs - for food, water, toilets and exercise - are seen as disruptions to sitting still 'on task'; ordinary restlessness is increasingly perceived as 'hyper' activity, a behavioural or medical problem. Will these trends be extended into almost all of the children's waking hours?

Similar concerns have been raised in relation to the 2006 Youth Matters policies, which are based on similar principles to those of ECM, but focus on an older age group.[10] Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith, in their assessment of Youth Matters, criticise its neglect of a 'lifeworld' approach to education as an emancipatory, expressive and creative experience. They argue that youth workers are becoming technicians for the application of government toolkits and targets, designed to shackle young people, increase their skills, manage their disaffection and invade their privacy (through widely-held and detailed personal computer records). Jeffs and Smith warn that schools and youth services are altering relationships between young people, the state, the market and the world, with little regard for the happiness of the young people, or for the adults working with them.

Across the whole age range, government policy seeks to tame and regulate young people, preparing them for the future labour market while freeing up their parents for the current workforce. The dominance of the Treasury in these processes reflects an instrumentalist view of education; and the lack of attention to issues such as play, creativity and enjoyment is in itself revealing. Critical reflection about ECM is therefore urgently needed, with all kinds of concerned adults reflecting with children and young people on its potential effects on their identities, lifestyles, aspirations, relationships and status as citizens.

Notes

1. Treasury et al, *Every Child Matters,* Stationery Office 2003, www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/.

2. Albert Parr is quoted by Colin Ward in his 'Opportunities for childhood in late twentieth century Britain', in Berry Mayall (ed), *Children's Childhoods Observed and Experienced,* Falmer 1994.

3. Cindy Katz, *Growing up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives,* University of Minnesota 2004.

4. London Councils website.

5. See, respectively, Hazel Henderson, *Paradigms in Progress: Life Beyond Economics,* Adamantine 1993; Maria Mies with V. Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective,* Zed Books 1999.

6. Jurgen Habermas *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Polity Press 1987.
7. See also Lynda Dyson, Sally Davison, 'Growing Up In Britain Can Damage Your Health', *Soundings* 31, Autumn 2005; Jonathan Rutherford, Hetan Shah, *The Good Society*, Compass/Lawrence & Wishart 2006.
8. See Helen Penn et al, *Early Years: What is Known about the Long-term Economic Impact of Centre-Based Early Childhood Interventions?*, EPPI Centre 2006, http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/ssru/
9. Berry Mayall, *Towards a Sociology for Childhood*, Routledge 2002.
10. Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith, 'Where is Youth Matters Taking Us?', *Youth & Policy* 91, 2006.