

Original citation:

Cullen, Stephen Michael, Cullen, Mairi Ann, Lindsay, Geoff and Strand, Steve. (2013) The parenting early intervention programme in England, 2006-11 ; a classed experience? British Educational Research Journal, Volume 39 (Number 6). pp. 1025-1043.

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**The Parenting Early Intervention Programme in England, 2006-11; a classed
experience?**

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Abstract:

Family policy was a key component of the 'New' Labour government's family, social, and education policy, and a range of family focused initiatives and interventions designed to 'support' families and improve individual, family, and social outcomes were introduced. The post-May 2010 coalition government's family policy exhibits elements of policy continuity. There have been class-based critiques of this approach to social policy, which have argued that policies were informed by a project to recreate the working class. One family policy initiative, the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) ran from September 2006-March 2011. The evaluation of the PEIP was a large scale combined methods study of the implementation of parenting programmes in all local authorities in England, and forms the evidential base of this article which was built upon the completion, by participating parents, of three standardized pre and post course questionnaires (N = 4446). A sample of 133 participating parents was also interviewed using semi-structured interview schedules. The evidence from the evaluation showed the heterogeneous class nature of the PEIP cohorts, which over the roll-out of the initiative, incorporated a larger number of middle-class parents. The qualitative data indicated that parents had positive participant perceptions of PEIP courses, characterised by 'mutual reach', and did not experience the courses in classed terms. The evidence from the data collected for the national evaluation suggests that it is difficult to conceptualise the PEIP, in class terms – such an approach requires, at the least, major qualification.

Keywords: family policy; parenting; class; Parenting Early Intervention Programme

Introduction

Labour governments, 1997-2010, and family 'support'

Family policy was a key component of the British Labour government's domestic agenda from the election of the first 'New' Labour government in 1997 to its defeat in May 2010. The 1997 Labour Party manifesto set out the overall approach to family policy that characterised its thirteen years in power:

'Labour does not see families and the state as rival providers for the needs of our citizens. [...] But families cannot flourish unless government plays its distinctive role: [...] Society, through government, must assist families to achieve collectively what no family can achieve alone.' (Labour Party 1997).

The Labour government subsequently introduced a wide range of family focused initiatives and interventions designed to 'support' families and improve individual, family, and social outcomes. The variety of policy initiatives were matched by important government reports and legislation, such as Every Child Matters (H M Government 2003), the 2004 Children Act, and the Children's Plan (DCSF 2007).

This UK approach was reflected by European developments. In particular, the Council of Europe commissioned important work in respect of positive parenting and the role of governments and parents in family life. For example, Daly (2007) addressed key issues relating to parenting and parents' entitlement to support from the state in carrying out their role as parents; and in 2006, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recommended that member states should adopt a range of measures to 'promote positive parenting as an essential part of the support provided for parenting' (Council of Europe 2006). The universal applicability of parenting programmes has also been stressed by the United Nations (UN), with recent publications funded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), supporting UN policy recommendations on parenting (UNODC 2009,

2010). The UN produced a compilation of family skills training programmes which highlighted the evidence base of thirteen programmes, stressing that these programmes were:

'based on a vast body of scientific research that has undergone peer review to ensure the results are safe and beneficial to those targeted by such programmes [...] research [that] not only shows that evidence-based programmes are effective and have a positive impact but also indicates how these results are achieved. Evidence-based programmes [...] offer the assurance that positive results will be obtained, that the programme will benefit those targeted and that close adherence to the programme structure and content will ensure that implementation has no negative effects' (UN 2010, 4).

2010-2012 Continuities

The change of UK government in May, 2010, saw the Labour government replaced by the Conservative – Liberal-Democrat coalition. Despite this change, and the over-arching demands of austerity, the policy debate continues to be dominated by a stress on early intervention. The coalition government's first Child Poverty Strategy, *A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives* (DWP, DFE 2011), set out the government's approach to tackling poverty, indicating the direction of that policy, and its goals, up to 2020. The background to *A New Approach to Child Poverty* was the coalition government's Child Poverty Act 2010, which 'established income targets for 2020 and a duty to minimise socio-economic disadvantage' (DWP, DFE 2011, 8). The Child Poverty Strategy has as one of its core elements the declared policy aim of addressing the contexts of poverty and early intervention, including parenting support.

The background to *A New Approach to Child Poverty* was a number of recent reviews and reports to government. Foremost among these were those by Field (2010), Allen (2011a), Tickell (2011), and C4EO (2010), while others, Munro (2011), Allen (2011b) have effectively

reinforced key aspects of the Coalition government's Child Poverty Strategy (see Lindsay, Cullen, and Wellings 2011 for a review). Field's review of poverty and life chances, *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* (2010), focused on poverty as an explanatory influence on the life chances of children, but also addressed other influences, and proposed the establishment of the 'Foundation Years' covering a child's life from conception to five years. In terms of the key drivers of outcomes in childhood and young adulthood, parents and parenting were seen by Field to be crucial (2010, 39). Field argued that the consistent factor throughout a child's development is the role of parents and families, and: 'There is now a significant consensus amongst academics and professionals that factors in the home environment – positive parenting, the home learning environment and parents' level of education – are the most important' (Field 2010, 38). The Field Review's recommendations included a call for support for better parenting, and support for a good home learning environment (Field 2010, 7), policies that can be seen to be a continuation of the Labour approach.

The early intervention argument was also forcefully delivered by Allen in his two reports, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (2011a), and *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* (2011b). Allen's first report argued for the centrality of early years life experiences to future outcomes, and outlined the negative impact, on individuals, society and the economy of failing to adopt a uniform national policy of Early Intervention. Allen called for a strong cross-party commitment to prioritising Early Intervention. The report recommended the widespread adoption of evidence-based Early Intervention parenting programmes, based on rigorous standards of evidence, and offered an initial list of programmes that have been shown to be cost-effective methods of intervention. The central thrust of the report was that Early Intervention should aim to 'provide a **social and emotional bedrock** for the current and future generations of babies, children and young people by helping them and their parents (or other main caregivers) before problem arise' (2011a, v). This understanding was built upon the literature on 'what works' with children,

young people and families, and recognition that 'late intervention' was characterised by high costs and outcomes that were often limited in effectiveness. Finally, the Coalition government's continued commitment to early intervention has been highlighted by the pilot of universal parenting class provision in High Peak (Derbyshire County Council), Middlesbrough and Camden under the CANparent Trial (2012 – 2014) which seeks to develop parenting support aimed at, and accessed by, all parents and carers (see: <http://www.canparent.org.uk/>).

The Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder and Programme, and evaluation

The Parenting Early Intervention *Pathfinder* ran from September 2006-March 2008, providing £7.6 million of central government funding to 18 Local Authorities (LAs) in England to implement one of three evidence-based parenting programmes for parents of children aged 8-13. Following an evaluation which demonstrated that the Pathfinder had been effective (Lindsay et al, 2008; Lindsay, Strand & Davis, 2011), the pathfinder was followed, in 2008-2011, by the Parenting Early Intervention *Programme* (PEIP) - across all English LAs in two roll outs, Wave 2 (from 2008) and Wave 3 (from 2009), with two further evidence-based programmes added to the original three. The PEIP programmes were: Triple P; Incredible Years (school age) (IY); Families and Schools Together (FAST); and the Strengthening Families Programme 10-14 (SFP10-14); all of which were identified as strongly evidence-based by the UNODC (UNODC 2010), together with Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC). The PEIP had a particular focus on parents of children at risk of anti-social behaviour, although LAs were given the freedom to establish particular roll out strategies and target groups. In some cases, LAs made universal offers of PEIP parenting courses, for example through schools, while in others, LAs utilised a variety of referral routes to target particular parents and families, focusing largely on the 'at risk' groups.

A national evaluation of the three stages of the PEIP roll out was carried out by the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), the University of Warwick. The evaluation of the first stage – Wave 1 – was reported on in 2008 (Lindsay et al 2008). The evaluation of Wave 2 (2008-11) and Wave 3 (2009-11) was reported on in May, 2011 (Lindsay et al. 2011). The evaluations adopted a combined methods approach, using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Critiques of government family ‘support’ and learning policy

The effectiveness of evidence-based group parenting programmes has been established by a number of systematic reviews (e.g., Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2000; Patterson et al. 2002). There is strong evidence to suggest that such programmes are an effective and cost-effective way of improving parenting, parents’ mental health, and the social and emotional development of their children. However, most of this work has been conducted outside Europe, with parents of children who already have problems or are at high risk of developing those (Patterson et al. 2002). For governments, the attraction of evidence-based parenting courses is that they present an opportunity to intervene at the individual level with the aim of impacting upon problems that have a high political profile, and significant societal costs (Allen 2011b). Emotional and behavioural problems are common in children (Bone and Meltzer 1989), with a prevalence of 10-20%, depending on such variables as socio-economic status, parental educational levels, and single parenting (Green, McGinnity et al. 2005; Patterson et al. 2002). Such problems have important implications for adult mental health (Broidy et al. 2003; Robins and Rutter 1990), delinquency and costs to society (Scott, Knapp et al. 2001). Parents have a key role in children’s development generally and the appearance of problems (Gerhardt 2004).

There is extensive evidence that parenting programmes can have positive effects on both parent outcomes (e.g. improving parenting skills and parents well-being) and that these are associated with changes in their children (e.g. reduced behavioural problems). Overviews of

evidence are available (UNODC 2010) as are systematic reviews of studies (Coren and Barlow 2000; Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2000; National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 2005). This body of research continues to be built upon, and continues to inform policy, for example, the research report from the Allen Inquiry into early intervention (Allen 2011a) also reviewed parenting programmes and other methods of early intervention, and provided useful indications of the quality of the evidence available for each programme.

Despite the evidence of the effectiveness of parenting programmes, their employment by government has been seen as problematic, particularly in terms of classed policy. The adoption of parenting programmes as a strategy to improve parental mental health, for example, and to act indirectly on manifestations of social fragmentation such as children's anti-social behaviour, has been seen to be part of a broader policy shift away from tackling fundamental inequalities in social and economic life, towards locating responsibility for these issues at the level of the individual. From the beginning of the Labour Party's thirteen year tenure, it was argued by some critics that the intention was to continue with the neo-liberal, conservative agenda of reframing welfare provision, and the state's relationship with the individual (Gewirtz 2001; Vincent 2001; Gillies 2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2010).

Despite the Labour government's rhetoric of a New Deal, and a Third Way, some argued that, at base, it was a project to establish a moral order for the provision of welfare, and in the relationship between state and individual (Heron and Dwyer 1999). That recasting would shift the burden of addressing socio-economic problems from the state, operating at a systemic level, to the individual responding to moral imperatives identified and enforced by the state. It was argued that this approach continued to underpin the Labour government's policies in a range of areas – crime and justice, social welfare, housing, and education. As a result, it was possible for critics of the Labour government to argue that it had managed to change the foundations of welfare policy from one that was characterised by the concept of welfare rights to a situation that was characterised by conditionality (Dwyer 2004). The shift

was from a position defined by need and entitlement to one where 'rights are conditional on the acceptance of attendant individual responsibilities' (Dwyer 2004, 282). This trend, of course, was not confined to the UK, but could be seen as part of a policy shift in a variety of areas common to many mature economies, with similar changes being identified in, for example, Canada (Robson 2010), and the USA (Mayer 2008).

Gewirtz (2001), Vincent (2001), Gillies (2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2010) and Klett-Davies (2010) have all questioned the class basis of government discourses of 'support' and 'inclusion' in family education policy, arguing that such discourses represent the attempted re-construction of the working class by the state. For example, Gewirtz argued that the Labour government's overarching strategy was to undertake a programme of the re-socialization of the working class based upon the values of a fraction of the middle class, which she termed 'cloning the Blairs' (Gewirtz 2001). This critique has, more recently, been applied to government sponsored parental involvement with their children's schooling, which Diane Reay has argued is nothing less than part of a hegemonic project that has 'sedimented and augmented middle-class advantage in the educational field' (Reay 2008, 647). Within the government's strategy, parenting programmes for parents, specifically from the working class, who did not share particular middle-class values and aspirations, were one element of a two-pronged approach – the other element being the reform of schools to reflect similar ambitions and targets. The fundamental aim of this strategy, it was argued, was 'the eradication of class differences by reconstructing and transforming working-class parents into middle-class ones. Excellence for the many is to be achieved, at least in part, by making the many behave like the few' (Gewirtz 2001, 366). In this analysis, parenting programmes are a tool for locating personal and social issues arising from systemic causes at the level of the individual and the family, whereby participating parents are to be reconciled to social and economic disadvantage.

Gillies has written extensively on classed policy in relation to parents and parenting. Most recently, utilising interesting qualitative research focused on 73 young people (24 young women and 49 young men) at risk of exclusion from school, and 22 of their parents (19 mothers and three fathers) Gillies has focused on parenting programmes (2010). Examining the strength of relations between parents and children in her sample, Gillies argued that these relationships were characterised by high levels of concern and care. The difficulties faced by these parents and young people were, she argued, economic, social and systemic. In this context, Gillies' research revealed 'little evidence to support the claim that better parenting could produce more positive outcomes', and that 'parenting classes in the context of these kinds of problems tended to provide reassurance rather than any practical help or solutions' (Gillies 2010, 58). With this research, Gillies appears to have identified serious issues relating to school leadership questions in the three schools she worked with, particularly in relation to Special Educational Needs (SEN) education, and exclusions policy. However, parenting programmes do not normally address these issues (it is not clear which parenting programmes the parents in Gillies' sample attended), and neither do they aim to address structural issues. By imputing these aims to parenting programmes, Gillies effectively set up a convenient straw person. In addition, no attempt is made to engage with the extensive academic research into the efficacy and effectiveness of evidence-based parenting programmes, as outlined above. At times, Gillies' characterisation of the purposes of evidence-based parenting programmes, and government policy that, for instance, produced the PEIP, amounts to a significant distortion of both. For example, Gillies concludes:

'The notion that childrearing is a "skill" that can be practised independently from social context bears little analysis. This formulaic "parenting by numbers" approach fails to engage with the reality of life for many parents and children. The families taking part in our research faced dilemmas and challenges that rarely trouble those with greater resources and choices. The current preoccupation with parenting

ensures their struggles go largely unnoticed, while their childrearing decisions and practices are judged through the distorting lens of middle-class privilege' (2010, 59).

PEIP evidence-based parenting programmes: their aims and objectives

The PEIP programmes make clear their aims and objectives. The central concern of all the programmes is to improve relationships between parent/s and their child/children as an aim in itself, and as a pathway to promote children's development, and parental well-being. For example, Triple P's general aims are:

'To enhance the knowledge, skills, confidence and resourcefulness of parents.

To promote a nurturing, safe, engaging, non-violent and low conflict environment for children.

To promote all aspects of children's development and prevent behavioural, emotional and developmental problems' (Lindsay et al. 2011, Appendix 2)

The two PEIP programmes that explicitly incorporate community building intentions – FAST and SFSC – have general aims and goals that reflect theoretical models which identify the importance of social capital and the role of community in building individual and family resilience. SFSC, for example, seeks to develop within its participants an understanding of community and the benefits accruing from familial involvement in community. Similarly, FAST aims to increase family support networks, develop social capital with other local parents, increase parent leadership over time in their community and empower parents to effectively access appropriate support services. FAST and SFSC therefore directly address social and economic contexts of parenting, but, nonetheless, their core aims also revolve around relationship-building and well being. For example, the aims of FAST are:

'To increase protective factors for the child and especially the parent-child relationship and parent involvement at school.

To improve parents' ability to listen and communicate with their children, to give clear commands and follow-through, and to use support from others.

To increase children's well-being across domains at home, at school and in the community.

To increase the family social network of support, including developing social capital with other local parents, increasing parent involvement with school staff, increasing parent leadership over time in the community, and knowing community agencies for specialist services and appropriate referral.

To increase academic achievement of children, increase attention span and social skills, and reduce stress.

To reduce bullying and aggression in school, and prevent child mental health problems, juvenile delinquency, violence, addiction and school dropout.

To enhance family functioning and reduce family conflict.' (Lindsay et al. 2011, Appendix 2)

So, although FAST's aims specifically include empowering parents in their communities, and in relation to schools and specialist services, key elements of the programme aim to improve parent-child relationships and promote stable and nurturing family life. As will be shown, it is this aim that frequently motivated parents to attend PEIP courses, and it was this desire that was common to parents across classes, even among those parents who benefitted from 'middle-class privilege' in terms of access to resources and choices.

The question of the definition of class is, of course, complex and contested. The foundations of class encompass economic conditions, cultural norms and expectations, status, and lifestyle, and can be both subjectively and objectively determined, but no single definition predominates in the literature concerned with parenting. The critics of the Labour

government's family policies have conceptualised class in socio-economic terms in relation to the lack of, or access to, resources and in cultural terms, particularly with reference to the values of a fraction of the middle class (for example, Gewirtz 2001). However, the precise delineation of what constitutes the cultural norms of either the middle or working classes is unclear, in the work of the critics of parenting policy (for example, Gillies 2010). As Klett-Davies has noted, 'we can agree that "class" is broadly about inequality, but recent social change has made a precise definition harder' (Klett-Davies 2010, 10).

The argument here is that although two of the PEIP parenting programmes (FAST and SFSC) do, in part, address structural socio-economic issues, the primary aim of these two PEIP programmes, and Triple P, Incredible Years, SFP10-14 is to improve parent-child relationships and the stability and nurturing quality of family life. Questions of socio-economic disadvantage are, therefore, encompassed by two of the PEIP programmes, but, overall, in terms of the PEIP, the greater stress is on familial relationships. (Further, the data available from the FAST programmes to the PEIP evaluation was limited, due to the slow progress of the roll out of FAST as part of PEIP, and, in consequence, FAST is not reported on here (Lindsay et al 2011, 24)). In this context, the relevance, or otherwise, of class must be in relation to the norms that characterise the daily lives of individual families (however constituted), their attitudes and aspirations. In this sense, 'class' is a matter of culture, and as Cannadine noted, 'class is best understood as being what culture does to inequality and social structure' (Cannadine 2000, 188). The degree to which the PEIP programmes were experienced by parents and families as a classed experience is, therefore, central to the question of the PEIP as a classed policy.

Classed policy, and PEIP parents

The perception of the parent experiences of the PEIP programmes as a classed experience is of interest to the further examination of the question of the classed parenting support discourse. This paper focuses on the experience of parents undertaking the PEIP parenting

programmes. Findings indicated that the majority experience of completing a parenting course resulted in a range of well-being and self-efficacy benefits. In addition, it is argued that the programmes were experienced in generally positive terms by participating parents. There were no indications that parents experienced PEIP courses in a negative, classed, fashion; rather, parents reported that the PEIP courses had general applicability to all families.

Method

Design

The research comprised two combined methods studies over two consecutive periods: The Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder (2006-8) in 18 English local authorities (LAs) followed by the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (2008-11) in all 150 LAs. Drawing on the results of the evaluation of the Pathfinder (Lindsay et al, 2008), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), later renamed the Department for Education (DfE) in 2010 when the Coalition Government was formed, made the decision to roll out the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) nationally, to every English local authority.

The DCSF selected three evidence-based, manualised parenting programmes for the Pathfinder on the basis of a review by Moran, Ghate and van der Werwe (2004). Eighteen English LAs, which had prior experience of parenting support, were funded to implement one of the three programmes (six per LA). Once the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) was begun the Pathfinder was renamed Wave 1. In the first year of the PEIP (2008) 23 Wave 2 LAs were funded in addition to continuing funding of the 18 (renamed) Wave 1. In 2009 the remaining LAs (Wave 3) began to receive funding in addition to Waves 2 and 3.

The basic design of the two research studies was identical with quantitative data collected from parents to examine changes associated with attendance at a parenting group and qualitative data from interviews and document analysis to examine the important factors with

respect to intervention and the experiences of both parents and those involved in the delivery of the programmes.

The programmes

The Wave 1 (Pathfinder) implemented three parenting programmes namely Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton and Reid 2003), Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme: Sanders 1999) and Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC: Steele et al, 2000). For Waves 2 and 3, two additional programmes were authorised by the DCSF to be eligible for use through the funded programme: Strengthening Families Programmes 10-14 (Molgaard and Kumpfer, 1993) and Families and Schools Together (McDonald, 1993)

All programmes had evidence for their efficacy from trials. In all cases except SFSC the evidence was from randomized control trials; for SFSC there were two pre- versus post-course comparison trials (For details see Lindsay et al. 2008; 2011).

Each of the five programmes was designed to be delivered to groups of parents, the focus of the PEIP study. Triple P comprises five levels of intervention from a universal community-wide level 1 to an intensive 1-1 intervention at level 5: it was level 4 group work that was funded in the PEIP. All of the programmes are designed to enhance positive parenting with a particular emphasis on improving children's behaviour as a consequence. The components of these programmes include not only parental management of child behaviour but also support of parents' own development and well-being so that they are better able to deal with relationships and their own problems. Programmes had additional elements, which varied, for example both FAST and SFSC had a particular focus on the development of communities; SFSC also addressed spirituality.

In all cases the programme had theoretically driven, carefully designed manuals and training programmes to optimise fidelity of implementation by the group facilitators, who were trained

by the programmes as part of the PEIP. The manualisation of these evidence-based courses was an important element in their selection for the PEIP. A high premium was placed upon the training and accreditation of course facilitators. In addition, fidelity in delivery was also a valued element of the programmes, a stress that was designed to ensure the uniform delivery of the core elements of each programme to all parents. The different programmes had different methods of training and accrediting facilitators, and ensuring fidelity, but these were issues addressed by all the PEIP programmes. Course length varied in line with each programme's specification: for example, Incredible Years was longest at about 17 weekly two-hour sessions; Triple P comprised five two-hour weekly sessions followed by three sessions on the telephone. The location of the PEIP parenting courses varied widely, with a range of LA, and third sector providers offering courses in a wide variety of settings. FAST differed in running all its sessions as family groups in the children's schools; other programmes were run as parent groups in a variety of community locations including schools, voluntary and community service resources and clinics.

Participants

A total of 2207 (Wave 1) and 6143 (Waves 2 and 3) parents (total N = 8350) provided data in response to questionnaires at the start of their course, Demographic data were comparable for each phase (Wave 1 versus Waves 2 and 3) as shown by Table 1. Most participating parents were female (86.7% Wave 1, 85.4% Waves 2 and 3). Most of those specifying their ethnicity were White British (76.1%, 83.3%) compared with 92.1% in the 2001 Census, indicating a higher proportion of parents from a minority ethnic background, especially in Wave 1, than England as a whole. The other participants registered a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds reflecting the variation in England.

Educational levels were skewed to low attainment: 46.9% of Wave 1 parents left school at 16 or earlier and 53.8% of Waves 2 and 3 parents reported having either no qualifications (23.5%) or fewer than five passes (30.3%) at the General Certificate of Secondary Education

(GCSE), the national examination in England at the end of compulsory education at 16 years of age. (N.B. The categories differed for Wave 2/3 to gain more precise data). On the other hand, 13.3% of Wave 1 parents had attended university comparable to 28% of Waves 2/3 parents who had been educated to Higher Education

In Wave 1 parents were asked for income data: of those that responded over half (52.3%) reported income of less than £200 per week, compared with the median gross weekly income of £489 per week for full-time employees in the UK for the year ending April 2009. This question was changed in Waves 2 and 3, as almost one in five Wave 1 parents had declined to respond, to a question on accommodation: 32.1% owned their own property and 62.6% rented, about 2.5 times the national average of 27% (ONS, 2001).

A total of 4446 parents completed standardised measures, pre and post-parenting course. A sample of 133 parents were interviewed from across the three Waves, with parents interviewed twice to examine changes in views. The parents were selected by the LAs' operational lead officers to reflect the range of programmes and of parents supported by the LA's groups.

Measures

Parents in all Waves completed three standardized questionnaires which are commonly used to evaluate parenting programmes at pre- and post-course. Parental mental well-being was examined through the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS: Tennant et al, 2000). Parenting style was examined by the Parenting Scale (Irvine, Biglan and Smolkowski, 1999). This comprises two scales of less effective parenting styles: Over-reactivity and Laxness. Parents were asked to think of their target child and to rate his/her behaviour using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 1997). This provides scores for Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity, Emotional Symptoms, and Peer Problem Prosocial behaviour as well as Total Difficulties and Impact score.

Parents in all Waves also completed a demographic questionnaire at pre-course, and a questionnaire designed for the study, *How was your group?* at post-course which examined parents' views of the group facilitator's style (for example, whether they felt respected) and the helpfulness of attending the course. Parents' sense of satisfaction as a parent was examined in Wave 1 by the Being a Parent scale (Johnston and Marsh, 1989) which comprises two scales Parental Satisfaction and Parental Efficacy. Being a Parent was omitted from Waves 2 and 3 to reduce the time needed to collect data during the parent groups.

Semi-structured interviews were designed to address different stages of the studies. In each case, main questions were supplemented by probes to explore issues not raised spontaneously. This method provides a balance between the benefits of relatively informal 'conversations' which encourages flow and the need to ensure consistent coverage of the themes under investigation at this time. Interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed by thematic analysis. The interview transcriptions were coded individually against pre-determined themes (deductive analysis), and emergent themes revealed by analysis of transcripts (inductive analysis). The development of the coding system was a recursive (iterative) process.

Procedure

Pre-course questionnaires were administered by the group facilitators at or just prior to the first session; post-course questionnaires were administered during the final session. About a quarter of parents failed to complete their programmes and for a similar number there were administrative errors by the LAs resulting in the questionnaire either not being administered or completed questionnaires not being returned. Consequently, analysis of improvement is based on 49.3 per cent Wave 1 and 53.5 per cent Waves 2/3 parents. The issue of those parents who did not complete a parenting course is of importance, and the quantitative data

was interrogated to investigate the degree to which this was a reflection of socio-economic differences (Lindsay et al, 2011). Parents who were reported to have dropped out of the programme were not significantly more socio-economically disadvantaged, or less educationally qualified than the other non-response groups. They were, however, more likely to be single parents (51%, the highest of any group and compared to the whole group average of 44%). The most distinctive factor about parents who were identified as dropping out was their lower average mental well-being at pre-course, their higher average parenting laxness and their single parent status. There were no significant differences in any of the standardised measures at pre-parenting class between those that completed their series of parenting classes and those that did not.

Interviews were conducted one to one with parents, either face to face or by telephone, or in small groups of parents from the same parent group, according to the parents' preferences. Interviews were recorded with parents informed consent and field notes taken. All parents were assured of confidentiality and non-identification. The study was approved by the University of Warwick Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Parenting course outcomes

The demographic data reported above indicate that the samples as a whole were similar in Wave 1 compared with Waves 2/3. The samples were largely female, and skewed towards lower levels of educational achievement and poorer socioeconomic circumstances. Prior to participation in parenting courses, parents overall had significantly lower levels of mental well-being than the general population, median scores of 43 for both Wave 1 and Waves 2/3, compared with the national median of 51. 75 per cent of parents scored below the national median. PEIP parents also had a substantially higher proportion of children with SDQ scores rated 'abnormal' than the national sample: 58.3 per cent (Wave 1) and 56.7 (Waves 2/3) compared with the national expectation of 9.8 per cent.

There were highly significant ($p < .0005$) improvements on all parenting measures following parents' attendance at one of the parenting programmes. Table 1 shows the pre- and post-course means for each measure at Wave 1 and Waves 2/3. Parents' mental well-being increased such that the median for both Wave 1 (50.6) and Waves 2/3 (51.6) were comparable to the national median of 51. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) ranged from 0.59 to 0.85 indicating medium to large effects across the measures. These effects were broadly similar across the four programmes for which pre- vs post-course data were available. Furthermore, the children's behaviour, as rated by their parent, had also improved significantly ($p < .0005$), although effect sizes were lower, for example 0.57 Wave 1 and 0.45 Waves 2/3 for SDQ total difficulties (Lindsay et al 2008, 2010).

<Table 1 here>

Family issues

In their accounts of family life prior to undertaking a PEIP course, a common theme among parents was their realization that their family lives were affected by disharmony. For example, a father explained, 'It was just like a free-for-all, really, in my house. The kids were doing what they wanted, not listening when you tell them to do something' (P1/LA C160). Parents frequently described family life as involving a repeated pattern of interactions that they were unhappy with, such as their children not responding to reasonable requests, or frequent occurrences of shouting between parents and children. There was a sense that, for many parents, they felt that in their relations with their children they had reached an impasse and one that was having a negative effect on them as well as their children. One mother explained why she decided to go on a PEIP course by saying, 'To be honest the reason I went along was because I was at the end of my tether with my daughter' (P1/LA C206).

Similarly, 'There were a couple of interesting bullet points [on the information leaflet] that caught my attention, but, again, I also felt that I was in a crisis where I needed help desperately' (P2/LA C343). Another commented:

'At the time I was contacted I was at the end of the road, I had looked at so many different places for help, and this fell on my doorstep and I just thought, "anything I can do to get help and information has got to be a good thing"; so I thought it would be an opportunity to go and learn, perhaps not where I had been going wrong, but how to put things right'. (P3/LA C123)

The parents wanted to address the problems that they recognised in their family lives, and wanted to improve their relationships with their children. They were concerned that other families were not like their own, and they were worried about attending PEIP courses where their 'dirty washing' might be on public display. Despite these reservations, parents accepted places on PEIP courses, and, even when referred, were willing to try the courses, in the hope that they might help in rebuilding relationships.

Parenting courses as educational processes

The interview data indicated that undertaking a parenting course was an educative process. Parents argued that the PEIP courses enabled them to acquire new knowledge and skills, which impacted positively on the culture of family life, interpersonal relations between adults and children, and between adults in the same household.

Parents identified a number of elements in the educative experience of completing a PEIP course. For the overwhelming majority of parents, the key transformative understanding was the acceptance of the knowledge that parent behaviour is of primary importance in parent-child relationships, and that parents need to change their own behaviour as a first step to the improvement of those relationships. For example:

'I was raising my voice willy nilly and I didn't realize, I wasn't present enough to see how that was masking him feel, how threatening that was, and some of the role plays and some of the things we did here made me see ... I was shouting and screaming and everything, but now, just the fact that I don't raise my voice now has changed everything. I'm mummy and he's safe, and he feels safe, and he gives that off. It's completely different'. (P2/LA C321)

The process of acting upon the new insights around the central part played by the adult's behaviour in parent-child relationships, and the rewards from that, helped parents gain new confidence in their parenting skills. In consequence, they were more capable of establishing or re-establishing appropriate parent and child roles, which, in turn, led to improved parent-child relationships, as identified, for example, by this parent:

'It's made me more confident in my parenting. It's made me more able to set boundaries with my daughter. It's made me more confident in challenging her when she's being disruptive. She knows when I mean business now. It's kind of ingrained in me now, and I can see, even when things are happening, and I'm not referring to the book, I can see myself thinking and afterwards I think, "I did that because of that course". It's changed the way I react to her reactive behaviour. It's just completely changed both of us, I think, in our outlook to each other as well. We're enjoying each other's company now. We're not just arguing constantly. It's changed our lives. It really has given me my daughter back'. (P1/LA C434)

The parents also provided accounts of the ways in which they had learned, through the PEIP courses, to devote specific time to their children, and, in that way they had learned how to build their relationships with their children:

'I now actually stop what I am doing and listen to them or say things like "let me just finish this washing up and I'm all yours". They ask you something while you're washing up ... it's always, "just a minute". I think more about how *they are* feeling and not just what *I've* got to do. That has improved a lot in my relationship with my daughter'. (P4/LA C544)

Improved parent-child relationships, child-centred time given by parents, boundaries for children, and appropriate parent and child roles all contributed to the improved quality of family life.

Discussion: the PEIP and classed policy

This paper presents an unusually large data set of quantitative and qualitative data on PEIP parenting courses, and these data can add to the discourse about classed policies and parenting classes. The presentation of the data does not pretend to answer the complexity of this issue, which goes beyond government policy. Rather, this study can enrich the discussion, as it is firmly grounded in empirical data from parents. The national focus of the PEIP was on families and children at risk of anti-social behaviour. Within that overarching target group, LAs were, nonetheless, free to decide on local priorities and referral pathways. In consequence, there were a range of referral mechanisms, from universal offers to all parents to court order referrals for individual parents, a small minority. The national focus on 'at risk' groups might suggest that, as critics of parent 'support' strategies argue, programmes like the PEIP are part of an attempt by the government to re-create the working class. There are problems with this approach in itself, with, for example, the inference that anti-social behaviour is a marker of class. The LAs operated under guidelines from the DCSF which stated:

'Parents targeted by the PEIP should include those that have been identified by children's and adult services due to their child's behaviour (early impulsiveness and

aggression, substance misuse, anti-social behaviour including children & young people involved in knife-crime, violence, and/or gangs) and those with parental risk factors (substance misuse, parental offending, parental mental health difficulties etc.’ (DCSF, 2009, 9).

If these target groups are taken, by inference, to represent the working class, or a particular, classed culture, as implied by, for example, Gewirtz (2001), Vincent (2001), and Gillies (2005a, 2005b, 2008), then characterisation of the working class is wholly negative; assuming that knife crime, substance misuse, and gang membership, for example, are accepted as being problematic for the individual and society. But even in the narrower context of the PEIP evaluation findings, there are additional difficulties with the critique that such initiatives represent a project the aim of which is the re-socialization of the working class by a fraction of the middle-class – the ‘cloning the Blairs’ project (Gewirtz 2001).

Firstly, the class base of the PEIP parent cohort was not class specific. Although the parent sample was skewed, comprising a high proportion from disadvantaged backgrounds, there was also substantial variation. For example, of the Waves 2 and 3 sample 11.3% had degrees and a further 19.3% had a higher education experience below degree level, a total of 30.9%, which compares with an overall UK percentage of 29% (ONS 2001) of the population having received Higher Education. There is a more class focused aspect of the PEIP cohorts in terms of housing (measured for Waves 2 and 3) with 32.1% of parents being owner occupiers, while 62.6% rented housing (for the UK population in general, in 2001, 68% were owner occupiers, 32% rented housing; ONS 2001). Similarly, even given the problems associated with generating accurate returns regarding income, the PEIP cohort reflects higher proportions of lower income parents. Nonetheless, there is, again, heterogeneity across the cohort, with 18.6% of the parental income being above £351 per week, with 33.2% having an income of less than £150 per week, and a range between those two positions. Despite the national focus of the PEIP on ‘at risk’ families, it is the case that

this did not, in terms of the PEIP cohort, translate into a straightforward class based intervention. The cohort exhibited a range of education, income, and housing backgrounds.

Secondly, in terms of the qualitative evidence generated by the parent interviews, there was no evidence that the parents regarded their participation as a classed experience. By contrast, parents explained that the experience of the parenting course was one that was characterised by non-judgemental respect. In addition, the delivery of PEIP courses was such that parents did not feel that they were in a formalised or hierarchical learning situation. Parents were highly positive about the group experience. Responses to the post-course questionnaire question, 'How was your group' for Waves 2 and 3 showed that over 98% of parents were positive about most aspects of group leader style, and over 95% were positive about most aspects of programme helpfulness (Lindsay et al, 2011, 50-52). As one father explained:

'It was the way it was delivered. It was not like a classroom setting, it was just like ... your mates, a bit like a bunch of friends. Just like ... down the pub with your mates or something. It was just ... it was not, like, dictated to you like if you was at school, like, your teacher ... this, this, this and this. It wasn't said, this is how you do it, this ... it was suggested this is how you do it. It was never put forward, this is how you must do it. It was ... these are only suggestions, you can take them on board if you like'.

(P2/LA C160)

This account was typical of that provided by parents, and matches Warin's (2009) description of parents and professionals working in partnership in a fashion that she has described as exhibiting 'mutual reach'. This is characterised not by a one-way, top-down flow of values and information, but two-way communication between parent and professional.

Further, the priority of the parents was to improve their relationships with their children. In some cases, there was an awareness that their children had been identified, by, for example, schools, youth workers, or police, as presenting with anti-social behaviour, but these issues were still seen in the light of their own relationship with their child. Nonetheless, a minority of parents were referred onto the PEIP courses, some by social workers, others by court orders. In these cases, there was an element of compulsion, the impact of which in terms of parental engagement and perception of course attendance needs further research.

It was a common belief among parents who had undertaken a PEIP course that all families would benefit from such courses, regardless of background. Interestingly, one father who had been referred onto a PEIP course by his social worker, argued that:

‘If you knock on ten doors round this place, and people say, “yes, I’ve got the perfect family” ... what liars! There is no such thing on this planet as the perfect family that social services have made it out to be.’ (P1/LA C160)

In this case, the father was using his life experience, and his experience of the PEIP course, as a way of subverting what he saw as his neighbours’ and social workers’ myths of ‘perfect families’. Other parents were enthusiastic about the PEIP courses and the impact of their new parenting knowledge, and thought that the courses should be universally available. They were also aware that many parents were wary of participating, fearing that the courses were a means of control. An example is the commentary made by a mother who had attended a school organised PEIP course. The school had offered the course to all the parents of its pupils (the majority of whom came from a London borough with unusually low levels of social deprivation), and, following a successful participation in the course, the mother, and her friend, was keen to engage other parents for the next course:

'We've been trying very hard to promote [the course] but I think most parents at the school are too busy or on the other hand they are very suspicious of it, they see it as something else. Once you've done it and you realise you get so much from it but originally you were "oh this is going to be like the school interfering or it's for bad children", so I think the difficult thing is that maybe it's you struggle to get other parents to see the benefits from it.' (P2/LA C248)

Neither of these women met any criteria of social deprivation, both were married, home-owning, middle-class, women with husbands in professional occupations. Their belief that the PEIP courses should be made more widely available, so that more parents could access the support, was one that was typical of all parents interviewed, regardless of class background. Parents also argued that groups should be run at a range of times and locations to suit different work patterns. In addition, parents suggested that parents should have access to groups when their children were young and problems were less severe.

Conclusions

The large-scale evaluation of the PEIP in England indicated that the dominant parental experience of undertaking an evidence-based PEIP course was characterised by improved mental well being, and self-efficacy measurements, as revealed by four standardised instruments. Further, the qualitative data generated indicated that parents experienced the PEIP programmes in a generally positive fashion, and that the parenting courses led to improved parent-child relationships, and happier family life. Government sponsored parent and family education interventions have been subject to class based critiques, and characterised in negative terms. The PEIP initiative falls squarely into that group of policies that have been subjected to class based critique. However, the evidence from the PEIP evaluation suggests that such critiques need to be revisited given, firstly, the heterogeneous class nature of the PEIP cohorts, which, despite being skewed to comprise a high proportion of parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, also included almost a third of parents with

experience of higher education. . In addition, the qualitative data indicate that parents had largely positive participant perceptions of PEIP courses, and experienced positive improvements in familial relationships. These changes can be characterised by the concept of 'mutual reach', and suggest that parents did not experience the courses in classed terms. Further, there was a belief that such courses should be made available more widely, irrespective of the class background of parents. These findings add to our understanding of class issues and government sponsored parenting support. It is the case that the class-based critique of such policy needs to be re-engaged with, and that further work is needed to extend our understanding of parenting support policy, which has an increasing prominence in the battery of social and family-orientated policies deployed by government.

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Table 1 Pre- and post-course means (*SDs*) for parenting measures

Parenting Measure	Occasion	Wave 1 (<i>n</i> = 1030-1071)		Effect size*	Waves 2 and 3 (<i>n</i> = 3093-3160)		
		Mean	<i>SD</i>		Mean	<i>SD</i>	Effect size
Parental mental well-being	Pre-course	43.5	10.4		43.5	10.8	
	Post-course	50.6	9.8	0.71	51.6	9.5	0.79
Parental laxness	Pre-course	22.0	6.6		21.3	7.2	
	Post-course	17.4	6.3	-0.71	16.5	6.5	-0.72
Parenting over-reactivity	Pre-course	22.5	6.4		22.5	6.9	
	Post-course	17.4	6.2	-0.83	16.9	6.4	-0.85
Parenting efficacy	Pre-course	27.4	6.4		-	-	-
	Post-course	31.0	5.7	0.59	-	-	-
Parenting satisfaction	Pre-course	31.9	7.7		-	-	-
	Post-course	36.9	7.9	0.60	-	-	-

p < .0005 in all cases

- Cohen's *d*