



THE WORLD BANK'S VIEW OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

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This article explores the World Bank's view of early childhood as an example of the globalization of childhood. It argues that the Bank pursues neoliberal economic policies that exacerbate the gap between rich and poor nations and between the rich and poor within countries. These policies affect children's lives adversely, but they are legitimized by the Bank in a variety of ways. The Bank claims to have children's interests at heart, and identifies early childhood as a fruitful site for interventions. It draws on traditional Anglo-American notions of family, community and childhood in its justification for these interventions. The article explores the inherent contradictions in these policies towards young children.

In her introduction to *Children and the Politics of Culture*, Sharon Stephens (1995) drew attention to the effects that political and macroeconomic policies have on children. She was concerned with the effects of globalization on children in the North, whose childhoods have become highly individualized, commodified and stratified. But she saw also that it is in the South that children have become the most vulnerable victims of global economic policies. Stephens claimed that one way in which macroeconomic policies came to be legitimized was through the invocation of simplified and idealized notions of childhood, family and community, in order to justify actions that may in reality damage the lives of real children. These idealized notions are usually drawn from a model of affluent, white, middle-class households in the industrialized world, and are likely to be as unreal in their application to the North as to the South (Stephens, 1997a).

These themes, the effects of macroeconomic policies on children and their justification by referring to distorted notions of childhood, family and community have prompted this article, which focuses in particular on the World Bank and its support for early childhood. I attempt to demonstrate how the Bank pursues policies that are detrimental to the interest of children while at the same time claiming to be promoting their interests. The Bank

claims to work for children in the South as the 'human capital' of the future without whom no economic intervention can truly succeed. The rationale for intervention is ultimately economic, but the key to successful intervention is seen to lie in the scientific application of scientifically proven facts. Lack of success is judged as a failure of application rather than as a failure of conception or a narrowness of understanding. In the case of early childhood, the scientifically proven facts relate to a particular model of child development. Not only does the Bank justify its actions in terms of helping young children; this helping hand, it is claimed, is impeccably informed by science. What then is at issue for the Bank is how this technological expertise is misapplied in the disappointingly messy real world.

No one can dispute that global statistics on children are truly appalling. An unacceptable number die at birth or soon after. The campaigning group Jubilee 2000 estimated that 7 million children die unnecessarily each year (Jubilee 2000 Coalition, 2000). Many of those children that survive have limited and falling access to education and health care, particularly girl children in poor Asian countries. Many of the goods used and consumed on a daily basis in the North, such as food, flowers and clothing, depend for their production on cheap child labour in poor countries. Almost all cities have growing populations of street children. There has been a resurgence of endemic diseases once under control, such as tuberculosis, and a failure to deal with new ones such as AIDS. An estimated one in four children in Sub-Saharan Africa is affected by HIV/AIDS, a truly shocking figure. Many millions of children are refugees fleeing from wars and natural disasters (UNDP, 1999).

There is also a widespread acceptance in the North that these levels of child poverty should be addressed. The question is how? The assumption of many international donor agencies is that carefully targeted interventions to vulnerable communities can make a difference. The World Bank in particular has adopted such an approach.

The World Bank?

What is the World Bank and why should it have an interest in children? The World Bank is 'owned' by 181 member countries, whose views and interests are represented by a board of governors and a Washington-based board of directors. The World Bank is actually the generic title for a number of international financial institutions such as the International Bank for Research and Development (IBRD), the International Finance Corporation and the International Development Association. In order to belong to the IBRD a country must first join the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The original, laudable, intention of the World Bank and its predecessors and partners was to assist in the redevelopment and reconstruction of debilitated economies after the Second World War. It has interpreted this brief liberally, and now

has a monetary interest in almost all 'developing' and 'transitional' countries.

The largest shareholder in the World Bank is the USA, with 16.49 percent of shareholder votes. The USA and four other major shareholders (France, Germany, Japan and the UK, who between them hold a further 16 percent of votes) each appoint an executive director. A further 19 executive directors are elected by a group of countries or, in the case of China, the Russian Federation and Saudi Arabia, form single constituencies. Wade (2001) argues that the USA has a disproportionate influence on the World Bank, not only because it is the largest shareholder but also because it has the unique power of veto on various key constitutional issues. The Bank is very closely intertwined with the US Treasury, which heavily influences, if not directly controls, key appointments. The location of the Bank's headquarters in Washington reinforces these connections. The World Bank, Wade claims, lends US policy a cloak of multilateralism, while enabling it to push hard for free market policies which serve its own financial interests: 'The World Bank has been an especially useful instrument for projecting American influence in developing countries and one over which the US maintains discreet but firm institutional control' (Wade, 2001:127).

Jubilee 2000 also claims that debts totalling US\$450 billion arose from loans to corrupt and dictatorial regimes such as those of Mobutu, Suharto, Brazilian generals and Apartheid South Africa; loans which were prompted by the geopolitical interests of the USA, including the sale of armaments, rather than for reconstruction purposes.

The World Bank nevertheless attempts to project itself as an independent, caring institution. Stung by criticisms about the indebtedness of poor nations, and the increasing gap between rich and poor nations, the World Bank's most recent mission statement is a paean of idealism: 'Our dream is a world free of poverty. Our mission is to fight poverty with passion and professionalism for lasting results.' It lists as its values, 'Personal honesty, integrity, commitment; working together in teams – with openness and trust; empowering others and respecting differences; encouraging risk-taking and responsibility; enjoying work and our families.'

The Bank now promotes itself as a kind of broker between the rich nations of the North and the poor nations of the South. It employs some of the best regarded analysts in their respective fields. It has recruited highly respected education and social development personnel from many countries besides the USA. However, the Bank's claims to draw on the impartiality of experts have been undermined by the recent sacking/resignation of Ravi Kanbur, the distinguished economist who was coopted to the Bank to write the annual World Development Report (WDR) 2000, *Attacking Poverty*. Kanbur was critical of aspects of economic policy within the Bank and his departure was widely interpreted as evidence of the Bank's unwillingness to fundamentally reconsider any of its policies.

The evidence continues to mount from outside, if not from within, that the World Bank is not only unsuccessful in its efforts to alleviate poverty and indebtedness, but that it may be making things worse. Its attempts to measure the extent of poverty and, most recently, to solicit the views of the poor on the poverty they experience, are undoubtedly extremely sophisticated, as seen in the publication *Voices of the Poor* (World Bank, 2001). But at root is an argument about the very concept of 'development' and whether a neoliberal economic approach can be extended unproblematically to all nations. The World Bank acknowledges, in its 1999 *World Development Report*, that the global fiscal system suffers from serious weaknesses, and that institutional and governance reforms are badly overdue. But these weaknesses are viewed as flaws that can be eliminated, given suitable expertise. The World Bank argues that its interventions are more, rather than less necessary, as a vehicle for achieving economic stability and progress; and that increased technological expertise can solve global problems.

The Bank's critics argue, on the contrary, that the claim that neoliberal economic development and global progress are neutral, culture-free and inevitable are so flawed that they are untenable (Chossudovsky, 1997; George and Sabelli, 1994; Rist, 1997; Shiva, 2000; Sklair, 1994; Stirrat 1999). In particular, it is claimed that indebtedness and rescheduling of international debts 'violates all the most basic principles of the rule of law' (Raffer, 1992). The Bretton Woods project, a coalition of non-governmental organizations that monitors the World Bank's output, and provides a bimonthly digest of articles scrutinizing many aspects of Bank policy, is extremely critical of its policies. One group of critics goes so far as to claim that:

. . . there is no region of the world that the bank can point to as having succeeding in implementing the policies they promote . . . there are numerous instances in which not only the poor but the labour force has failed to share in the gains of economic growth. (Weisbrot et al., 2000: 1)

In addition, they suggest that the statistical evidence used to underpin World Bank policy is demonstrably incorrect.

The World Bank's position on children and early childhood

Do global economic policies typified by the World Bank damage children? There is irrefutable evidence that the gap between rich and poor countries is growing, and that the world's poor are becoming poorer (UNDP, 1999). Children are affected by poverty disproportionately, and are particularly susceptible to cuts in infrastructural services such as health and education. Scheper-Hughes (1993), for instance, claims that when the military junta in Brazil came to power and instituted a new economic regime (which was supported by the World Bank and for which debt repayment is still being paid), there was a 'wipe-out' of babies in the shanty town areas of northeast Brazil

where she had been working. Few babies survived infancy in the initial years of the coup. The transition to a market economy in Communist countries has in all instances led to a fall in access to education, in some cases drastically so (UNICEF, 1998). Many others have drawn the link between neoliberal economic policies (particularly when abruptly introduced), the growth of poverty and the suffering of children (de Vylder, 1996; Rampal, 1999; Woodward, 1992).

The World Bank acknowledges that education rates are falling and child mortality is increasing worldwide. But, as pointed out earlier, they see this less as a failure of neoliberal economic policy than as a need to refine their approach. 'Human capital theory' (now fashionable among economists) considers how, irrespective of neoliberal economic policies, health, education and other welfare policies might in the long term enhance economic productivity; or put more crudely, poverty has too many bad side-effects. Falling rates of education and increased child mortality are thus seen as technical failures of adjustment which can be remedied by suitably targeted investment in the fields of health, education and welfare (Shihata, 1996). The Bank is now targeting many more loans at education and social development projects. A recent promotional booklet claims that 'The World Bank is fully committed to pro-actively and comprehensively improving the quality of life for children' (World Bank, 2000a). This gradual refocusing of endeavour has led to the adoption of early childhood programmes, the case I wish to consider here. The World Bank claims that it is a caring, as well as a financially astute, organization and that evidence of this unique combination of fiscal acuity and compassion can be found in their promotion of policies that support the health, well-being and education of young children.

The World Bank has thus far loaned over US\$1000 million to support a range of early childhood development and care programmes (ECD) throughout the world, including countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Brazil, El Salvador, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Uganda, Morocco and Kazakhstan. It maintains a lively website, with pages of material on early childhood. It commissions papers and promotes the topic through publications and regional and global conferences. It regards itself as an important contributor to the debate about early childhood; and conversely it is lobbied by many organizations that regard it as a major player in the field. It states that:

The World Bank is the largest single source of external funding for health and education in developing countries. Increasingly much of that investment has been directed towards helping young children – the human capital of the future. (World Bank, 2000c: 1)

The dominant conceptual model of early childhood

What conceptualization of early childhood informs the World Bank? Mary Eming Young who is senior public health specialist at the World Bank and

has been responsible for much of the justificatory literature on the Bank's ECD policies, has reviewed ECD programmes across the world and concluded that:

Evidence suggests that [ECD] programmes are effective in addressing such vital human development issues as malnutrition among children under five, stunted cognitive development and unpreparedness for primary education . . . early childhood interventions can increase the efficiency of primary and secondary education, contribute to further productivity and income, and reduce the cost of health care and public services. . . . Deficits in individuals caused by early malnutrition and inadequate care can affect labour productivity and economic development throughout society. Properly designed and implemented interventions in the early childhood years can have multi-dimensional benefits. (Young, 1998: 209–10)

In this kind of analysis, malnutrition in children is not directly linked to food security and impoverishment. While feeding supplements may be provided for young children, the 'environment' is taken largely as given. The issue is whether mothers and care-givers can improve on or mitigate the environment in which they find themselves. Scheper-Hughes (1993) illustrates in her analysis of food and hunger in shanty town families in northeast Brazil that poor mothers simply could not afford to feed their children, but were treated by the medical profession as neglectful or ignorant mothers. Much of the literature on malnutrition in children in the South repeats this perspective (see also Panter-Brick, 1998; Wachs and McCabe, 1998).

Leaving aside the issue of malnutrition, what are these 'properly designed' interventions? Young draws her evidence exclusively from US programmes. She does not mention any developed country except the USA, even although there is considerable documentation from various European and Antipodean sources to suggest that conceptions of early childhood programming in these countries may be very different from the USA. Indeed, the USA may constitute a poor example of what is possible, or consensually acceptable, to workers in and users of services – including children (European Union, 1998; OECD, 2000; Penn, 2000).

More recently the World Bank Institute, the arm of the Bank that was established in 1955 'to train officials concerned with development planning, policy making, investment analysis and project implementation in member developing countries', has published a 'definitive handbook' for early childhood programming (Evans et al., 2000). This guide also has the imprimature of 12 major international donor agencies with an interest in early childhood, including UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, the Christian Children's Association, Plan International and the Inter-American Development Bank. This handbook is issued by a multi-donor organization called the 'Consultative Group on Early Childhood'.

The handbook took several years to produce, and drew on earlier, similar guides produced by UNICEF and other agencies. It contains some

useful, and occasionally radical, suggestions as new information and ideas have been grafted on. But, although the handbook begins by speaking of children's rights, it reverts straight away to standard definitions of children's needs. The overriding assumption at the heart of the handbook (and the accompanying CD-Rom) is what is called 'developmentally appropriate practice'. These precepts of understanding and practice forged for children in the USA are seen as perfectly legitimate for the South – indeed the authors claim that the only valid evidence and experience is from the USA because no one else has tested the assumptions of early childhood with the same degree of rigour. (The fact that other developed countries may not consider it relevant or necessary to go to such lengths of justification to legitimate expenditure on children is not considered.)

Leading North American educators have claimed that 'children are pretty much the same everywhere and the people teaching them have pretty much the same ideas' (Weikart, 1998; see also Katz, 1998). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which is the main voice for the profession in the USA, coined the phrase 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice' (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987, 1998). The NAEYC manual, which is produced and updated regularly, lists the unvarying ages and stages children go through as well as the broad familial contexts in which learning takes place. It perpetuates the stereotype of experience subdivided into the physical, the intellectual, the emotional and the social. It enumerates the kinds of practices that adults should adopt in order to enable children to pass through those stages successfully. These stages and the accompanying practices are assumed to be similar everywhere. 'Culture' produces only minor variations.

Research findings from a variety of fields, chiefly from developmental psychology, but also from the neurosciences and genetics, are drawn upon to inform and justify this approach. For each segment of behaviour and for each aspect of practice, 'scientific evidence' is quoted in justification. Providing the study is an empirical one, however specific the investigation, it can be extrapolated to build up a picture of what children 'need'. This globalizing notion of 'developmentally appropriate practice' is pervasive and appears in manuals and books for people working with young children throughout the world. The World Bank, in its own programming handbook, and elsewhere, cites it as a key reference. For the World Bank, as for other donor agencies, children are assumed to pass through the same ages and stages whether in remote parts of the Kalahari or in Chicago. The essence of being a young child is defined by brain capacity: 'If the brain develops well learning potential is increased and the chances of failure in school and later life are decreased' (Evans et al., 2000: 7). The programming handbook insists that 'cultural' needs should be respected; but at the same time, breaches of DAP may have to be challenged or overridden by enlightened programmers (Evans et al., 2000: 3).

Close textual reading of DAP and other similar documents suggest that they are produced by trawling through a complex, highly specific and sometimes contradictory research literature on a 'pick and mix' basis. For example, one of the most frequently cited research findings is that of Chugani et al. (1987) on brain development. The study reported the results of PET scans on 29 epileptic children, ranging in age from 5 days to 15 years, many of whom had been medicated since infancy and some of whom were medicated on the day they were scanned. Their results were compared with those of seven 'normal' adults ranging from age 19 to 30 years. Despite this very limited and atypical sample, as Bruer remarks 'Chugani's 1987 PET study is . . . possibly one of the most over-interpreted scientific papers of the last twenty-five years . . . it is taken as the paradigmatic example of how neuroscience is providing "hard data" about the first three years of life' (Bruer, 1999: 8). This study is quoted in DAP texts as well as being used by Evans et al. (2000) and Young (1998) as a prime source of evidence about brain functioning.

As Richards (1998) argues, crude extrapolations from very limited experiments cannot offer credible explanations for behaviour since, above all, development is a 'contingent, conditional, process' (Richards, 1998: 143). He further argues that 'development' functions as a catch-all concept to explain the complex – and little understood – interplay of a range of environmental, genetic and biological factors. Mutual influences occur at multiple levels, and can only be followed in the context of 'the diversity of cultures and the individual experiences of children' (Richards, 1998: 145). Increasingly there is a lively theoretical debate about these more sophisticated views of child development, although these recent debates have yet to percolate through to the practitioners and policy makers who espouse DAP.

At a meta-level, but without acknowledging it to be the case, DAP draws heavily on certain societal assumptions. These include the paramount importance of individualism and selfhood; the assumption of a permanent nuclear household, with a prime carer and a lone dependent child as the focus of adult attention; the need to encourage choice from a wide range of material goods; and various kinds of nature–nurture dualisms (Penn, 1999). The practices advocated are neither neutral nor scientifically established (even if this were possible), but rooted in specific assumptions about childhood and society. DAP might be more accurately described as 'how to understand and bring up your child as an Anglo-American'. Yet, despite shortcomings of representativeness and enquiry, it still has enormous currency.

World Bank advisers have uncritically accepted the assumptions of DAP, which introduces us to a kind of 'core' child who is paradoxically both embodied brain and a highly individual being, upon whom adults act – benignly or otherwise. Adults bringing up young children, as parents, teachers and childcare workers, are seen to have a unique, profound and formative

influence in a child's early years. The pattern and sequence of child development may be more or less the same everywhere, but it can be speeded up by particular kinds of personal adult interventions like parent education programmes; and slowed down or even stymied, by the lack of such intervention. Conversely 'poor parenting', left untreated, can lead to low self-esteem, lack of aspirations, antisocial behaviour in children and, of course, continued poverty. Physiological effects of malnutrition are conflated with psychological effects of poor parenting and the answer to both is a more sophisticated and carefully calibrated intervention. If professionals can only find the right parenting programme, the right level of stimulation and toys for children, and the right kind of feeding programme to use when children are especially young and malleable, and their brains as yet unformed, many of the ill effects of poverty could be offset. As illustrated in the following section, early intervention programmes, and the assumptions on which they rest, have been severely criticized – even in the USA (Bruer, 1999; Kagan, 1998).

Unfortunately, such criticisms have made little inroad on the dominant discourse. Coping with poverty and all its attendant evils, continues to be seen, at least in part, as the fault of individual parents. Scheper-Hughes's cautions that 'of all the many factors that endanger the lives of young children, by far the most difficult to examine with any degree of dispassionate objectivity is the quality of parenting' (Scheper-Hughes, 1983: 5). Yet, parents tend to be viewed as lacking in the knowledge, energy or willpower to improve their children's circumstances. Intervention programmes aim to redress these failings, as well as, or instead of, providing directly for children. For example, the World Bank's African Early Childhood Development strategy, while making a token acknowledgement of structural problems such as indebtedness, war, and HIV/AIDS, still concludes that child malnourishment is 'largely due to inappropriate child feeding practices, high morbidity, and poor child caring practices' (World Bank ECD website/Africa, 2000d).

Do World Bank interventions in early childhood 'work'?

As discussed earlier, there is strong evidence that the World Bank's neoliberal economic policies have served to increase poverty between North and South, and between rich and poor within countries. The evidence also suggests that children suffer disproportionately from such inequalities. Yet the Bank continues to argue, first, that it is compassionate and concerned with young children's well-being, as well as that its actions are informed by the most modern scientific evidence in the field of child development.

In a neoliberal model of the economy the state is generally seen as an inefficient means of funding and delivery of essential services, and regulation of any kind is often viewed as unwarranted interference. This views the state as essentially incapable, or at the very least having to work in close

partnership with private enterprise. ECD programmes are well established as a state-funded and state-regulated service in Europe, but barely exist as a public service in the USA (OECD, 2001). The USA in particular has followed a liberal economic approach which sees little need for state intervention except for a targeted minority of the very poorest; and even this small intervention is contracted out to a variety of profit and non-profit providers. These interventions are then assessed as specific, isolated and time-limited experiments to reduce poverty in targeted populations, usually poor black populations. The most well known of these intervention programmes have recently been summarized by Sylva (2001). Certain types of early childhood intervention, it is claimed, lead to a lowered risk of imprisonment in adulthood, better education rates, higher employment rates and even to more property owning in the target populations. Intervention programmes are seen to 'work' in the sense that it is 'cheaper' to have a productive population, than an unproductive population dependent on welfare. The ratio frequently quoted is 1:7/8: that for every US\$1 spent on early childhood programmes, US\$7-8 are saved on future demands for welfare and other state provision.

Rather than promoting any kind of state service, the private and voluntary (non-profit) sector is urged by the World Bank to invest in ECD programmes based on DAP. A recent paper commissioned by the World Bank, reviews the arguments for private profit and non-profit investment in ECD (Myers, 2000: 4). Myers argues that there are six arguments for supporting ECD programmes; a human rights argument; a moral and social values argument; an economic productivity argument; a cost-savings argument; a programme efficiency argument; and a social equity argument. The human rights argument is regarded as largely irreconcilable with a corporatist neoliberal approach. Instead, Myers suggests a more 'practical' model of the different kinds of institutions that might be grouped together and concludes that there are many untapped opportunities for macro-and micro-philanthropy in order to promote ECD.

This targeted approach has been strongly criticized by Brazilian researchers. Rossetti-Ferreira et al. (2000) and Rosemberg (2000) have followed through the effects of targeted investment in ECD programmes in Brazil. They argue convincingly that, despite the claims for technological expertise in setting up and delivering ECD programmes, World Bank poverty programmes promote far lower standards of care for poor children than those acceptable to wealthy families for their offspring. The programmes serve to exacerbate existing inequalities. They do little to help the poor, except insofar as they underwrite the exploitation of women in low-paid jobs. In fact, the evidence suggests that the promotion of such 'low-cost programmes' has been cynically used to lower investment in primary education, and uptake of primary education has actually fallen where such ECD programmes have been implemented (Rosemberg, 2000).

The early childhood programme in Colombia, one of the first, much

vaunted, 'low-cost' ECD projects, based in Medellin, has almost petered out in disarray as women who had been hired as childminders objected to lack of employment benefits and security in the projects. The programme was launched as Colombia descended into anarchy and civil war, fuelled by the huge profits to be made from the drug trade. Burke (2000) has recounted how this war in Colombia has displaced many thousands of children, including in Medellin where the ECD programme was launched. The misery wrought on individual lives cannot possibly be offset by ECD programmes, yet the Colombia programme is still claimed as an intervention success story. The premises on which the programme are based are listed (UNESCO, 1998: 67) as:

1. The healthy development of young children depends on the quality of the environments in which they grow; that is the family and the community, especially in the first years of life;
2. To achieve sustainable, integrated social development, each individual and community must be involved in and generate his or her development processes;
3. Changes should be articulated around and with the family.

The rich irony of these claims in the current political situation in Colombia is apparently unnoticed by donors signed up to DAP and targeted interventions.

Despite its extremely low GNP, by far and away the best educational and health statistical indicators in Latin America are from Cuba, which has a more equitable income distribution and collective, state-provided services. The Cuban correlation between equity of income and better health and education is an unpalatable fact for the USA. ECD programmes in Cuba are near universal but have programmes that owe more to Soviet-style education than to DAP. Regional donor conferences on Latin America invariably exclude Cuba.¹ Similarly, the work of many advocacy and campaigning groups who protest about the gross inequalities which exist in Latin America are not only unheard, but cannot even be understood within existing economic and political paradigms (Scheper-Hughes, 1993).

These experiences in Latin America show how World Bank investment patterns in ECD have served to reproduce North American assumptions about the acceptability of gross disparities between rich and poor. They have also highlighted how the delivery and assessment of ECD intervention programmes proceed without any reference to macroeconomic circumstances, although inevitably they reflect them. This is not to deny the importance of working at a micro-level as well as a macro-level, and small-scale changes which might make life more endurable for a small number of people should not be dismissed out of hand. But ECD programmes intrinsically modelled on Anglo-American middle-class childhoods, yet denying the circumstances

which prevent such a model from ever being realized, cannot 'work' in the way they were intended. Their main, if not deliberate, function is to legitimize the claim of the World Bank to be concerned about the welfare of children, despite macroeconomic policies which make their condition worse.

Discussion

It does not do to exaggerate. Relatively few of the world's children are likely to experience anything remotely like an ECD programme before they start school, if indeed they ever do attend school. ECD programmes constitute only a fraction of the World Bank's expenditure. Only determined lobbying from a variety of groups such as the Consultative Group on ECD, a consortium of donor agencies such as the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Aga Khan Foundation, persuaded the World Bank to engage in ECD programmes. But now that it has, it has done so with its usual technological fervour. There is now a kind of cartel of international donor agencies, including UNICEF and UNESCO, which are strongly influenced by the World Bank. They all argue that integrated, early intervention programmes, which combine the education of parents and stimulation of young children with health and community development, are an effective way to combat poverty.

The argument that early childhood interventions are preventative is suspect in the UK and USA. Rather than focus on issues of structural poverty and equity, these governments have promoted the notions of 'social exclusion' and 'social capital'. These approaches emphasize the need of the poor themselves to take action about their condition. For example through its much vaunted 'Sure Start' programme, targeted at poor communities, the UK Treasury has set itself targets such as improving the social and emotional well-being of children through improving parenting skills; improving health, particularly the numbers of low birth weight babies and a decrease in infant mortality; achieving speech and development levels that are 90 per cent normal; and improving readiness to learn; and strengthening families and 'natural' communities. If childcare is provided, it is as an adjunct to these aims, rather than imaginative services for the children themselves. The main emphasis is not on income maintenance or redistributive measures, but on early interventions in poor communities such as home visiting and parent education, to 'empower' poor families.

The rhetoric about early childhood programmes is misleading. It is both technological and redemptionist – the world is a difficult place to reform but young children are innocent and unformed and we can really make a difference if we get in soon enough with the right kind of stimulating programme for the children and convert their parents to a right or better way of bringing them up. More importantly, this rhetoric is diversionary. As Kagan has pointed out, in relation to the USA, the rhetoric is a way of denying an unacceptable truth:

... so many people believe in infant determinism [because] it ignores the power of social class membership. Though a child's social class is the best predictor of future vocation, academic accomplishments and psychiatric health, Americans wish to believe that their society is open, egalitarian, without rigid class boundaries. To acknowledge the power of class is to question this ethical canon. (Kagan, 1998: 147)

If these arguments are dubious in the North, they are much more so in the South. Few would disagree that young children benefit from protected spaces in which to move and play if their environment is a dangerous one. Few would disagree that the kind of poverty many of the world's children – and their families – experience is debilitating and harmful. These issues can and should be addressed at every level, whether in the North or the South and international donor agencies do indeed play a significant role in addressing them.

But the premise that a dose of developmentally appropriate practice in Uganda or Kazakhstan can significantly address poverty and inequality in those countries is risible. Stephens (1997b) illustrated how the USA at the height of the Cold War used images of middle-class, white children in publicity campaigns to legitimate a Cold War nuclear arms policy and nuclear testing which directly harmed many children belonging to marginalized communities. The World Bank is similarly able to use the configuration of the innocent individual child, whose brain will be fed, nutritionally and cognitively, by ECD programmes modelled on the USA. In this way the World Bank and its satellite donor agencies avoid confronting the gross harm that is being done to the children of the poor in the South by neoliberal policies, and the failure to address debt relief.

Note

1. The Inter-American Bank recently convened a major shareholder meeting in Paris to discuss ECD programmes in Latin America at which the lead speaker was the distinguished economist Amartya Sen. All major donor agencies were represented at the conference, including representatives from the World Bank. When consulted about the programme beforehand, I suggested that Cuban statistics/speakers be included. This suggestion was politely ignored.

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