Received 5 October 2017
Revised 18 February 2018
5 July 2018
31 August 2018
Accepted 1 September 2018

Better with less: (Re) governmentalizing the government of childhood

Karen Smith
School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the discursive rationalities shaping Irish child policy, with a particular focus on the rationality of "better with less" and its association with an intensified focus on the early years. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis there was a shift towards universal provision of early years services as part of the better with less agenda – the paper critically examines the assumptions which shaped this policy reform.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on analysis of the texts of the two national child policy plans produced to date in Ireland – The Children, Their Lives 2000–2010 and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014–2020.

Findings – Ireland adopted its first national children's strategy The Children, Their Lives in 2000, associated with an initial shift to a more technocratic, investment-oriented approach to policy making. The emphasis on economic returns is more strongly evident in the successor adopted in 2014. Informed by the "better with less" agenda Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures has a strong focus on early years provision as offering the most significant potential for returns, particularly in relation to "disadvantaged" children. This position not only objectifies children but is associated with a set of assumptions about the nature of "disadvantage" and those affected by it which ignores the wider context of unequal social, political and economic relations.

Originality/value – National children's strategies have not been explicitly looked at previously as a form of governmentalization of government and there has been limited analysis to date in Ireland or elsewhere of the better with less agenda in the context of child policy, gaps which this paper seeks to address.

Keywords Ireland, Social investment, Child policy, Early childhood education and care, Government of childhood

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While children and youth have always been an important focus of state welfare policies, the intensity of focus has increased noticeably in the last two to three decades. "Child policy" has become increasingly formalised as a distinct area of political decision-making, evident in the adoption of national strategic plans for children in various countries and the appointment of children's ministers and commissioners. This is in part linked to the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations in 1989, but arguably even more significant has been the increasing influence of the discourse of social investment at national and international level since the mid-1990s. "Investing in people" came to be seen as key to the kind of competitive economies espoused in the policy prescriptions of the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU): "smart" targeting of social expenditure could boost productivity and "break the cycles of disadvantage" deemed to perpetuate poverty and inhibit economic development (Jenson, 2017; Kvist, 2015). With investment in children, especially the very young, appearing to offer the most promising "returns", the rise

The author is grateful to the (then) Office of the Minister for Children, Republic of Ireland for funding some of the research associated with this article. Grateful thanks also to Nessa Winston, Jim Campbell and Stephan Koeppe for comments at various stages and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments which has been of immense benefit in improving the article.

0144-333X
DOI 10.1108/IJSSP-10-2017-0122

of social investment has been associated with increased spending on children's services and on early years services in particular (Jenson, 2017).

In the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis austerity policies advocated following the massive injection of public monies into the financial sector represented a significant brake on social expenditure. In a European context, EU member states, though under pressure to curb spending, were at the same time called upon to address the social impact of the crisis – evident in starkly increased poverty rates – through strategies of social investment (Kvist, 2015). Investment in children, framed in terms of "breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage", was demarcated as a specific and important strand of the EU social investment agenda (Commission of the European Union, 2013). Efficient targeting of resources is a key aspect of social investment, but took on a new dimension in the context of austerity. The discourse of "better with less" which rose to prominence in Europe and beyond in the aftermath of the financial crisis could be viewed as an attempt to reconcile potential tensions between social investment and austerity, calling for targeting of expenditure with an eye to maximum benefit for minimal expenditure. Taking Ireland as a case study this paper explores the question of whether the "better with less" agenda has led to a reorientation of child policy and to what effect.

Until recently a "laggard" rather than a "leader" in terms of child policy, with a poor record in protecting the welfare and rights of children, Ireland represents an interesting case-study in this area. One of the poorest member states when it joined the EU in 1973, Ireland was at this time also one of the most religiously dominated countries in Europe. In part due to the strong influence of Catholic social teaching and the resistance therein to state intervention in the family, statutory child and family supports were highly residual and there was a heavy reliance on religious and voluntary organisations to deliver services. Reform of the child welfare system established in the Victorian era had only just gotten underway (Powell, 1993). Efforts to modernise policy and provision for children were slow and piecemeal (a comprehensive blueprint for reform produced in the 1980s was never fully implemented) (Smith, 2016). Then at the turn of the millennium Ireland became one of the first countries to embrace a strategic "whole of government" approach to child policy (Ryan, 2017). The ten-year national children's strategy Our Children, Their Lives was adopted during a period of unprecedented prosperity in Ireland when "investment in childhood" was viewed as "vital to continuing success" (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 7). This success was the result of a dramatic change of fortune in the 1990s, when the low-tax, regulation-light, FDI-led economic model pursued in Ireland came to be viewed as "the poster child for global neoliberalism" (Coulter, 2015, p. 5). An equally dramatic reversal post-2008 accompanied by near-ruinous efforts to rescue the Irish banking system led to entry into a stringent EU-IMF adjustment programme in 2010, which, as Coulter *et al.* (2017) write, was effectively an instrument to shore up the European banking system. The increases in taxation and drastic reductions in public expenditure demanded were implemented by successive governments and Ireland was labelled the "model pupil" for "austerity", an example to other states (Robbins and Lapsley, 2014; Coulter *et al.*, 2017). The subsequent much-vaunted economic "recovery" was heavily exaggerated and belied declining social conditions and increases in poverty and deprivation (Coulter *et al.*, 2017). By 2014 when the successor to Our Children, Their Lives – the national policy framework Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures – was published, a steep decline in the living standards of Irish families was apparent, with over one third of households with children affected by material deprivation (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2017).

Making better use of scarce resources became a key aspect of Irish policy discourse from 2008 onwards and the "better with less" agenda was pursued with renewed vigour from 2011 when a new Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was established (see MacCarthaigh, 2017). Allocated the dual responsibility of reducing public spending while driving reorganisation and improvement of public services the new department represents the institutionalisation of better with less in Ireland. Subsequent child policy has necessarily been shaped by the increasingly results-driven policy agenda, evident in the better outcomes promised by the 2014 policy framework. This has been associated with increased policy attention to early years services and interestingly – for a country traditionally wedded to residualism and in the midst of a financial crisis – a shift towards universal provision in this area. Drawing on analysis of the texts of Our Children, Their Lives and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and of related policy developments the aim of this paper is to critically examine this development within the broader context of child policy reform.

The analysis presented in this paper draws on governmentality theory and the strategic turn in Irish child policy is viewed as a form of what Dean (1999) refers to as the "governmentalization of government" – a reflexive mode of exercising power in which the target is the system of political government itself. A fundamental assumption is that the exercise of power depends upon some kind of shared rationalisation – produced through discourse –of the nature of the issues to be addressed and of the aims, objects and subjects of power (Rose, 1999a; Foucault, 2007; Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014) and a key aim of the analysis is to examine the discursive rationalities shaping policy reform. There is no shortage of literature internationally examining how neoliberal and neosocial rationalities of government have infused child policy (e.g. Nadesan, 2010; Smith, 2012, 2014; Sonu and Benson, 2016) and from an Irish perspective Ryan (2011) has carried out a governmentality-inspired analysis of Our Children, Their Lives, addressing the shift towards governing children through freedom. National children's strategies have not however been explicitly looked at previously as a form of governmentalization of government and there has been limited analysis to date in Ireland or elsewhere of the better with less agenda in the context of child policy, gaps which this paper seeks to address. The theoretical and conceptual lens informing analysis is set out below as a preliminary to examination of the strategic turn in Irish child policy since 2000. It is argued that in the aftermath of the financial crisis the growing emphasis on technocratic investment-oriented policies associated with this strategic turn has intersected with a broader austerity-driven focus on activation in a manner which both objectifies children and obscures the complex and relational causes of poverty and disadvantage.

Analytical lens: the "governmentalization of government"

Dean's concept of "governmentalization of *government*" builds upon the notion of the "governmentalization of *the state*", coined by Michel Foucault (2007) to describe the emergence of liberal state-centred forms of government. Foucault's account highlights the subtle and pervasive mechanisms of power upon which the freedoms allocated by liberal government depend. Disciplinary technologies act on individuals, while the biopolitical technologies of power which developed alongside techniques of statistical reckoning from the eighteenth century, made possible management of the health and welfare of entire populations (Foucault, 2007). The emergence of these technologies of power (described by Foucault as the two poles of biopower) was associated with a shift by which human life could be administered as economic and political resource (Foucault, 2007; Lemke, 2011) and was thus a key factor in the positioning of the initial phases of life as a particularly privileged site of governmental investment (Rose, 1999b). Hence the governmentalization of the state and the governmentalization of childhood went hand in hand.

Central to the governmentality perspective is the relationship between power and knowledge – as Miller and Rose write, governing is necessarily predicated upon a particular understanding of "that which is to be governed" and the development of that understanding actually serves to "constitute new sectors of reality" (2008, p. 31). The shifts in thinking about and exercising power associated with the governmentalization of the state depended upon and brought into being new statistically measurable domains – population, economy and society – which became the primary targets of liberal government (Foucault, 2007; Dean, 1999). The governmentalization of government refers to the reflexive reorientation of political authority apparent from the late twentieth century. The far-reaching policy shifts adopted by major economic powers to the economic crises of the 1970s and the subsequent rise of "neoliberal" forms of thinking about government was associated with a profound re-evaluation of the functions of the state. Dean suggests that the resulting reforms (particularly evident in the English-speaking "liberal welfare-state regimes" (Esping-Andersen, 1990) from the 1980s) brought about a kind of "folding-back" of government upon itself as political and administrative structures and processes became the main target of governmental power within which new domains of governability were established (1999, pp. 147-153).

Thinking in terms of the "governmentalization of government" captures the imperative within neoliberal modes of government to reform and refine the operation of governmental systems. Of central importance to this project was the pursuit of "efficiency" through stratagems such as contractualism and "performance management" and constitution of "internal markets", all designed to promote a reflexive orientation in those charged with implementing policy and delivering public services (Dean, 1999, pp. 167-168). Of course these reforms – and the political parties who implemented them – came under critical scrutiny in turn. During the 1990s efforts to constitute some kind of accommodation or "third way" between the "truths" espoused via global neoliberalism and the concerns of social democracy was associated with the emergence of a rationality of government which can be described as "neosocial" (Larner and Butler, 2005). Countering the "fragmentation" caused by earlier neoliberal reforms through "joined up government" and adoption of partnership principles have been important aspects of the reflexive mode of neosocial government (Larner and Butler, 2005; Bevir, 2011), which is arguably best understood as a variant of, rather than alternative to, neoliberal rationality.

A distinguishing feature of neosocial government is the pragmatic rationality of "what works" (see Sanderson, 2003; Moss, 2013) which – reflecting the infusion of welfarism by neoliberal market logic – prioritises social policies and programmes deemed likely, based on available evidence, to yield a measurable return on investment. The discourse of investment is of course deeply embedded within liberal forms of governmentality, within which capitalist forms of production and exchange are the very basis of the political order, operating at once as a kind of natural limitation and legitimisation of the authority of the state (see, e.g. Lemke, 2011, p. 46; Fraser, 2014). Foucault (2008), however, sees a break between classical liberalism and the logic of enterprise which underpins neoliberal thought. From a neoliberal perspective every aspect of human existence – from the political to the deeply personal – is viewed as calculable in units of economic value, as forms of capital (Brown, 2016). However it has been through neosocial government that this logic has been most effectively put to work via policies aiming to stimulate social and human capital by encouraging the governed to adopt an entrepreneurial approach both to their civic participation (in the domain of "community" rather than the polis) and to individual projects of skills-enhancement (Lister, 2003; Rose, 1999b, pp. 167-196). This responsibilized subject is referred to by Brown (2016, pp. 10-11) as a "sacrificial citizen", directed to contribute to the greater (economic) good, but offered little by way of economic security in return.

The now all-pervasive language of human capital lies at the heart of social investment discourse. It has transformed how we perceive child-rearing; parental time and effort now a means by which human capital is increased: the higher the level of parental human capital, the more "stimulating" the environment and hence the greater the pay-off in the next generation (Foucault, 2008, pp. 229-230). Over the last three decades this thesis has been reformulated and given increased credibility based on findings from neuroscience. As taken up within political and media discourse on child development these appear to point both to the primacy of parental interaction in shaping neuro-development and the special importance of the first two to three years in a child's life as a particularly sensitive period for brain development (Macvarish *et al.*, 2014). What Macvarish *et al.* (2014) term "brain claims" have been central to the demands of the "first three years" movement which emerged from the 1990s initially in the USA, and has been particularly influential in English-speaking countries. The claims have been subject to sustained criticism in the academic literature on the basis that the state of neuroscientific research has not advanced to the point where consensus has been achieved on infant brain development (see, e.g. Wastell and White, 2012; Rose and Abi-Rached, 2014; Macvarish *et al.*, 2014). The movement has also attracted attention from scholars critical of the political uses to which claims derived from neuroscience have been put by advocates of increased state intervention in early childhood (see Macvarish *et al.*, 2014 for a review of critiques). To a great extent these criticisms reflect those made of the discursive rationalities of social investment and human capital more generally – the individualisation of responsibility, the instrumental approach to policy, the objectification of children as "resources" or "liabilities", the increasing pressures placed on parents and the potential created for coercive government of parents deemed deficient (Lister, 2003; Hendrick, 2003, Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2011; Millei and Joronen, 2016). Nonetheless these discursive rationalities remain highly influential in policy discourse and arguably have been strengthened by the better with less agenda, which in important respects can be seen as an intensification of the rationality of social investment oriented towards extracting maximum returns from the minimum possible investment.

As noted above the primary aim of this paper is to examine the increasing importance of the policy imperative of maximising returns from minimal investment in Ireland post-2008 and the weight of expectation placed upon early years services in relation to this. Informed by the conceptual framework provided by the governmentality literature, analysis centred on the discursive rationalities shaping early years policy as set out in the texts of Our Children, Their Lives and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. The analysis was oriented towards two key tasks: first, unpacking assumptions about the nature of the issues to be addressed by policy reform and second, how those targeted by reforms have been discursively constituted.

Governmentalizing the government of Irish childhood

The manner in which rationalities of government are taken up – or resisted – varies with the political, economic and socio-cultural context (Rose, 1999b). In the Irish context early developments in relation to the government of childhood took place under colonial rule and, as Ryan (2017, p. 35) argues, biopolitical technologies centred on children as "national assets" were in place prior to the creation of an independent Irish state in 1922. It is important to stress that deployment of biopolitical measures by the state in Ireland (before or after independence) was by no means straightforward. This was largely due to the influence of the Catholic Church, highly protective of its own interests in shaping young souls, and to the significant role of religious organisations in providing services.

The role of the public sector in service-delivery in Ireland has always been residual. Local government has weak powers and limited functions and policy-making is thus highly centralised (MacCarthaigh and Boyle, 2011). While services such as schooling and hospital care are provided on a universal basis, there remains today a reliance on non-state providers to administer services. (For instance the Catholic Church still controls most primary schools). The complex mixed economy through which social services have traditionally been delivered has helped to shield from scrutiny the increased role of for-profit organisations in recent decades (Mulkeen, 2016). As discussed further below, for-profit providers dominate in relate to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Non-profit organisations are still important providers of welfare services for children and other groups but increasingly the trend is towards contractual/commissioned arrangements (Shaw and Canavan, 2016).

Ireland, until recently, had adopted a somewhat conservative consensually driven approach to public sector reform. The Strategic Management Initiative adopted in 1994 is regarded as a less radical approach to performance management than those adopted over the previous decade in other Anglophone states, reflecting the influence of the social partnership approach adopted in the late 1980s (MacCarthaigh and Boyle, 2011, p. 216). The reform agenda was associated with a shift towards strategic policy-making and efforts to promote more "joined-up government" through various cross-cutting initiatives from the late 1990s. In recognition of the importance of non-state actors in policy-making and service provision these were generally informed by partnership principles. Centred on three high-level goals -participation (children will have a voice); research (children's lives will be better understood) and service provision (children will receive quality support and services) – the first National Children's Strategy Our Children, Their Lives was among the most significant of these.

There were other important factors underpinning the reflexive orientation adopted to the government of childhood in Ireland at the turn of the twenty-first century. Foremost among these were the child abuse scandals which emerged during the 1990s and the subsequent official inquiries into historic and ongoing failures to safeguard vulnerable children. The scandals did not come to light in a vacuum, but must be viewed in light of the declining influence of the Catholic Church, whose personnel were at the centre of the most high-profile inquiries. The subject matter of these inquiries can be understood as chief among the "past failures" obliquely referred to within the text of Our Children, Their Lives which along with "present challenges […] must be faced openly so that further progress can be made" (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 6).

The direct impetus for a national strategy came via the monitoring mechanism of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Ryan, 2011), itself representing a particular mode of reflexive government. The influence of the rights discourse associated with the Convention – in particular the principle of participation – was clearly evident in the strategy document and actions adopted since 2000 under Goal One of Our Children, Their Lives have created an infrastructure for child and youth participation at local and national level. The child's right to participate in decision-making has also been accorded Constitutional status in Ireland as part of a broader children's rights amendment adopted by referendum in 2012. These reforms are indicative of a shift in power relations, with conditions of possibility established for less authoritarian child-adult relations than in the past (Ryan, 2011). It must be borne in mind however that discourses of agency and participation can be deployed in ways by which the freedom of the governed becomes an instrument of governance (Rose, 1999b; Ryan, 2011; Smith, 2012, 2014). Ryan's (2011) analysis of Our Children, Their Lives draws on Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism to argue that "empowerment" of children and young people through participation can be understood as a mechanism for exercising power, which aims not to challenge unequal relations, but to equip the young to compete within the neoliberal "game of inequalities" (p. 768). This is a competition for which the more economically privileged are best equipped, but as tacitly acknowledged within the text of Our Children, Their Lives, […] imposes "pressures" on all (Ryan, 2011, 2017). That these pressures were represented therein as resulting from societal changes somehow exogenous to the system of political decision-making which creates economic and social policy is significant. It provides a good indication of the relatively narrow form of reflexivity informing the strategic turn in the government of Irish childhood, the overarching goal of which was to more effectively harness the energies of those involved in child policy and provision – including children themselves - towards common objectives (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 6, see also Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2014, p. 14).

At the heart of the first national children's strategy was a blueprint for reconfiguration of relationships, both across government departments and between those working in government departments and the various organisations and individuals addressing children's issues at national and local levels. Space precludes detailed elaboration of the structures and processes created or the subsequent reforms, but these have ultimately led to the establishment of Department for Children and Youth Affairs overseen by a cabinet minister; national-level advisory bodies (including representatives of children and young people); partnership-based local children's services committees; and indirectly, the establishment of a dedicated national agency (TUSLA) for child and family services. The channels of communication, collaboration and accountability configured (and subject to ongoing reconfiguration) have thus brought into being a new governable domain underpinned by partnership and participation. Within this domain everybody is "working together" to "improve children's lives", represented in the text of Our Children, Their Lives as a relatively straightforward matter of identifying children's needs, determining how best to meet them (through consultation and research) and then rallying all interested parties (Government of Ireland, 2000, pp. 8-9).

While at first glance unobjectionable, the obvious danger with "everybody working together" is that potential tensions and inequalities of power escape meaningful examination. Identification of the needs of the heterogeneous category of children cannot be said to be a value-neutral process and the respective views and interests of public servants, researchers, community activists, service-providers and service-users do not necessarily coincide. The mechanism adopted to promote consensus among stakeholders was the evidence-based policy approach and Our Children, Their Lives was guided by the assumption that by utilising appropriate evidence it is possible to identify needs, calculate costs and benefits of interventions, measure activity and gauge impact, thus identifying "what works" most effectively in achieving desired outcomes. In line with the imperatives of the performance management agenda an evidence-based approach would also ensure that resources were directed as efficiently as possible (Government of Ireland, 2000, pp. 38-39). Without dismissing the importance of research and evaluation, the problem here though, as outlined by Sanderson (2003), is that not only are there are practical difficulties in apprehending cause and effect in evaluating "what works", more importantly, "ambiguous and complex" social problems such as poverty or child neglect can be reduced to technicalities to be addressed (p. 331). As the scope for dissent is thus constricted, the focus of critical reflection becomes directed towards the search for more effective – and cost-efficient – technocratic interventions rather than on addressing the various intersecting inequalities which underlie social problems (Madra and Adaman, 2014; Penn, 2017). That such interventions can be easily represented on the basis of financial costs and benefits is an obvious advantage for policy-makers, who as Miller and Rose (2008) note, are continually seeking ways to make sense of the messiness of social reality, but this kind of "economisation" of existence, which operates to "depoliticise" social questions and hence "silence" alternatives (Madra and Adaman, 2014; Brown, 2016), ultimately reinforces the dominance of neo-liberal market-logic (Vandenbroeck, 2017). In addition is the danger that resources allocated on the basis of potential "returns on investment" will flow only to domains of policy which promise straightforwardly measureable results.

Better with less: (Re) governmentalizing the government of Irish childhood

The strengthened evidence base for children's services brought about since 2000 meant the "case for supporting children and young people" set out in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures could draw on a body of Irish studies, in which, reflecting the increasing colonisation of childhood research by economic analysts internationally (see, e.g. Millei and Joronen, 2016, p. 393), returns from child-related expenditure were calculated in precise monetary terms: €2.20 per €1 spent on youth work; €7 for every €1 invested in "one year of universal *quality* pre-school service"; and €3 for every €1 euro spent on youth mental health services (DCYA, 2014, p. 16, emphasis added). Returns flow not simply from increased productivity but through lowering long-term costs associated with ill-health, poor educational attainment or anti-social behaviour. Some of these costs were enumerated in the policy document – "by age 28 the cost to society for individuals at age 10 with conduct disorders was 10 times higher than for those with no conduct problems […]" while "the direct and indirect costs of overweight and obesity in 2009 were estimated at 1.13 billion" (DCYA, 2014, pp. 14-17).

Expenditure on children within the policy document is represented as "a capital investment from which significant returns flow" and achieving better outcomes for children as an important aspect of economic planning (DCYA, 2014, p. 14). The research findings cited above provided a clear indication of how best to leverage funds for maximum returns and reorienting expenditure so as to benefit from the "significant dividends" to be accrued from spending in the early years result was one of the most important avowed goals of the policy framework. The returns from investment in the early years are seen to flow to in part from its preventative effect. In 2000 Our Children, Their Lives had promised "major expansion of preventative and early intervention services" (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 45) and reversing the "bias" in provision, so that the more "cost effective" prevention and early intervention takes priority over "treatment" remained a central goal in 2014 (DCYA, 2014, p. 42). This was to be achieved not only through targeted interventions for "at risk" children, but through universal services which would "build essential social and emotional foundations for children in their early years" (DCYA, 2014, pp. 29-30).

Boosting brainpower, breaking cycles

Universality has never been a strong feature of Irish welfare provision[1], so the development of universal early years' services represents a striking departure, especially as until relatively recently care and education of young children was not a significant policy issue in Ireland. The male breadwinner/female caregiver ideal shaped social policy until the 1990s, with state involvement in early years services apart from primary schools limited to those addressing educational or social disadvantage. By the mid-1990s female labour market participation was a key factor in pushing the early years on to the policy agenda and in 1999 – against the background of what was represented as "a crisis in childcare supply" – a National Childcare Strategy was adopted (Government of Ireland, 1999, p. iv). Early years education was at this time treated as a separate policy issue the Department of Education.

Under Our Children, Their Lives childcare services were categorised as the first of a set of universal needs shared by all children, reflecting the shift underway towards institutionalisation of early childhood. As part of the reform agenda initiated under Our Children, Their Lives the "early years" (encompassing childcare and early childhood education) subsequently became a distinct domain of policy under the joint remit of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education. Interestingly a large-scale programme (co-funded by the EU) to increase childcare places in the early 2000s was rolled out under the Department of Justice and Equality, reflecting the socio-economic and gender disadvantage/labour market focus of the funding programme. In the latter part of the decade responsibility for administering funding for early years services shifted to the Minister for Children, and an increasing emphasis on children's developmental needs rather than just parental childcare needs was evident in policy discourse.

Positioned as a vital aspect of the post-2008 "better with less" agenda, the early years is one of the few policy areas in which there has been recent expansion of state activity in Ireland, although at the level of policy and funding rather than direct service delivery.

The funding programmes implemented during the 2000s were directed towards the non-profit and for-profit sectors. Today 73 per cent of services are for-profit (POBAL, 2017), while non-profit providers availing of state funding have been obliged to put an "effective", albeit income-differentiated, fee structure in place (Fitzpatrick and associates, 2007). As in the case of similar developments in the UK during the 1990s there was limited consultation or debate on the deployment of public funds to support development of a childcare market, rather than establishment of "democratically controlled, community-owned" spaces (Moss, 2013). Political discourse on early years provision in Ireland has to a large extent been dominated by questions of supply and affordability, with greater attention to the former until recently. Then in 2010 a new universal subsidy in respect of one year of sessional pre-school education (Early Childhood Education scheme) was implemented. First announced in the context of an emergency austerity budget in 2009 this replaced a more expensive and widely criticised cash-transfer scheme (Early Childhood Supplement) established in 2006 for all families with children under the age of six. In announcing the new pre-school scheme the Minister for Finance represented it as an exemplary model of how "to achieve better results with fewer resources" noting that "pre-primary education significantly enhances the subsequent educational achievement of students and in turn increases the return for State investment in education" (Lenihan, 2009). Under Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures a commitment (since implemented) was made to extend the Early Childhood Education scheme to offer a second year of pre-school provision as part of measures to support "learning and development from birth", an objective particularly relevant to Outcome Two (achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development). Expansion of early years provision was also represented as a vital tool in attaining progress under Outcome Four (economic security and opportunity). This reflects the perceived utility of early years services in Ireland as elsewhere as a dual mechanism with multi-temporal effects, simultaneously boosting the human capital of the future working population, while facilitating those with caring responsibilities in the here and now to access training and employment opportunities.

The increased emphasis on the developmental benefits of early years provision evident in contemporary Irish policy reflects the neuroscience-inspired turn to the early years referred to above, referred to as the "(bio)politicization of neuroscience" by Millei and Joronen (2016, p. 395), as policy-makers seek to capitalise from what is regarded as the most critical period for brain development. The received wisdom is set out in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures in a passage lamenting the comparative inadequacy of Irish investment:

> The brain develops at an astonishing rate in the early years of life. Its capacity to adapt and develop slows with age. This is one of the reasons why earlier intervention yields greater returns. Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for future learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health. Investment in the very early years (0-3) yields the highest returns, with significant returns incurred throughout childhood and early adulthood (DCYA, 2014, p. 15).

As noted earlier, as a foundation for policy the above thesis has been heavily criticised as both an over-simplification and an exaggeration of the current state of neuroscientific research (Wastell and White, 2012; Macvarish *et al.*, 2014; Millei and Joronen, 2016; Vandenbroeck, 2017; Penn, 2017). As Penn (2017) argues it is underlain with a parental determinism infused with classed and racialized assumptions – that parents with low human capital are incapable of supporting optimum infant brain development. This kind of parental determinism is reflected in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures in which it is unequivocally stated that "how children are parented" is more significant than any other social factor in shaping future outcomes: "what parents *do* is more important than *who* they are" (DCYA, 2014, p. 27, original emphasis). Elsewhere in the document there is a reference to the importance of "giving every child the best start in life" framed in terms of supporting brain development in the first two years (DCYA, 2014, p. 65). Clearly there is concern that some children are not receiving the kinds of "early experiences" which support a "strong foundation", presumably due to deficiencies in parenting. It is these children who are seen as most in need of early years services and in relation to whom the highest returns will be derived.

Macro-economic and structural factors as well as factors such as, mental health and social exclusion strongly related to structural disadvantage are identified in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures as key factors affecting the capacity to parent effectively. For the most part however the manner in which disadvantage is framed in the policy document –particularly through the language of "intergenerational cycles" – tends to elide the salience of macroeconomic and structural factors, implying that the causes – and solutions – to poverty and disadvantage lie within family units. Addressing disadvantage is to a large extent represented as a matter of "freeing" parents from welfare dependency, framed within the document in highly gendered terms:

> There is a strong link between parental participation in the labour market, maternal educational attainment and children's living conditions. Tackling disadvantage is most effectively achieved through active inclusion strategies that combine supports for parents to access education, training and employment with adequate income support and access to essential services, such as quality, affordable and accessible childcare, quality pre-school education, after-school services, health, housing and social services. This is particularly important in supporting the economic engagement of all women and in helping lone parents to make the transition from welfare dependency to economic independence (DCYA, 2014, p. 90).

"Remov[ing] barriers to employment through increasing the affordability of quality and accessible childcare and after-school services" is central to the outcome of "economic security and opportunity" under Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. Subsidised childcare was made available from September 2017 for all pre-school children in addition to existing subsidies for those from low-income families and at the time of writing new Childcare Support legislation had been adopted by the Irish parliament which will rationalise subsidies and strengthen financial supports. These can be said to be welcome developments since Irish childcare costs are still among the highest in OECD states, however they can be said to form part of a broader set of policies – informed by the intensified focus on activation since 2008 – by which breadwinning has been prioritised over other aspects of parental duties, for the less economically privileged at least.

Improving work incentives and promoting progression to the labour market are central planks of commitments to reducing child and family poverty within Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (DCYA, 2014, p. 93) to promoting children's economic security. The particular commitment made to promoting labour market participation of lone parents must be viewed in the context of new activation obligations imposed post-2008 on those parenting alone (see Collins and Murphy, 2016). Of course viewed from the vantage of social investment welfare-dependent lone parents are likely lacking in human capital and accordingly ill-equipped to ensure that the potential value of their children's human capital is fully realised. Hence from the point of view of economic efficiency it appears to make sense that the division of labour in society allocates responsibility for young "barriers to employment" to trained professionals, while welfare-dependent parents concentrate their efforts on maximising their market potential. However, even if accepted – and there are many reasons for rejecting this kind of reasoning not least the preferences of children[2] – it only holds true by its own logic if the "quality" of childcare provision is high and if employment offers a genuine route to economic security, about both of which, as I will briefly discuss now, there are good reasons to be sceptical in the Irish context.

Quality in children's services is of course a highly contested concept with a long-standing divide evident between those who are concerned with utilising quality as an objective, universally applicable measure of "what works" and those who emphasise the complex, relational and situational nature of quality as well as the limitations of the discourse of quality in capturing salient features of children's experiences within services (Klinkhammer and Schäfer, 2017, p. 9; Moss *et al.*, 2013). The definition of quality services set out in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, with an emphasis on "outcomes focused and evidence informed" provision, could be said to lean towards the narrower technocratic definition of quality, although with inclusion of broader issues such as participation and community involvement. Regardless of how defined, and without denying the existence of many excellent services, there are serious concerns regarding the quality of Irish early years provision. Recent scandals have served to highlight variable standards in the market-driven Irish early years sector in which pay and conditions creates difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified, experienced staff (Urban *et al.*, 2014; Start Strong, 2014; O'Toole and Byrne, 2015; POBAL, 2017), the most important "input" from an outcomes-oriented perspective (Klinkhammer and Schäfer, 2017). Only around half of services are inspected by the statutory inspection service annually and a minority of services inspected are fully compliant with the regulatory standards (TUSLA, 2017). The minimum staff qualification required by national regulations (QQI Level 5, equivalent to one year vocational training) is very low. (There are slightly more stringent obligations regarding staff qualifications in those services – most in practice – who participate in government subsidy schemes). Average pay for ECEC practitioners is significantly less than the average industrial wage, almost half of the predominantly female workforce are part-time and casual/seasonal employment is common (Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 2017; POBAL, 2017). Limited attention (at the political level at least) has been paid to the question of meaningful participation of children and parents in the design, governance and day-to-day administration of early years and after-school provision: and the nature of provision in Ireland in which parents and children are positioned primarily as consumers of market-based services creates obvious – although not insurmountable – challenges in this regard.

As regards the second part of the assumption, unemployment rates are now relatively low (currently 5.1 per cent) in Ireland and income poverty and material deprivation rates are significantly lower in households with adults in employment (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2017, 2018a). Nonetheless 23.5 per cent of those experiencing material deprivation in 2016 were "in work" (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2017). In terms of GNP per capita Ireland is one of the wealthiest countries in the EU (Eurostat, 2017), but has the distinction of having one of the most unequal distribution of market incomes in the OECD (OECD, 2015). Earnings vary considerably across different sectors, with average annual earnings in the ICT and finance sectors over three times that of earnings in the hospitality sector (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2018b). In addition the burden of housing costs is high even for relatively affluent households, but creates enormous insecurity for those on low wages who may not qualify for housing supports (Nugent, 2018). Within the prevailing market-driven Irish housing system, in which large-scale international investment funds have become much more significant in the post-crisis era (Byrne, 2016), the interests of a range of influential market actors are in direct conflict with those of buyers and renters. In this context poverty and inequality cannot be said to arise simply from "generational cycles", but from a fiscal, regulatory and policy regime which to a great extent privileges the interests of global capital.

Concluding remarks

In the foreword to Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures the Minister for Children described the present as "an extraordinary point in the history of childhood in Ireland". While acknowledging the need to avoid complacency the Minister asserted that "we have drawn a line in the sand between the present and times past, when children were not protected and cherished" (DCYA, 2014, p. xiii). The strategic turn in Irish child policy represents an attempt to break with the past but also to embrace the opportunities offered by prudent investment. In contrast to our present moment – represented in epochal terms in the texts of the two Irish policy plans examined here – not only was there a failure in the past to "cherish" and "protect", there was also a failure to recognise the long-term benefits which flow from public spending on children and young people. Representation of children as "resources" is by no means a new feature of Irish policy discourse (Smith, 2016; Ryan, 2017), but there is novelty in the precision and rigour now brought to bear in ascertaining the future financial "dividends" to be derived from exertions in the optimisation of child-life. In this regard Irish policy reflects the intensification of the "economisation of childhood" (Millei and Joronen, 2016) brought about through neoliberal and neosocial rationalities of government.

Representing children as economic resources not only objectifies the young, it also serves to buttress the prevailing political economy, within which widening inequality is an acceptable price to pay for economic growth and low public deficits. The discourse of investment locates the value of children in their future contribution to the national wealth and sustainable public finances. This makes for a compelling argument for expenditure even in times of fiscal restraint, positioning children as a priority in relation to policy development and reform. However as the objective is to maximise returns to the exchequer the logic of investment is associated with a narrow form of reflexive rationality – evident in Irish child policy – in which systems of policy-making and implementation are viewed in isolation from their interaction with wider socio-economic relations.

The big ideas which have shaped the government of contemporary childhood in Ireland and globally – boosting human capital; activation of welfare dependent parents; prevention and early intervention – are rooted in the assumption that technocratic interventions can address deficits related to disadvantage without reference to the economic, political and socio-cultural context (Moss, 2017, p. 19; see also Penn, 2017). The extent, causation and consequences of advantage and privilege thus remain unexamined since the relational nature of disadvantage is barely acknowledged (on related points see, e.g. Lodge and Lynch, 2004; Penn, 2017). Hence the disadvantaged, rather than the structures and systems which produce privilege and disadvantage, are positioned as the problem, with all the potential for coercive policy approaches this implies. Again, as is widely recognised in the literature, there is nothing necessarily new in this, but we can say that efforts to impose responsibility on individuals have been transformed and intensified by the biopoliticization of neuroscience discussed above (Wastell and White, 2012; Millei and Joronen, 2016). Policy-makers have been seduced by the promise that by boosting brainpower, state intervention in the earliest years of life can effectively – and relatively cheaply – forestall potential problems and enhance productivity of those born into poverty. Provision of early years services can also serve as a buttress for increased conditionality in social protection systems, thus bringing an immediate return to the public finances.

It is thus unlikely to be a coincidence that the arguments of the baby-brain movement have been particularly enthusiastically embraced in the so-called liberal welfare-state regimes such as the USA, the UK, New Zealand, Australia and more recently Ireland, where neoliberal rationalities of government have been most influential. These are among the most economically unequal high-income countries with high levels of child poverty (OECD, 2018; UNICEF, 2017; Watson *et al.*, 2018). Characterised by relatively residual approaches to social service provision these states have adopted market-based approaches to early years provision, albeit with state subsidy of various kinds. Diversity in standards and costs across services (see contributions to Lloyd and Penn, 2013) mean that even if "brain-claims" were wholly accurate it is highly unlikely that all children are receiving care of sufficient quality to benefit.

In the Irish case it is significant that "brain claims" were deployed in policy discourse at a time when members of the Irish population were being called upon to assume a disproportionate level of responsibility for addressing the Eurozone crisis (Coulter *et al.*, 2017). This has led to significantly reduced incomes for many and despite the promise of "better with less" to crises in provision of many social services in particular housing and health (Robbins and Lapsley, 2014). In the longer-term Ireland's response to the crisis has created a burden which will be carried by today's youngest citizens throughout their lifetime. In this context "investment" in early years provision appears less as a mechanism for equalising life chances and opportunities than as an instrument to support responsibilization of children and parents.

Notes

1. The other major recent Irish innovation in universality is in children's healthcare discussed by Ryan (2017).
2. While there has not been research in Ireland on the care preferences of children in the early years, a recent consultation commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017) in relation to the after-school care preferences of primary-school children found that the overwhelming majority preferring to be cared for in their home or in that of a friend or relative.

References

Alasuutari, P. and Qadir, A. (2014), "Epistemic governance: an approach to the politics of policy-making", *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 67-84.

Bevir, M. (2011), "Governance and governmentality after neoliberalism", *Policy & Politics*, Vol. 39 No. 4, pp. 457-471.

Brown, W. (2016), "Sacrificial citizenship: neoliberalism, human capital, and austerity politics", *Constellations*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 3-14.

Byrne, M. (2016), "'Asset price urbanism' and financialization after the crisis: Ireland's National Asset Management Agency", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 31-45.

Collins, M.L. and Murphy, M.P. (2016), "Activation: solving unemployment or supporting a low-pay economy?", in Murphy, M.P. and Dukelow, F.L. (Eds), *The Irish Welfare State in the Twenty-First Century*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, Basingstoke, pp. 67-92.

Commission of the European Union (2013), "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage", Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 (2013/112/EU), available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112&from=EN (accessed 25 July 2017).

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017), "Survey on income and living conditions (SILC) 2016", available at: www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2016/ (accessed 4 November 2018).

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2018a), "Monthly unemployment June 2018", available at: www.cso.ie/en/statistics/labourmarket/monthlyunemployment/ (accessed 4 July 2018).

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2018b), "Earnings and labour costs quarterly Q1 2018 (Final) Q2 2018 (preliminary estimates)", available at: www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/elcq/earningsandlabourcostsq12018finalq22018preliminaryestimates/ (accessed 31 August 2018).

Coulter, C. (2015), "Ireland under austerity", in Coulter, C. and Nagle, A. (Eds), *Ireland under Austerity: Neoliberal Crisis, Neoliberal Solutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 1-45.

Coulter, C., Arqueros-Fernández, F. and Nagle, A. (2017), "Austerity's model pupil: the ideological uses of Ireland during the Eurozone crisis", *Critical Sociology*, doi: 0896920517718038.

Dean, M. (1999), *Governmentality*, Sage, London.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017), "Report of consultations with children on after-school care", Government Publications, Dublin, available at: www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/publications/20170404REPORTOFCONSULTATIONSWITHCHILDRENONAFTERSCHOOLCARE.pdf (accessed 25 July 2017).

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2014), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*, Government Publications, Dublin.

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990), *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Eurostat (2017), "GDP per capita, consumption per capita and price level indices", available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/GDP_per_capita,_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices (accessed 26 September 2018).

Fitzpatrick and associates (2007), *Value for Money Review of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme*, Office of the Minister for Children, Dublin.

Foucault, M. (2007), *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Foucault, M. (2008), *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Fraser, N. (2014), "Can society be commodities all the way down? Post-Polanyian reflections on capitalist crisis", *Economy and Society*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 541-558.

Government of Ireland (1999), "National Childcare Strategy: report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on childcare", The Stationery Office, Dublin.

Government of Ireland (2000), *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children–Their Lives*, The Stationery Office, Dublin.

Hendrick, H. (2003), *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate*, Policy Press, Bristol.

Jenson, J. (2017), "Developing and spreading a social investment perspective: the World Bank and OECD compared", in Hemerijck, A. (Ed.), *The Uses of Social Investment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 207-215.

Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs (2017), "Report on the working conditions of the early years education and care sector 2017", Houses of the Oireachtas, Dublin.

Klinkhammer, N. and Schäfer, B. (2017), "Monitoring as a guarantee of quality? Evaluation of national reports and interesting aspects for Germany", in Klinkhammer, N., Harring, D. and Gwinner, A. (Eds), *Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, International Center Early Childhood, Munich, pp. 201-229.

Kvist, J. (2015), "A framework for social investment strategies: integrating generational, life course and gender perspectives in the EU social investment strategy", *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 131-149.

Larner, W. and Butler, M. (2005), "Governmentalities of local partnerships: the rise of a 'partnering state' in New Zealand", *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 75 No. 1, pp. 79-101.

Lemke, T. (2011), *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, New York University Press, New York, NY.

Lenihan, B. (2009), "Financial statement of the Minister for Finance, Mr Brian Lenihan, T.D", *Dail Eireann*, Vol. 679 No. 4.

Lister, R. (2003), "Investing in the citizen-workers of the future: transformations in citizenship and the state under New Labour", *Social Policy & Administration*, Vol. 37 No. 5, pp. 427-443.

Lloyd, E. and Penn, H. (Eds) (2013), *Childcare Markets. Can they Deliver an Equitable Service*, Polity Press, Bristol.

Lodge, A. and Lynch, K. (2004), *Equality and Power in Schools: Redistribution, Recognition and Representation*, Routledge, Abingdon.

MacCarthaigh, M. (2017), *Public Sector Reform in Ireland: Countering Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

MacCarthaigh, M. and Boyle, R. (2011), "Joined-Up government in Ireland: from Un-strategic choices to patriotic imperatives", *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 213-220.

Macvarish, J., Lee, E. and Lowe, P. (2014), “The ‘first three years’ movement and the infant brain: a review of critiques”, *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 8 No. 6, pp. 792-804.

Madra, Y.M. and Adaman, F. (2014), “Neoliberal reason and its forms: de-politicisation through economisation”, *Antipode*, Vol. 46 No. 3, pp. 691-716.

Millei, Z. and Joronen, M. (2016), “The (bio) politicization of neuroscience in Australian early years policies: fostering brain-resources as human capital”, *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 389-404.

Miller, P. and Rose, N. (2008), *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life*, Polity Press, Bristol.

Moss, P. (2013), “Need markets be the only show in town”, in Lloyd, E. and Penn, H. (Eds), *Childcare Markets, Can they Deliver an Equitable Service*, Policy Press, Bristol, pp. 191-203.

Moss, P. (2017), “Power and resistance in early childhood education: from dominant discourse to democratic experimentalism”, *Journal of Pedagogy*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 11-32.

Moss, P., Dahlberg, G. and Pence, A. (2013), *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation*, Routledge, Abingdon.

Mulkeen, M. (2016), “Going to market! An exploration of markets in social care”, *Administration*, Vol. 64 No. 2, pp. 33-60.

Nadesan, M. (2010), *Governing Childhood into the 21st Century: Biopolitical Technologies of Childhood Management and Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Nugent, C. (2018), “Wage sufficiency in the context of the Irish housing emergency: rents and access to homeownership”, NERI WP 2018/No 51, NERI, Dublin.

OECD (2015), *OECD Economic Surveys Ireland September*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2018), “Income inequality (indicator)”.

O’Toole, C. and Byrne, D. (2015), “A whole new spectrum of queries, concerns and anxieties: exploring families’ childcare decision making within the Irish context”, *Children’s Research Digest*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 10-15.

Penn, H. (2017), “Anything to divert attention from poverty”, in Vandenbroeck, M. (Ed.), *Constructions of Neuroscience in Early Childhood Education*, Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, pp. 54-67.

POBAL (2017), *Early Years Sector Profile 2015-2016*, POBAL, Dublin, available at: www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/Latest%20Early%20Years%20Sector%20Profile%20Published.pdf (accessed 25 July 2017).

Powell, F. (1993), *The Politics of Irish Social Policy*, Edwin Mellen Press, New York, NY.

Robbins, G. and Lapsley, I. (2014), “The success story of the Eurozone crisis? Ireland’s austerity measures”, *Public Money & Management*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 91-98.

Rose, N. (1999a), *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Rose, N. (1999b), *Governing the Soul*, 2nd ed., Routledge, Abingdon.

Rose, N. and Abi-Rached, J. (2014), “Governing through the brain: neuropolitics, neuroscience and subjectivity”, *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 3-23.

Ryan, K. (2011), “Governing the future: citizenship as technology, empowerment as technique”, *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 37 No. 6, pp. 763-778.

Ryan, K. (2017), “Governing the future: children’s health and biosocial power”, in Edwards, C. and Fernandez, E. (Eds), *Reframing Health and Health Policy in Ireland: A Governmental Analysis*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 25-45.

Sanderson, I. (2003), “Is it ‘what works’ that matters? Evaluation and evidence-based policy-making”, *Research Articles in Education*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 331-345.

Shaw, A. and Canavan, J. (2016), *Commissioning in Ireland: Exploring the Landscape for Child and Family Services; A Literature Review*, UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway, Galway.

Smith, K. (2012), "Producing governable subjects: images of childhood old and new", *Childhood*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 24-37.

Smith, K. (2014), *The Government of Childhood: Discourse, Power and Subjectivity*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

Smith, K. (2016), "Constructing the child in need of state protection: continuity and change in Irish political discourse, 1922–1991", *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 309-323.

Sonu, D. and Benson, J. (2016), "The quasi-human child: how normative conceptions of childhood enabled neoliberal school reform in the United States", *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 46 No. 3, pp. 230-247.

Start Strong (2014), *Childcare' Business or Profession?*, Start Strong, Dublin, available at: www.startstrong.ie/files/Childcare_Business_or_Profession_Full_Report_Web_Version.pdf (accessed 25 July 2017).

TUSLA (2017), "Annual report 2016 of Tusla – child and family agency's early years inspectorate", TUSLA, Dublin.

UNICEF (2017), *Building the Future Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries: Innocent Report Card No. 14*, UNICEF, Florence.

Urban, M., Robson, S. and Scacchi, V. (2014), *Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care*, University of Roehampton Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC), London.

Vandenbroeck, M. (2017), "Introduction: constructions of truth in early childhood education: a history of the present abuse of neurosciences", in Vandenbroeck, M. (Ed.), *Constructions of Neuroscience in Early Childhood Education*, Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, pp. 1-19.

Vandenbroeck, M., Roose, R. and De Bie, M. (2011), "Governing families in the social investment state", *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 69-85.

Wastell, D. and White, S. (2012), "Blinded by neuroscience: social policy, the family and the infant brain", *Families, Relationships and Societies*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 397-414.

Watson, D., Maitre, B., Grotti, R. and Whelan, C.T. (2018), *Poverty Dynamics of Social Risk Groups in the EU: An Analysis of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, 2005 to 2014*, ESRI, Dublin.

About the author

Dr Karen Smith is Lecturer in Equality Studies at University College Dublin. Her research and teaching interests centre on childhood and inequality and she has a particular concern with state regulation of children and families. Her book *The Government of Childhood: Discourse, Power and Subjectivity* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014. Dr Karen Smith can be contacted at: karen.m.smith@ucd.ie