Social inclusion and the early years

Some concepts, critiques and suggestions

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Structure of the talk

- The concept of social inclusion
- Ideas of social justice
- Social inclusion and children
- Critical perspectives
- Conclusions and questions
The concept of social inclusion

- Origins in Europe and the U.K.
  - A new way of looking at the old problems of poverty and disadvantage

- A broader conceptualization of disadvantage and inequality than ‘just’ poverty and low income
  - U.K.:
    - 'A short hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown’ (SEU, 1997)

- ‘Joined up solutions to joined up problems’
  - An integrated approach
The concept of social inclusion

Australia:

- **Increasing economic and social participation**
  - ‘Secure a job; access services; connect with others through family, friends, work, personal interests and local community; deal with personal crisis; have their voices heard’ (Gillard, 2008)

- **Addressing inequality**
  - To ‘narrow the gap in opportunities and wealth that’s opened up between individuals and community’ (Gillard, 2007).

- **An ‘economic imperative’** (Gillard, 2007) with a strong emphasis on workforce participation
  - ‘Labor believes that work, along with family and community, gives meaning to life. Workforce participation is the foundation of social inclusion; it creates opportunities for financial independence and personal fulfillment.’ (Gillard & Wong, 2007).
The concept of social inclusion

Social investment and human capital:
- Social inclusion agenda ‘underpinned by investment in human capital’ (Gillard & Wong, 2007)
- An alternative to traditional welfare - a redefinition of the role of the state:
  - The ‘social investment state’: ‘Investment in human capital wherever possible rather than direct provision of economic maintenance’ (Giddens, 1998)
  - Equality of opportunity (rather than access to resources)
- Achieved through education, with the aim of promoting labor market participation and individual employment opportunity
  - ‘Perhaps the most significant aspect of this platform for Labor’s social inclusion agenda is the commitment to universal preschool for all four year old children’ (Gillard & Wong, 2007)
Social inclusion and social justice

- **Redistribution: (‘economic justice’)**
  - Re-distributing wealth and access to resources
  - Addresses exploitation, economic marginalisation, deprivation, poverty.

- **Recognition: (‘cultural justice’)**
  - Representation, interpretation, communication
  - Addresses misrecognition – being excluded from full participation in society due to patterns of cultural value that constitute certain people as comparatively unworthy of respect and esteem
  - Addresses disrespect – being maligned or disparaged in stereotype and public cultural representation and/or everyday life interactions

They are ‘mutually constituted and inextricably connected’: both create social exclusion and both are relevant to achieving social inclusion.

(Fraser, 1987)
Children and social inclusion

- Children are more vulnerable to poverty than society as a whole. (Child Poverty Action Group, 2001)
  - ‘For all the indicators in this domain [material well-being], Australia’s results are worse than the best international result. Indigenous Australians have a higher rate of reported deprivation than the rate for the total population. Out of the OECD countries where data are available, only Mexico and Turkey have worse levels of reported deprivation than Indigenous Australians...Deprivation is getting worse, especially for Indigenous Australians’. (ARACY, 2008)

- Poverty’s effects on children’s lives are fundamental and far-reaching.
  - ‘For all of these indicators, the health and safety of Australian children compares unfavourably with the best international result...Indigenous Australian babies have the lowest birth weight in the OECD.’ (ARACY, 2008)
Children and social inclusion

- Social exclusion is identified as a result of child poverty, and as transmitted intergenerationally
  - ‘More than 37,000 babies at risk of serious disadvantage were born in just those 21 electorates last year alone. Without action, too many of the next generation of Australians are being born into the communities least able to help them escape a life of disadvantage.’ (Gillard & Wong, 2007)

- Achieving the social inclusion from the early years becomes important because of its long-term, future consequences for society as a whole
  - ‘So when it comes to children, the focus is slightly different to adults. We need to think in terms of the future child as well as the child today’ (Buchanan, 2006)
  - Children as ‘human becomings’ as well as ‘human beings’ (Ridge, 2002)
Children and social investment

- Children are key to social investment/human capital agenda.
  - ‘Children, and in particular young children, represent the main human capital to which Giddens refers’ (Lister, 2006)
- Investment in children’s well-being and education represents the epitome of prudent long-term investment.
  - ‘Tackling child poverty is the best anti-drugs, anti-crime, anti-deprivation policy for our country’ (Brown, 2000)
  - ‘Support for today’s children will...help to ensure a more flexible economy tomorrow’ (Brown, 2003)
Children and social investment

- Social investment in children becomes about several other major agendas
  - The productivity agenda: Child-care and ‘early learning centres’ free-up parents – mostly mothers – to (re-)enter the paid workforce – to raise productivity
  - Children offer the means for ‘reforming’ parents, for instance by reinforcing their responsibility to enter the labour market to support them, and for ‘modelling’ certain forms of child-rearing skills for certain types of parents
Social inclusion and children

- **National Early Childhood Reform Agenda (COAG, 2008):**
  - Within COAG, the Productivity Agenda Working Group oversees the Early Childhood Development Sub-group
  - Includes universal access to preschool for four-year-olds
  - Roll-out of 260 early learning and child-care centres in areas of unmet child-care demand (child-care component viable without additional govt financial support, although there are increases in the Child Care Tax Rebate).

- **Social inclusion measures for ‘early childhood and parenting’ in Australia** (Gillard & Wong, 2007)
  - Help parents in disadvantaged communities prepare their children for school (HIPPY)
  - Early detection of health problems ‘critical to maximise children’s ability to learn and develop at school’ (Healthy Kids Check)
Social inclusion and children - concerns

1. An individualistic rather than structural focus
   - ‘Intergenerational’ explanations for exclusion are framed at the level of the individual, family, and community of families
     - Policy interventions are subsequently framed at the individual, family, and ‘pockets’ (community of families) level
   - Social exclusion becomes about the inadequacy of certain parents (mothers) (in certain communities), rather than about the inadequate conditions mothering takes place within.
     - ‘The focus on promoting particular kinds of maternal behaviours risks neglecting material factors and slipping into a view of social exclusion as the consequence of maternal inadequacy’ (Clarke, 2006)
Social inclusion and children - concerns

- Social exclusion becomes a cultural phenomena
  - To be addressed through changing norms of parenting in poor families: reading books, structured play, breast feeding, cleaner homes, attendance at child-care, maternal employment.
  - Paid employment becomes a duty for all parents - an obligation to provide for themselves and their children, but also for the benefits that the experience of pre-school care and education will bring for their children
  - Children are then provided with the ‘right’ environment...
Social inclusion and children - concerns

2. ‘Redistribution’ but not also ‘recognition’

‘A social justice agenda for children...transcends the public-private, involving both recognition and redistribution...The Government’s emphasis on children as investments needs to be balanced by a more explicit appeal to principles of social justice and to the human rights of children qua children. This includes respect for children and their voices’ (Lister, 2006).

- A social investment approach – eg access to education - may mean losing site of inherent benefits and intrinsic worth of children


- Child-care and education more about employment and productivity agenda priorities – rather than the well-being of children themselves
Social inclusion and children - concerns

- Childhood is ‘eclipsed’
  - ‘Infancy becomes a period of preparation for entry into education...the child needs to be stretched and groomed for this, both at home and in publicly provided institutions’

- Parenting becomes an activity whose purpose is to deliver children with desired characteristics
  - ‘Good parenting then comes to be regarded as a question of technique instead of being fundamentally about quality of relationships’

- This involves the promotion of certain normative models of childhood and parenthood
  - What are these, explicitly? Do we agree with them? Do we have any say in them, and how they are shaped?
3. A gendered perspective

- ‘Parent’ rather than ‘mother’ and ‘father’
  - Obscures overwhelmingly gendered nature of most child care-giving – and the implications of this
  - Still mostly women who combine paid work with caring responsibilities, and for many women (particularly on low incomes with children), their vulnerability to poverty is heightened.

- Child poverty dis-connected from the economic costs of parental labour

- Pay of mothers and future-mothers have become child-poverty issues in the UK

- Absence of mother’s and father’s voices in many debates eg re child-care quality and provision
Conclusions

- Social inclusion, social investment and the early years brings a welcome focus to the well-being of children.
- We are working with outdated models of combining work and family and community life, and outdated value systems.
- We’re beyond arguments of whether which is more important - the social or economic – but we have become adept at making certain sorts of ‘the social’ very economic.
- Children are future workers, and we provide economic analyses of a myriad of social issues to prove their worth.
- Investing in human capital is smart economics, but is it the whole story? Have we done enough to socialise the economic? Perhaps we need a different, updated sort of socialization of the economic.
- We need to consider a fundamental recognition and revaluing of those worlds outside the paid workforce, where people care for others, often the most vulnerable. We need to revalue children.
Conclusions

- A politics of recognition - as well as redistribution - for the early years
  - Greater recognition needed of children’s well-being, happiness and flourishing as important in itself, and of their inherent worth to society as a whole