
Interview with Frank Field, MP

Part 3: on interventions that work

And what do you think about the response to the report that you wrote, 2010?

Well, it's been good with the civil servants pushing it, but I don't think the Prime Minister's read it, or answer for it. So, given that it marshalled I thought a rather good case for showing that circumstances and intervention could trump class. We've gone ahead in Birkenhead; we've set up a trust, raised a million quid. We've got Cambridge University doing the indicators that we wanted, the measurements, school readiness where children will be at two-and-a-half and three. And we again partly we're trying to do an intervention project of some scale. I'm thinking about certain indicators for birth ready, which parents can find the easiest, and which parents might find it most difficult.

So the hope is that we have a model, which when we next get a radical government, the monies will be scarce still, they will know for any given amount of money in these foundation years, these are the things that we can do best to ensure those terrible class differences and mobility levels of children coming to school is, if not eliminated, much reduced. And already the Cambridge, set of indicators are ready for school, they've found of course these wide class differences, but if you are in poorer households, if your parents read to you, you were up there with the best kids. But also much more encouragingly if the children reported they had fun at home, they were simply up there with the bright kids, bright kids from richer homes. And intervention, the differences in the areas to say to parents come on, get home and have fun with your kids is a crucial factor for their life chances is better than saying, come on, reading to them is a crucial thing when parents themselves may have had a really tough year at school and don't read themselves. So we're doing it, while waiting for politicians to make up their mind.

But do you think it's hard for people to have fun with their children and provide lots of entertainment and stuff when they've got a lot of money worries?

I think that of course it's more difficult. But what the Birkenhead study already shows is that some poor parents manage it. And my guess is that more would try it if they knew that was really important. One of the things, one of the other part, or a part of the intervention was in the one of the Birkenhead schools, and I tried it elsewhere afterwards, and I said given the collapse of behaviour, we're going to move back to a contract-based society, where you will know what's expected of you and you'll know what you can draw on. Tell me which six things do you most want from your school? And don't cheat, because every answer is the right one. And all of them came up with three, and I had six, but they all had a common three, and one was how to be a good parent. None of them said better, compared with some of toe-rags they've got. They said they wanted to know was it possible to make, to learn to make life-long friendships.

So again a huge denial of the adult world they were in. And they hoped to get jobs but they knew from their own brothers and sisters, getting a job and keeping a job were two different things. How could they teach that? So what we've done is that somebody at the, Erika Greenslade at the Manchester Academy, we've been to 15 schools, we've worked out what is already the national curriculum, which teaches these sets of skills. Where there were gaps, like on brain development science, which we're preparing that material and as we do all of this, and then there might be changes the national curriculum. So, but I mean that's going to happen, and I hope we're going to run that in schools and elsewhere.

So more young people will be leaving school who themselves have got poor parents will know the difference they can make. People are fascinated by our growing child's brain by looking and focussing and laughing and mimicking and talking, people actually make, and of course I agree with you it's hard if you've got all the other things coming down at once. But lots of poor parents show it's not impossible.

Okay, great.

Sorry, there's also a reason for not trying to combat poverty. But it's also a reason for not saying we can't do anything until we've solved poverty.

Yeah, okay. Is there anything else you wanted to say about the Peter Townsend study or?

No.

Or poverty in general, anything that I haven't...?

What I can, what's interesting is that Barbara Wootton in her Social Science and Social Pathology dug up all that information from official sources what we know and National Assistance Board reports and so on. And Peter's came out really so long after when they did the survey that it was easy for people to dismiss it.

So you don't think it had quite the impact that it could have had?

No, I don't. I mean the thing about Peter really was, like John Vaizey said we always want to do what we're second best at, and Peter wanted to be an academic. And Peter's great role in life could have been a George Orwell in the age of social sciences. He writes like a dream. I mean I don't know anybody who writes more beautifully than Peter did. And also, compared with Barbara Wootton who showed me once a manuscript when she, there were four drafts on one piece of paper, Peter almost never changed anything. I mean he wrote it in beautiful handwriting to be typed, and I don't think many things ever had to be changed from that draft. And his impact I think would have been so much greater if he'd been a journalist, than if he'd been an academic. And I think, you know, that, he wrote like Orwell, did that brilliant bit, he wrote in ways that, he used phrases to open up the imagination summed up what is actually happening. I think it's a pity that he got bored down with producing all these tables which when they were produced were produced so late. But that big book he did, taken from a refuge, Old People in Institutional Life, wonderful, wonderful descriptions. No, brilliant. But I think he was always trying to do what he was second best at, which was to be an academic like Tony Atkinson, Brian Abel Smith and so on.

Okay. Anything else?

I haven't, no, not at all.

Okay, well thank you very much.