

Article

The exceptions to child exceptionalism: Racialised migrant ‘deservingness’ and the UK’s free school meal debates

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Abstract

Free School Meals (FSM) have been the site of renewed contestation and extensive campaigning in the last half-decade. Until recently, children in families with ‘no recourse to public funds’ because of their immigration status were excluded from accessing FSMs, despite being some of the most destitute in Britain. Through an analysis of campaign materials and interviews with advocates, we consider this dynamic policy terrain in light of the UK’s ‘hostile environment’ and consider lessons for campaigners. By exploring imaginaries of childhood, poverty, and nation shaping FSM policies, we offer a warning that campaigns can end up justifying exclusions at the same time as aiming for more expansive support. How campaigns represent their causes has implications, which, in this case, is often through the exceptionalism and hyper-deservingness of childhood. We argue these representations reduce discussion to technical questions about who is ‘deserving’, thereby risking shoring up an exclusionary and hostile state.

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Critical Social Policy 2024, Vol. 44(2) 201–221

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DOI: [10.1177/02610183231223948](https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183231223948) journals.sagepub.com/home/csp

Keywords

destitution, free school meal campaigns, migrant families, no recourse to public funds (NRPF), welfare bordering

Introduction: Free school meals, a shifting policy terrain

Free School Meals (FSM) in British schools, a key plank in the state's 'poverty alleviation' strategy, have been the site of renewed contestation and extensive campaign efforts in the last half-decade. This has resulted in rapidly changing policy, including a widely welcomed expansion of the FSM programme. In this paper, we consider this dynamic policy terrain in light of the UK's 'hostile immigration environment' and, more specifically, consider the lessons for policy campaigns in a climate that seeks to 'dissuade illegal residence in the UK by preventing people from accessing basic services', including FSM (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021: 522, see also the introduction to this Special Issue for a more in-depth discussion of the hostile environment).

FSM provision varies across the devolved nations, and here we focus primarily on policy and campaigns in England. In this context, FSMs are provided by the Department for Education (DfE) for all children until they reach Year Three (age 7–8), at which point children can receive means-tested meals if they meet certain criteria (e.g., if their parents are in receipt of specific welfare benefits). FSM have been provided by the (local) state in England since 1879. Until very recently, however, FSM policy explicitly prevented children in migrant families with 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) from accessing this support, despite being some of the most destitute in Britain. Around 1.376 million people with time-limited 'leave to remain' are subject to NRPF in the UK (Fernandez-Reino, 2020), while approximately 674,000 undocumented people have NRPF by default (Jolly et al., 2020). The condition prohibits access to most welfare benefits, social housing, and other forms of support tied to the welfare system, such as extended childcare services and, until recently, FSM. NRPF has detrimental impacts on those who are already socio-economically marginalised (O'Neill et al., 2019), particularly mothers from former British colonies and their children who are undocumented or on the '10-year family migration route' to settlement. Often destitute, families find themselves forced to choose between incurring debt or their children going hungry (Dickson et al., 2023).

NRPF has a long history, dating back to 1971, but its application and negative impacts have become more extensive in the past decade.

Therefore, although not technically or explicitly part of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's 2012 'hostile environment' strategy, we suggest that NRPF cannot be clearly separated out from this context. The outsourcing of immigration enforcement and proliferation of internal borders central to the hostile environment agenda have fundamentally shaped the terrain we are concerned with in this article, instituting a climate of hostility and fear, entrenching barriers to welfare support, and normalising practices of 'everyday bordering' (Yuval-Davis et al., 2017).

Restrictive eligibility for FSM has long been a concern for migrants'-rights groups and racially marginalised families navigating the UK's migration regime. Recent litigation and campaigns have resulted in an announcement of new policy. A permanent expansion of FSM to children in families with NRPF along the same lines as national children was announced in April 2022, following a temporary measure introduced in April 2020 that saw some children in such families become eligible for FSM during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been widely celebrated as a 'major win' by organisations campaigning for migrants' rights (Praxis, 2022b), but campaigns continue due to ongoing access issues.

While we applaud the extension of FSM, and see the importance of marking advocacy successes, in this paper we critically reflect on the new policy and the framing of the campaigns and litigation that helped to bring it about. We do so not just as researchers but as 'insiders', both having been involved in pro-migrant organisations that provided advocacy or campaigned on this issue. Here we pose a question about what constitutes a policy 'win' and consider what this tells us about the workings of the UK's hostile migration environment and the possibilities for political struggles against the welfare exclusions it creates. Building on existing scholarship that has examined how campaigns seemingly working in support of marginalised people can reproduce the very logics that cause this marginalisation to persist (Byrne, 2015; Dadusc and Mudu, 2020), our article offers new insights through a focus on the oft-neglected figure of 'The Child'. We explore the imaginaries of childhood, poverty, and nation which inhabit FSM policies and campaigns for their extension. How campaigns represent their causes – which, in the case of FSM, is often through claims about the exceptionalism and hyper-deservingness of (particular) childhoods – has implications. We argue that without reflecting on and challenging these imaginaries, campaigns for FSM can end up justifying exclusions at the same time as they aim for more expansive support. To conclude, we offer a warning that narrowing political imaginaries to technical questions about who is 'deserving' risks shoring up borders around welfare provision in a hostile environment.

Welfare policy enactment in the hostile environment

Central to the arguments in this paper is an understanding of policy as a process rather than a transparent text created and implemented to address pre-existing problems. Instead, policy formulates its object (a problem) through intense contestation and is then interpreted, translated, and 'enacted' (Braun et al., 2010; Ball, 1993) by multiple policy actors. Problem formulation involves determining what is (or is not) to be considered a social issue and how to describe and respond to this. Policy frames, Schön (1993) argues, work as a 'generative metaphor' creating particular 'solutions' through the stories they tell. For example, formulations of urban 'blight' prompt policy solutions rooted in frameworks of 'disease' and 'cure'. It is therefore critical to ascertain what interests and assumptions are 'encoded' in policy problems and how these are then decoded by policy actors, in ways which are shaped by their experiences, skills, resources, and the ideological context (Ball, 1993).

One of the key policy 'problems' for (neo)liberal states is what van Oorschot (2000: 34) calls the fundamental welfare question: 'Who should get what, and why?' Given such a framing, it is unsurprising, in thinking with Schön (1993), that policy responses involve calculations of 'deservingness'. Indeed, the embedding of evaluations of deservingness in welfare policy dates back at least to the British Poor Law of 1834, but it has become particularly acute as Britain has increasingly shifted away from ostensibly universal commitments to targeted or conditional social programmes (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2015) in the context of neoliberal projects of austerity and marketisation. Drawing on large-scale surveys in European contexts, van Oorschot (2000) highlights five key criteria on which welfare deservingness is seen to rest: level of culpability for one's impoverishment; degree of need; attitude, where the more compliant and grateful are viewed as more deserving; reciprocity, where earning support (e.g., through work or taxation) is seen to increase deservingness; and ideas about belonging, or whether someone is 'one of us'.

For our purposes, two points are particularly crucial here: the constitution of 'us', as well as the ways in which responsibility intertwines with ideas about generation, understood here as adult-child social relations akin to gender (Alanen, 2011). The 'us' is a moral production, according to Anderson (2013: 2), as 'modern states portray themselves not as arbitrary collections of people hung together by a common legal status but as a community of value, composed of people who share common ideals and (exemplary) patterns of behaviour'. Crucially, this imagined community of value, which is closely linked with the nation, exists by setting out the terms of its exclusions (Valluvan, 2017). Who does not belong is as important as who does in making the nation. Its constitutive outside, Anderson continues, includes

both those considered to be 'Failed Citizens', exemplified by people on benefits, and 'Non-Citizens', those understood as foreigners and (im)migrants.

Destitute (im)migrants may strive towards 'Tolerated Citizenship', a fragile state of deservingness, but they are largely rendered, or easily slip into being viewed as, 'un-deserving' via the terms of the modern nation state. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the rising clamour of voices suggesting that a key welfare policy problem is scarcity of resources which, the argument runs, should be protected for 'our own' (Rosen et al., 2021; Anderson, 2013). Although Britain's welfare provision has been funded by international systems of extraction and taxation from times of empire to the present, its distributive function is framed as a national project dedicated to those deemed deserving Good Citizens (Bhambra, 2022). Such 'nativist' ideas of an 'us', which posit a 'native people' in opposition to 'foreigners' or even 'non-integrated co-citizens', are telling (Newth, 2021). As Shilliam (2018, 6) elaborates through an historical evacuation of Britain's colonial and welfare policy from 'abolition to Brexit', deservingness has been racialised from the outset and concatenated with Whiteness. It is notable then that the figure of the migrant is racialised as Other, alien, and abject in the context of modern nation states (Silverstein, 2005, and see the introduction to this Special Issue). This is based on migrants' purportedly immutable cultural differences from citizens and presumed natural mobility, rendered suspect in the context of assumptions that the Good Citizen prioritises loyalties to a singular nation. For this reason, we speak of racialised migrant deservingness in this article.

Racialised and nationalist conceptions of welfare deservingness have produced both 'gatekeeping at the border' and increasingly 'gatekeeping access to services' (Van Der Leun, 2006), exemplified by the UK's hostile environment strategy. For instance, the NRPF rule was initially used to control entry at the border, through demands to prove financial self-sufficiency, and later became a key form of internal bordering restricting migrants' access to welfare support (Dickson and Rosen, 2021). Guentner et al. (2016: 392) point out that such practices are 'world-configuring', in the sense that they provide both 'form' and 'rationale' for inclusions of 'good citizens' and exclusions of 'non-citizens'. They term this process 'welfare chauvinism': 'the ideological construction of a specified out-group as both threatening and morally inferior so that action to punish, exclude or incapacitate its members is necessary on both moral and existential grounds' (Guentner et al., 2016: 393). While concurring with their broad points, naming this process as chauvinism runs the risk of reducing it to individuals' 'bad feelings'. Although moral judgements are certainly central to imaginaries of the community of value, our preference is to understand this process as *welfare bordering*. This points towards systemic and institutional exclusions from social support at and

within the boundaries of the nation state, and their manifestations in everyday bordering practices.

These theorisations of welfare bordering and the Non-Citizen, however, largely assume an adult subject and implicitly or explicitly take for granted that (migrant) children are treated better than their adult counterparts (e.g., see van Oorschot, 2000). We draw on critical childhood studies to trouble these assumptions, especially the widespread acceptance of the assertion that children represent deserving subjects *par excellence*. In many ways, this assumption is unsurprising given contemporary imaginaries of childhood – those ideas, affective investments, and representations of the figure of The Child which generate historically and spatially specific formulations of the institution of childhood. In dominant present-day imaginaries, children are gifted with a fundamental vulnerability seen to result from essentialised characteristics. Briggs (2003), for example, traces the way images of the ‘imploring waif’ have come to serve as the ubiquitous representation of ‘need’. She argues that: ‘It is not an accident that our collective imaginary has become so narrow with respect to hunger and poverty’ (2003: 179) and indeed produced ideas about the ‘deserving[ness] of resources’ (2003: 181). This is, however, despite a plethora of evidence of children’s frustration with this ascribed status (Duffy-Syedi and Haleem Najibi, 2023) and indeed their complex protagonism. Further, The Child is radically de-responsibilised, in the sense of being largely sealed off from the world of wage labour and financial activity, albeit in imaginaries not fact (Glockner, 2023; Leon and Rosen, 2023), and therefore immune to expectations of reciprocity bound up with contemporary European assessments of deservingness. Instead, The Child, characterised by the status of ‘human becoming’ (Qvortrup, 2009) or citizen-in-the-making (Larkins, 2013), serves discursively as the passive, and therefore in-need, victim of ‘bad’ parenting.

We are not seeking to depict a homogenous or a-historic view of imaginaries of childhood here. As with any constructed social category, there is a large degree of flexibility, malleability (Castañeda, 2003), and slippage that occurs (Rosen and Crafter, 2018). As we go on to argue, not all those who are legally children are included in this category in its hegemonic contemporary form. Nor are imaginaries simply symbolic: for instance, generation serves as a filtering tactic in the UK’s hostile environment where specialised forms of care, protection, and residency are made possible in policy through a ‘child’ status. This point, however, is different than accepting claims of the (neo) liberal capitalist state that migrant children are necessarily the *beneficiaries* of special protections and care. What is done in the name of care can end up (unintentionally) causing harm (Ticktin, 2011). For instance, child migrants under the legal care of children’s services may feel compelled to hide exploitative income generating activities from social workers to avoid punitive responses or curtailing of their remittances to transnational families in the

name of their ‘protection’ (Leon and Rosen, 2023). Alternatively, decisions made in enacting policy can wind up excluding children who do not fit neatly into hegemonic imaginaries of childhood deservingness.

Certainly, there is ample evidence that ‘street level bureaucrats’ such as social workers and caseworkers exercise discretion in enacting policy surrounding the provision of services and support (Lipsky, 2010; Mills and Klein, 2021), including in relation to children in families with NRPF (Price and Spencer, 2015; Dickson and Rosen, 2021) and – as we go on to discuss – FSM. Street level bureaucrats are key policy actors who interpret and translate policy, making up part of Ball and colleagues’ (Braun et al., 2010; Ball, 1993) trifecta of policy enactment, along with those who make policies (e.g., state representatives) and the policy text itself. Here, however, we complicate this formulation, arguing for the importance of attending to non-state campaigners. They are not simply policy actors translating and interpreting policy. Instead, we view them as part of the policy *making* process, directly and indirectly influencing both problem formulation and proposed solutions (Langford et al., 2013). Understanding the ways in which advocates and activists frame their campaigns is thus crucial to understanding policy and its effects and is the focus of what follows.

Methodology

This article centres on an analysis of the largest and most prominent campaign for broadening access to FSM, the Child Food Poverty Taskforce campaign head-lined by footballer Marcus Rashford. We focus on the Taskforce’s public-facing campaign materials, interrogating the kinds of imagery, language, and evidence they mobilise, drawing on strategies of multi-modal critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013; Kress, 2010). We complement this with reflections on less high-profile campaigns for FSM, noting points of difference and commonality. This is not to assess the efficacy of different approaches, but as a way of highlighting what is absent or obscured in the other. Building on the conceptualisation of policy offered above, our analysis pays particular attention to the ways policy problems related to impoverishment and FSM are framed in campaign materials, and the policy solutions, recommendations, or demands these generative metaphors produce. This is in keeping with CDA, which emphasises the importance of considering why policy discourses emerge at particular times, and their historical (dis)continuities to past, present, and future imaginaries. CDA also asks how the subjects of policy are represented and encoded. Given the widespread acceptance of children as deserving subjects, we concentrate on the various ways that migrant children and their entitlement to welfare support through FSM are (un)represented in campaign materials. Finally, as our focus is on campaigns which

explicitly seek to influence policy, we consider how ‘success’ is framed and articulated (Langford et al., 2013), as well as the implications for other activist efforts in the UK’s hostile environment.

Although the main thrust of our analysis is on public-facing FSM campaign materials, we heed Ball’s points regarding the indivisibility of policy making and interpretation, and particularly how policy enactment is shaped by the discretionary power of street level bureaucrats as they evaluate deservingness. As such, we bring commentary from advocates and activists about on-the-ground enactments of changing FSM policy into conversation with our close reading of campaign materials. To do this, we draw on publicly available materials from campaigning organisations as well as interviews with participants from our larger study about negotiations between advocates, frontline workers, and families with NRPF over entitlement to children-in-need support under Section 17 of *The Children Act 1989* (part of the ‘Solidarities: Negotiating migrant deservingness’ research project). We conducted 24 interviews with advocates; ten interviews with eleven relevant Local Authority staff e.g., from children’s services teams; and, ethnographic field work with five families in London. While not specifically about FSM, the ethnographic material provides insights into why and how particular campaign discourses were mobilised, as well as FSM policy effects.

FSM and child exceptionalism

When the renowned British footballer Marcus Rashford stepped into the FSM debate in early 2020, sharing his personal story of receiving FSM and calling on the government to address increasing child food poverty – one fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic – the issue rose to public prominence. Over 1 million people signed his parliamentary petition (Rashford, 2020). His interventions with the Child Food Poverty Taskforce were widely credited with winning a government U-turn on the provision of FSM support during school holidays for eligible children in England and a promised rise in Healthy Start vouchers from £3.10 to £4.25 in 2020, as well as for helping to expose the paltry food parcels delivered to qualifying children during the second lockdown by Chartwells, a company contracted by the DfE (Rashford, 2021).

As a campaign that captured the public’s imagination and sparked public debate around access to FSM, Rashford’s advocacy efforts provide an instructive example for examining how imaginaries of childhood, poverty, and nation shape claims for social support. The main campaign image on Rashford’s End Child Poverty website is a helpful starting point. It features Marcus Rashford prominently, his gaze directing our sights into the distance, underlined by the strapline text: ‘No child should go hungry in this country’ – a refrain that has

also characterised campaigns for FSM for families with NRPF (Praxis, 2021). The main image is accompanied by the following text:

We must act with urgency to stabilise the households of our vulnerable children. No child in the UK should be going to bed hungry. Whatever your feeling, opinion, or judgement, food poverty is never the child's fault. Let's protect our young. Let's wrap arms around each other and stand together to say that this is unacceptable, that we are united in protecting our children. Together we can end this problem. We live in the fifth richest economy in the world. No child should go hungry in this country (End Child Food Poverty, 2021).

What stands out in the campaign framing is the exceptionalism of 'The Child' in ways which structure the problem, solution, and wider story being told. While calling attention to the riches of the UK, and therefore hinting at the wider inequalities which allow hunger to persist, children are specifically singled out as the group for protection, at least on a national basis. To see what is assumed here it is telling to consider other ways this might have been framed: 'no one in the UK should go hungry' or 'no child should go hungry'. The campaign call works, so to speak, and is legible, because it builds on and amplifies a conception of the (British) child as the quintessential deserving subject, with limited to no control over their circumstances (van Oorschot, 2000). We see this call to deservingness echoed in the website's statement: 'Food poverty is never the child's fault.' Here, it is implied that simply because of their youth, children are essentially non-responsible subjects, simply vulnerable recipients of adult actions. The use of 'child food poverty', with its focus on a blameless victim beyond the political sphere, does something else. It reifies poverty, removing it from larger political questions about the processes of dispossession, extraction, and exploitation which produce inequality and impoverishment.

But the trope of the child works in another way in this call to its exceptionalism. More than just capitalising on Rashford's celebrity status, where fans' 'affective attachment' to athletic stars can become a key influencer of public thought and action (Towler et al., 2019), the campaign makes a call to the *futures* impoverished children can have if we act now. Rashford represents a successful adult who, as he himself has stated publicly, is where he is because of programmes like FSM. In a widely publicised letter to MPs, Rashford wrote:

As a family, we relied on breakfast clubs, FSM, and the kind actions of neighbours and coaches.... without the kindness and generosity of the community I had around me, there wouldn't be the Marcus Rashford you see today: a 22-year-old black man lucky enough to make a career playing a game I love (Newsround, 2020).

Rashford's statement is eloquent and emotive, flagging up the importance of social support for impoverished families. But it also draws on a long history of representations of childhood as 'futuraity', where the child is constituted as fundamentally malleable, potentially redeemable, and the site for accruing human capital (Rosen and Suissa, 2020). Rather than deservingness being premised on evaluations of whether support has been earned, as it often is with adults in the sense of "What have you done, or can you do, for us?" (van Oorschot, 2000, 38), deservingness here rests in part on a sense of deferred reciprocity or what the future adult that the child represents has to offer.

Indeed, although the campaign speaks about children, in proclaiming that 'we must act with urgency', the 'we' addressed is adult. Language such as 'the child' or 'our young' holds children outside the 'we' rather than (also) addressing those children who may be experiencing food poverty. Thus, while exceptionalist approaches put children on a pedestal, they are rarely included as actors, subjects, and agents in the societies they live. Yet, children experience the blunt end of FSM exclusions and are the conduits for their enactment. In addition to the detrimental impacts of hunger, children in families with NRPF who were previously ineligible for FSM have reported being publicly shamed, given debtors letters by their schools and told to take them home to parents who were charged hundreds of pounds for school meals they could not afford (Dickson et al., 2023). Others have been threatened with missing important school activities, and some were subject to abuse and taunting from other children because of the public display of debt.

Far from being unknowing bystanders or recipients, many children are highly aware of the state policies and institutional practices which shape the conditions of their lives (Larkins et al., 2015; Taft, 2014), including the impact of exclusionary FSM policies. As Joel (Dickson et al., 2023), a young person involved in a campaign for FSM by the grassroots organisation NELMA (North East London Migrant Action), put it:

Each time I was having the school meals they were putting debt on my mum, keep adding debt what she needs to pay, and by the time you know it, they had her in thousands of pounds in debt – the last one I saw was one hundred and twenty pounds. Me and my mum we were really scared because we were so worried – 'how is my mum going to pay this money?' – we didn't have anything then, we were just living our lives.

Joel's comments highlight a further problem with the invocation of child exceptionalism: the splintering of children and their carers. When campaigns invoke essentialised views of child deservingness ('food poverty is never the child's fault'), they imply that poverty is someone else's fault. In the context of a heavily familialised welfare regime, where parents are increasingly held individually responsible for their child's

every success or failure (Rosen and Faircloth, 2020), the implication is that ‘child food poverty’ may at least be partly their fault. Whether this is underpinned by assumptions that adult carers should be working or working harder, the implicit message is that food poverty is somehow in their control in a manner that it is not for children. The statement ‘adult food poverty’ rings strangely for this reason; it certainly does not easily map on to discourses of deservingness. Yet, if children are living in food poverty, it is very likely that the adults they live with are too. Families in our research, for example, spoke of the way that mothers restrained from eating to ensure that their children had something. As Linda Gordon (2008) argues, child exceptionalism rarely generates much material help for children yet it justifies decreasing support for parents who are rendered ‘undeserving’. The point here is that policy and campaigning frames based on discourses of child exceptionalism often fail to deliver on their promises for children and may serve to (implicitly) reinforce discourses which blame parents, in this case in shared parent-child experiences of being destitute.

The impossible child of child exceptionalism

So far, we have focused on the encoding of ideas of child exceptionalism in FSM policy and campaigns, and therefore constructions of the deservingness of children in the face of impoverishment. Perhaps the greatest irony, even violence, of approaches which galvanise child exceptionalism, however, is the fact that some children are ‘unchilded’ in the process, to borrow Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s (2019) evocative term. We use this concept here to highlight those who are effectively denied inclusion as children in such campaigns, a point we elaborate below by showing how and why FSM campaigns – not dissimilarly to other campaigns for extending welfare provision – framed their demands around *particular* impoverished children, often to the exclusion of those living in families with NRPF. In so doing, our paper grapples with FSM policy flux which can quickly make understandings of the programme obsolete and hinder analysis, mirroring one of the challenges facing families, schools, and the third sector. To address this, we group our analysis into a rough periodisation focusing on three phases of FSM policy and campaigns.

Our overarching point in this section is that the FSM campaigns framed within a narrative of child exceptionalism in the UK’s hostile environment tended to obscure or erase children in families with NRPF. They were the ‘impossible child’ of child exceptionalism, seen to violate narratives premised on the ‘deserving child’ due to their construction as national and racial outsiders. This had significant outcomes in terms of the policy changes that were won and for campaigning for welfare provision more broadly.

Phase 1: Early pandemic

During 2020, Rashford and the Taskforce's campaign focused its calls for the expansion of FSM on all families in receipt of Universal Credit, a welfare benefit for which those with NRPF are ineligible regardless of levels of destitution. Despite the call that 'no child should go hungry', this effective exclusion of children in families with NRPF from campaign demands was not unusual, despite their being amongst the most destitute in the UK. Our interviews with advocates involved in campaigning for FSM are suggestive that these exclusions assumed that to do otherwise would endanger the campaign's winnability. For instance, Barbara, who worked in a large national children's charity which was also part of the coalition formed around Rashford's campaign, commented on the 'internal barriers' to 'prioritis[ing] immigration issues'. Noting specifically the concerns of fundraising and media teams in the organisation, she commented that NRPF:

'...was seen as quite a toxic issue that our supporters aren't very interested in... there was a fear that we would lose supporters... and we'd get some nasty kind of racist comments back from supporters.'

As a result of this tacit acceptance that children with NRPF were largely positioned outside the community of value in the UK's hostile environment, the organisation had a 'kind of policy' not to 'ask about including migrant children' in their FSM campaign. Other advocates we interviewed spoke about NRPF being too 'complicated' or 'technical' to explain to the public, suggesting it was relevant only to those it impacted directly, not the community of value more generally – despite Anderson's (2013, 9) point that 'immigration is not just about "them" but is fundamentally about "us"'. During this period, it was only a few small grassroots activists and local migrants' rights groups like NELMA, Project 17, and Hackney Migrant Centre which highlighted the denial of FSM to children in families with NRPF and called for an end to NRPF.

Consequently, when extensions of FSM to holiday periods were won in 2020, the exclusion of children in some families with NRPF (e.g., those who were undocumented and not in receipt of statutory support) was not addressed. Seeking to win policy concessions for 'our children' within the UK's hostile environment meant that many campaigns premised on child exceptionalism focused on *particular* children. Other young people were 'unchilded', erased from the category of child in a context shaped by racialised and nativistic ideas about child deservingness. Karen Dubinsky (2012: 10) suggests that when children are represented in political campaigns they 'can move emotional and psychic mountains'. What the campaigns for FSM

suggest, however, is that not just any child figure will do, leading us to call undocumented children in families with NRPF the ‘impossible child of child exceptionalism’.

Phase 2: Mid-pandemic

On January 14, 2021, Rashford’s campaign directly mentioned children in families with NRPF for the first time. In a letter to the Prime Minister, the Task Force called for a review of FSM policy recommending that, among other issues, eligibility thresholds for FSM be addressed:

The Government should seek to ensure disadvantaged children are not excluded from Free School Meal eligibility (in line with National Food Strategy recommendations) and to work with the Devolved Administrations to eliminate disparities between the nations. Current estimates show 2 in 5 UK children under the poverty line are missing out. The ongoing eligibility for children with No Recourse to Public Funds should be addressed explicitly (Rashford et al., 2021).

In many ways, this inclusion in a large nation-wide campaign can be read as a win for families with NRPF. But what, if anything, was being called for with respect to children in families with NRPF? The National Food Strategy (Part 1, July 2020) recommendations continued to focus on expanded eligibility of FSM for families in receipt of Universal Credit and did not provide any further detail about families with NRPF.

Similarly, in the legal challenges seeking to extend eligibility for FSM during the pandemic, decisions were made as to who would be the most compelling litigator because of their assumed deservingness. A solicitor we interviewed, for example, spoke of ‘stronger’ claimants being those with a British child or other ‘sympathetic facts’, such as experiencing domestic violence. Other legal challenges and campaigns around NRPF operated under similar assumptions – arguments for ‘British children’ affected by NRPF and those ‘legally’ residing predominated (Rodgers, 2020; Reed and Clare, 2020), making undocumented, non-British children the impossible subjects of such campaigns.

Not to be trivialised, these legal challenges and campaigns did result in a temporary extension of FSM including to children in *some* families with NRPF (such as those in receipt of support for refused asylum-seekers or Section 17 of the *Children Act 1989*) ‘in recognition of the difficulties [families] may be facing during these unique circumstances’ due to the pandemic (Home Office, 2020). However, the temporary extension continued to exclude many children affected by NRPF, such as those in undocumented families

who were not in receipt of any statutory support and who were therefore likely to be experiencing the most severe forms of destitution.

Interestingly, the temporary government concession on FSM saw a proliferation of advocacy on the issue, with a variety of high-profile children's NGOs that were previously more reticent to include children in families with NRPF in their campaigns joining in calls for a permanent extension. While previously undocumented families were framed as unsympathetic subjects for the public in the hostile environment climate, the temporary policy shift appeared to make the issue more palatable to some of these organisations. Patricia, a legal advisor in a local migrants' rights organisation, reflected:

'I think possibly that the Covid changes made it an easier step-down. So having already said yes okay we can extend it to children more generally because it's recognised as a good thing children should have free school meals. I think that helped, and I think also the very positive public response to people like Marcus Rashford to say you know yes free school meals, all this kind of stuff ... it felt that this was something that they could buy into which is generally popular and which wouldn't alienate...'

This is an example of policy campaigns working within existing policy frames about Good Citizens, which inform ideas about *which* children are deserving or might be represented in campaigns based on child exceptionalism. As such, while this period offered glimmers that children in families with NRPF might no longer be the 'impossible child of child exceptionalism', only the 'most deserving' in ethno-nationalist terms were represented while most undocumented children remained excluded. The logic of child exceptionalism and its unchilded other largely continued, with campaigns primarily *following* policy shifts to a sub-group of children with NRPF rather than raising larger questions about who belongs in a community of value.

Phase 3: Post-pandemic

In the post-pandemic era, most lawyers and high-profile NGOs continued to focus on making the pandemic-era FSM extension a long-term policy – rather than addressing its exclusions. However, to the surprise of several of our interviewees, in April 2022 the government announced a new policy permanently entitling *all* families with NRPF to FSM, even those who are undocumented and not in receipt of statutory support. At a policy level then, it would seem that these issues have largely receded and children in families with NRPF are no longer the 'impossible child of child exceptionalism'.

As we outlined above, however, policy is also made in its enactment, and our research suggests that problems with access remain in practice, with many

families being wrongly told they are ineligible. The shift in FSM policy has been poorly publicised by the government, with little effort to make schools and migrant families aware of the change (Praxis, 2022a). There is also no guidance on how to process applications for FSM from undocumented families, leaving frontline policy actors with limited information on how to enact a potentially crucial policy change. At the same time, as the DfE and the Home Office shared school records for the purposes of immigration enforcement between 2016–2018 and have yet to delete this data – a practice introduced as part of the ‘hostile environment’ agenda (Liberty, 2019) – many families are likely to be deterred from applying. Given the unchanged nature of the UK’s hostile deportability regime, it is highly unlikely that undocumented families who are unknown to the authorities will apply for FSM, even if they are eligible in principle, and its borders continue to shape the decision making of street level bureaucrats, including those in schools (Dickson et al., 2023). The climate of fear engendered by the British state over the last decade through its hostile immigration environment effectively renders this seemingly generous policy change quite meaningless, with children in families with NRPF remaining the impossible child of child exceptionalism.

Conclusion: The repercussions of child exceptionalism in a hostile environment

Our goal in writing this article has not been to condemn FSM or those who campaign for their expansion – quite the opposite. It is worth celebrating the significant gains in FSM policy in the past few years, as campaigns have made visible long-standing needs exacerbated by Covid-19. This resulted in increased access to FSM for a greater number of families. As researchers and supporters of campaigns for FSM, we are, however, troubled by the way that campaigns can end up reproducing long-standing exclusions in efforts to achieve incremental policy gains. Our effort here has therefore been to reflect on the way that campaigns represent their causes – in this case through the exceptionalism of childhood and unchilding – on the understanding that this has an impact beyond the simple question of ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ specific policy changes. And these more extended impacts, we suggest, concurring with Engler and Engler (2016), have no less long-term relevance than a policy shift – and perhaps more.

As we have demonstrated, in the UK’s hostile environment, FSM campaigns often represent their cause through recourse to problematic conceptions of deservingness to create ‘winnable’ campaigns or provide humanitarian relief for suffering. Here, The Child is held up as a blameless victim caught up in poverty and immigration restrictions that are not

really designed ‘for them’, but for their parents, at the same time as some children (e.g., those who are undocumented) are obscured altogether. Expanding the parameters of eligibility for FSM for children represents a *relatively* easy public win in a context where deservingness and non-responsibility are concatenated, or at least this is an assumption motivating decisions around campaign framing in Britain’s hostile environment. However, these representations derive their power both from disempowering, hegemonic imaginaries of childhood and long-standing colonial, nativist, and seditarist ideas about Non-Citizens as ‘undeserving’ drains on Britain’s welfare system. As a result, at the same time as we have witnessed an expansion of FSM, the child exceptionalist framing fundamentally leaves the logic and violence of NRPF and the hostile environment unchanged, rather than disrupting the pervasive notions of deservingness that underpin it. This helps to explain why school canteens continue to be sites of welfare bordering, as serious issues remain with the enactment of the policy extension of FSM to families with NRPF.

What’s more, focusing on FSM as a single ‘winnable’ issue, rather than a symptom of a larger hostile border regime, means it can be understood to be ‘resolved’ through a simple change in eligibility criteria and, subsequently, a policy technicality. Indeed, how the extension is implemented and publicised appears to be where political energy is currently concentrated. There is a risk that in so doing advocacy groups lose sight of the structural issues that position and legislate migrant families with NRPF as ‘undeserving’ of welfare support in the first place. We concur with Dadusc and Mudu (2020: 8) about the importance of attending to ‘structural border violence’, including but not limited to the hostile environment initiated in 2012, and ‘the histories and responsibilities of colonial and neo-colonial dominations’ which make NRPF seem acceptable and poverty a thing rather than a process whereby some people are impoverished and others profit. There is, then, a need for a shift, not just in FSM policy but also campaigning in the hostile environment. What sort of alternative futures can we imagine if we jettison a framework of deservingness and exceptionalism altogether?

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all those families and advocates who have participated in our research projects – this article would not have been possible without you. We appreciate the careful and generative feedback we received from anonymous reviewers at *Critical Social Policy*, as well as participants from the Children and Young People Hub (University of Edinburgh) and *Child Poverty and Education: Philosophical Reflections* where we presented

earlier versions of the paper. All omissions and errors remain our responsibility alone.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding

Financial support for the research informing this article was received from Nordforsk (94891) and the British Academy (SRG19\190192).

NordForsk, British Academy, (grant number 94891, SRG19\190192).

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