

Poor, consumer, citizen? What image of the parent in England?

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New Labour, new priority

In my country, England, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have moved centre-stage over the last 20 years. When I first entered this field, in the early 1970s, ECEC services were under-developed and under-funded, a subject of indifference to successive post-war governments. Such provision as existed was mostly in part-time nursery classes for 3 and 4 year olds located in primary schools and in 'play-groups', private non-profit services often organised by parents and offering usually only 2 or 3 mornings of attendance per week. In addition, many 4 year olds were admitted into the first grade of primary school before compulsory school age of 5 years. Working parents needing 'child care' relied mainly on family (combined with high levels of part-time employment among mothers), or else individuals offering care in their own homes (so-called «childminders»).

A major policy turn occurred from the mid-1990s, following on a rapid increase in the numbers of women resuming employment after maternity leave. Employment, therefore, was a major driver of change, increasingly so with the 'New' Labour government of 1997-2010. This administration attached high importance to the value of employment, for women as well as men, and recognised that 'childcare' was a necessary condition; a National Childcare Strategy was launched with a Green Paper – *Meeting the Childcare Challenge* – in May 1998 (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Another influence was a belief in

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the value of nursery education for later school achievement, leading to the introduction of an entitlement to part-time early education for 3 and 4 year olds. Last, but not least, government fell under the spell of early intervention, persuaded by experts quoting US research that targeting services on young children and their families could reduce or eliminate a whole range of social and economic problems.

From being a policy backwater, in a few years early childhood services were seen as essential to

[...] achieving some important government objectives. Childcare can improve *educational outcomes* for children. Childcare enables parents, particularly mothers, to go out to work, or increase their hours in work, thereby lifting their families out of *poverty*... Childcare can also play an important role in meeting other top level objectives, for example in improving *health*, boosting *productivity*, improving public services, closing the gender *pay gap* and reducing *crime* (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2002, p. 5: emphasis added).

This new-found interest in ECEC manifested itself in various ways. Soon after coming into office, the Labour government moved 'childcare' services from the welfare to the education ministry; responsibility for the ECEC system was now integrated, to be followed by an integrated system of regulation and a 0-5 curriculum. However, access, funding, provision and workforce were not integrated, leaving two sectors in an administratively integrated system. The 'childcare sector' had always been consigned to the private sector, and this continued; as demand from working parents grew, there was an explosion of private 'for profit' nurseries, the number of places in private (mainly for-profit) nurseries nearly trebling in just five years from 1989-1994. Government policy was to regulate and facilitate the further growth of this private market, and to introduce demand subsidy funding, tax credits that reduced the costs to middle and lower income families: the stated aim was «to ensure quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0 to 14 years in every neighbourhood» (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, par. 1.26), the means a managed market.

The 'early education' sector also grew, with the new entitlement supported by direct (supply) funding of services. An important development was that this funding could be paid not just to schools providing nursery classes, but to any provider – in particular private providers – who could show they met certain conditions. Thus while 'childcare' was essentially viewed as a private responsibility, with some public support

for those least able to pay, 'early education' was treated as a public good, with public funding for everyone. What they both shared, however, was a market approach, with competition encouraged between a variety of providers – yet all regulated by a prescriptive government.

The last part of the jig-saw was the growth of targeted early intervention services. This third stream of ECEC services - in addition to 'childcare' and 'early education' – had long existed, aimed primarily at 'children in need' and/or families needing additional support. Local authority day nurseries and family centres provided limited coverage for many years, supplemented by local social work departments purchasing some places in private services. But from 1997 there was a rapid expansion of targeted services, mainly through the Sure Start programme focused on children under 4 years of age and their families in the most disadvantaged areas in the country. From 2003, Children's Centres were introduced, intended to be multi-purpose services «where children under 5 years old and their families can receive seamless integrated services and information, and where they can access help from multi-disciplinary teams of professionals» (Sure Start, 2005a).

Children's Centres were eventually to be provided in every community, 3500 by 2010, but within this universal provision, two types could be distinguished. The first, which absorbed the preceding Sure Start programmes, served the most disadvantaged areas. These full service Centres offered families access to 'good quality early learning combined with full day care provision for children (minimum 10 hours a day, 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year); good quality teacher input to lead the development of learning within the centre; child and family health services, including antenatal services; parental outreach; family support services; a base for a childminder network; support for children and parents with special needs; effective links with Jobcentre Plus to support parents/carers who wish to consider training or employment' (Sure Start Unit, 2005b, p. 5).

But for the majority of areas and families, Children's Centres provided far more limited services: 'appropriate support and outreach services to parents/carers who have been identified as needing them; information and advice to parents/carers on a range of subjects, including local childcare, looking after babies and young children, local early years provision and education services for 3 and 4 year olds; support to childminders; drop-in sessions and other activities for children and carers at the centre; links to Jobcentre Plus services' (*ibidem*). Though the Guidance from which these descriptions are taken (Sure Start Unit, 2005a) added that these constitute a «minimum range of services», a clear distinction was

being drawn: a wide-ranging and integrated service in a minority of areas, whose level of disadvantage created conditions of market failure; whilst elsewhere the split system remained, with education and care services to be accessed through the market and Children's Centres providing 'information and advice to parents/carers on a range of subjects, including local childcare' (*ibidem*). For most parents, those living outside the most disadvantaged areas, early years services remained a mix of childcare as private commodity and early education for children from 3 years upwards as a public good.

Relations between families and ECEC

The 'poor' parent

What took shape in England during the last 20 years or so was a system that I have termed «a governed market», combining competition in the delivery of services and standardisation in their content, through the dual operation of a detailed national curriculum and a national system of regulation via OFSTED, the government agency responsible for the inspection of all services for children including ECEC and schools. The system was at the same time both integrated (for policy-making, administration and regulation) and split (for everything else), retaining a conceptual division between «child care» and «education» despite a rhetoric of inseparability. The former remained, in government and public thinking, an essentially private matter, the latter a public responsibility. Early education became a universal service, an entitlement for children over 3, whilst enhanced 'early intervention' emphasised a targeted approach.

In this situation, the relationship between the family – or perhaps, to be more precise, parents (and, in practice, mothers) – and ECEC has been re-forming. There has long been a relationship between government and a minority of parents viewed as being in need, deficient, unable to raise their children adequately without public intervention: the 'poor' parent. Since 1997 that relationship has become more intense and systematised, as government has sought more effective early interventions – «evidence-based programmes» (often of American provenance), which hold out the prospect of high returns on initial investment

This was the appeal and rationale of the initial Sure Start programme, but has been re-doubled under the current Conservative-led govern-

ment, which came to power in May 2010. The Prime Minister has asserted that there are 120,000 'troubled' families in the country, a particularly dysfunctional group who, it is estimated, cost taxpayers £ 9 billion a year – or £ 75,000 each (Cameron, 2011). Two reports on the early years written by Labour MPs, but commissioned by the current government, concluded that a stark either/or choice faced Government and society, between improving parenting by targeted behavioural interventions or more income equality – and went for the former (Allen, 2011; Field, 2011). The Field report, for instance, concludes that an anti-poverty strategy based on redistribution

[...] is not sustainable in the longer run, particularly as we strive to reduce the budget deficit. But even if money were not a constraint there is a clear case to be made for developing an alternative strategy to abolish child poverty. A shift of focus is needed towards providing high quality, integrated services aimed at supporting parents and improving the abilities of our poorest children during the period when it is most effective to do so. Their prospects of going on to gain better qualifications and sustainable employment will be greatly enhanced. The aim is to change the distribution of income by changing the position which children from poor backgrounds will be able to gain on merit in the income hierarchy (Field, 2011, p. 6).

The Allan report identifies «the most effective Early Intervention programmes and presents the calculations which have been made of their cost-effectiveness» (Allan, 2011, p. XIV) listing 72 programmes. It goes on to propose a means of delivering these programmes: the «creation of a new, independent Early Intervention Foundation... created in the first instance through private, philanthropic, ethical and local funding» (p. XV). A major source of this funding would be 'social investment bonds', in which wealthy individuals would invest and which would be used to fund accredited early intervention programmes. Programmes would be paid by results and investors, in turn, would get their money back, plus a dividend, once programmes had delivered their promised effects. This proposal is now being piloted, a first step in the 'poor' parent becoming a business opportunity for materially rich philanthropists and other investors.

What is apparent in such thinking and its application in policy is a re-personalisation of poverty and related social problems, causation ascribed to personal short-comings and divorced from any relationship with societal inequalities and injustices. Carol Vincent sums up the consequences of this renewed emphasis on early intervention

Such intervention, conducted sensitively, can have many supportive characteristics, and can help improve the lives of parents and children. This type of intervention can only ever be a partial response, however. As a policy 'solution' it is silent on such issues as parents having limited space, limited resources, stress or mental health problems... Parents are required to become reflexive, self-evaluative, self-transforming, focused and future-oriented individuals – in tune with the demands of a neoliberal, post-welfare-state era (Vincent, 2012, p. 7).

So far, compulsion has not been applied. But an increasing number of European countries are going down this road, making attendance at ECEC services obligatory for the last 1 or 2 years before primary school: for example, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Latvia and Luxembourg. The rationale for this move is to ensure the attendance of children who are considered most in need of pre-school experience to ensure their 'readiness' for school, in other words children from poor and socially excluded families, such as Roma and migrants. A similar development has been described in the Flanders region of Belgium

A child cannot enrol in the first year of compulsory school (at age 6), unless she has attended *kleuterschool* [*scuole dell'infanzia*] for at least 220 half days (Smet, 2009). If she has not, she will need to do a language test and, failing that, will have to attend *kleuterschool*, regardless of having reached the primary school age. Obviously, children whose home language is not Flemish will have less chance of passing the test. This new measure implies not only that *kleuterschool* is formally expected to prepare children for [compulsory school], but also that [compulsory school] is no longer expected to be able to deal with the diversity of home languages. It also implies that enrolling in the first year of [compulsory school] is not an unconditional right anymore, but dependent on earlier attendance at pre-school; a *de facto* lowering of compulsory school age has been introduced, a measure that is likely to affect ethnic minority children in particular (Vandenbroeck, De Stercke and Gobeyn, forthcoming).

Yet as Vandenbroeck goes on to argue, this compulsion fails to recognise and engage with the reasons why such families may be ambivalent about pre-school. Instead of entering into democratic dialogue to better understand parental perspectives, the education system falls back on duress. Like other forms of early intervention, compulsory attendance in early education may become a new technology for governing children and parents, not a way of fostering inclusion and justice.

The emergence of the parent-consumer

For the great majority of parents, the state played little part in early childhood provision before 1997; childcare and early education were mainly private matters. But since the mid-1990s, and particularly under the New Labour administration, the state became more active. Early education became a national, not just a local, responsibility, through a funded entitlement. Parental – essentially maternal – employment was to be facilitated; while ‘childcare’ remained a private service and a private responsibility, government not only positively valued its use but facilitated the expansion and use of the market. Legislation in 2006 – the Childcare Act – placed new duties on local authorities, including securing sufficient childcare by conducting ‘childcare sufficiency assessments’ and managing the local childcare market.

Above all, parents have been cast as active consumers of ECEC, just as they have been cast as active consumers of a school system that has been steadily marketised since the late 1980s. The parent-consumer has before them a market of early childhood providers – whether it be for ‘childcare’ or ‘early education’. Entering this market, the parent-consumer should select, by the exercise of informed choice, their preferred ECEC provider, the service that, as informed consumers, they decide will best meet their needs. There was no moment when government explicitly argued the case for this market approach to ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’; no policy document where different options were considered and the market option justified; no parliamentary or public debate on the subject; no national evaluation of the experiment in marketisation and privatisation. Yet by 2008, a senior civil servant could state in a public presentation that a «diverse market (is) the only game in town» (Archer, 2008).

Irrespective of views about the desirability of this state of affairs, there are problems with this formulation – of the market and the parent-consumer. In a study of middle-class parents in two areas of London, the most substantial research to date on the actual workings of childcare markets, Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent (2006) describe the ‘childcare’ market as it actually functions as a ‘peculiar market’ – indeed, they conclude, «the childcare market just does not work like markets are supposed to». Among the reasons they cite, two are of particular interest. First, the market is «saturated with emotions», so that «both positive choices and rejections are based on a mix of rational and emotional criteria...and typically determined by what is described as ‘gut instinct’» (*ibidem*, pp. 38-40). Second, it is

[...] a highly gendered market. The main players in both supply and demand are women...most literature on marketization is silent on gender and also on the role of emotions. Again this challenges the traditional economic assumptions about the theoretical consumer. As Kenway and Epstein (1996, p. 307) suggest, "the free standing and hyper-rational, unencumbered competitive individual who can operate in the morally superior market can only be an image of middle class maleness" (*ibidem*, p. 43).

The issue of gender is also identified as central to parent-service relationships in a study of 200 English early childhood practitioners by Jayne Osgood (2004).

[T]he ethic of care and approaches to management that female managers tend to adopt can be regarded as oppositional discourses to the masculine managerialism... embedded in government policy designed to promote entrepreneurialism... They were resistant to viewing children as financial commodities, but this became inevitable when seeking to make a profit (*ibidem*, pp.13, 16)

Ball and Vincent argue further that the current problems are irresolvable «in so far as there are important paradigmatic differences between the nature of market relations and the nature of the social relations embedded in childcare... [T]he market is an exchange relationship rather than a shared relationship based on shared values» (Bell and Vincent, 2006, p. 48).

Parents do not, therefore, necessarily accept the parent-consumer role – although this may change over time as market-thinking becomes more normative and taken-for-granted. But nor does government itself necessarily accept the consumer-parent role. For it transpires that these informed consumers cannot really be trusted to make the right choices, so putting young children – a national resource – at risk. A key 'childcare strategy' document from the English government acknowledges the problem:

Although the quality of childcare experience is vital to child outcomes, there is evidence to suggest that parents do not accurately observe the quality of the childcare they use... [A recent American study] suggested that parents significantly overestimate quality; do not use all available information when judging quality; and incorrectly believe that certain observable characteristics are indicative of non-observable quality (HM Treasury *et al.*, 2004, p. 67).

The consumer is not, then, necessarily the informed consumer, and the state cannot afford to leave decisions entirely in their hands; too

much is at stake if young children really represent the future of the nation. Hence the need for prescriptive and detailed regulation of providers, one part of a veritable blizzard of policy documents that poured out from the New Labour government. The title of one of these – *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare* – perhaps captures the ambivalence at the heart of public policy.

Another possible relationship: democratic collegiality

There are, of course, other possible relationships between parents and early childhood services, beyond the poor parent and the consumer parent. Where services are provided by employers as a worker benefit, then the parent relates to them as a company employee (as for example to any work benefit such as a company canteen or a company sports club). There is also a long tradition of churches or philanthropic foundations providing services to indigent families, rendering parents as objects of charity.

But in this final section, I would like to raise yet another potential relationship, based on the image of the citizen-parent: what I would term democratic collegiality. «Collegiality» refers to a sharing of responsibility, the co-construction of projects and knowledge (learning from and with) and collective reflexivity (for a further discussion of the concept see Fielding, 1999 and Lazzarri, 2012). It is imbued with democracy as a fundamental value and practice, the two facets - collegiality and democracy - being inter-dependent as Fielding comments, «It is through radical collegiality that one upholds democratic community» (1999, p. 29). Access to services is based not on consumer purchase, targeted intervention, state compulsion, employee benefit or charitable dispensation, but as a right of citizenship arising from the community assuming responsibility for the education of its citizens.

I adopt a 'thick' understanding of the democratic in democratic collegiality: democracy as a multi-dimensional concept, with different forms and practices linked to each dimension; democracy ranging from «electoral and procedural democracy» through «activism and civic participation» and «aspiration and deliberation» to democracy in the family, the workplace and public services (Skidmore and Bound, 2008). Democracy so understood must «be rooted in a culture in which democratic values and practices shape not just the formal sphere of politics, but the informal spheres of everyday life: families, communities, workplaces, and

schools and other public services» (Skidmore and Bound, 2008, p. 9). So while formal and procedural democracy, democratic governance, is vitally important, democracy has a more pervasive presence: as a way of thinking, being and acting, of relating and living together, as a quality of personal life and relationships.

This is democracy, in the words of John Dewey, as «a mode of associated living embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life» and as «a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature... [and] faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgement and action if proper conditions are furnished» (Dewey, 1939). This is democracy, as Hannah Arendt sees it, as a form of subjectivity expressed as a quality of human interaction (Biesta, 2007). This is democracy as a relational ethic that can and should pervade all aspects of everyday life, a way of 'thinking of oneself in relation to others and the world' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.156), a relationship of solidarity and mutual affection and care for one another, of democratic fellowship. A relationship, too, that recognises and welcomes plurality of values and perspectives, respecting the alterity of others, not trying to make the Other into the Same. A democracy, in sum, of what John Gray (2009) calls *modus vivendi*, inscribed with a high degree of value pluralism, though premised on 'shared adhesion to ethico-political principles of democracy' (Mouffe, 1999, p. 755); and in contrast to a democracy of rational consensus, which presumes one right answer to any question.

In a recent book, written with Michael Fielding, I have explored the idea of a radical democratic education, in which democracy is applied as a common value and practice throughout a renewed public education system – for children from a few months old up to young people of 18 years and older (Fielding, Moss, 2011). Here and elsewhere (Moss, 2009), I have proposed how democracy can be practiced throughout this education system, at all levels from national government, through the 'educative commune' and into the school: in different forms of decision-making, from high policy to everyday life; in the curriculum; in approaches adopted to learning; in experimentation; in evaluation; and in contesting dominant discourses and creating new, less oppressive discourses.

We can see elements of this relationship of democratic collegiality in some of the Italian communes that contributed to what Enzo Catarsi (2004) has referred to as the «municipal school revolution», including the schools in Reggio Emilia. I think some of this relationship, and how

it extends to the whole school community, is captured in these comments by three Reggio pedagogistas:

So in the Reggio Emilia experience, participation does not mean simply the involvement of families in the life of the school. Rather it is a value, an identifying feature of the whole experience, a way of viewing those involved in the educational process and the role of the school. The subjects of participation, even before the parents, are the children who are considered to be active constructors of their own learning and producers of original points of view concerning the world...

The subjects of participation also include all the school staff. The teachers, in particular, do not merely execute programmes established by others, but participate in the construction of knowledge-building processes of each child and each group of children, as well as their own. All this takes place through listening and research conducted within a collegial framework.

Participation, in fact, is based on the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, especially an educational project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts: and, in our opinion, so, too, is democracy itself (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004, p. 28).

The image of the school

A relationship of democratic collegiality is, in Foucault's words about the possibility of transformational change, «both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible». Very urgent because the crisis we are in today – made up, as Morin (1999, p. 74) says, of a «complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet» – calls for a radical democratic education.

Our society faces challenges where we need to act collaboratively more than ever. We need to deepen democracy through more deliberative and participative democratic mechanisms which spread democracy into the 'everyday' of our lives. And we need to foster a stronger public realm and associative democracy with organisations that bring people together to live and learn together (Shah and Goss, 2007, p. 26).

Very difficult for reasons that hardly need elaborating to the reader, who will doubtless already see many reasons why this relationship of dem-

ocratic collegiality won't work, especially when our vision is so restricted by living under what Roberto Unger terms «the dictatorship of no alternative», in a world that is economically and, increasingly educationally, dominated by the neo-liberal imaginary and the accompanying awesome power of the neo-liberal machine (see, for example, Ball, 2012).

But also very possible. Here, I would suggest, are the first three steps. First, as Foucault argues, we need to recall the power of thinking differently, to develop alternative imaginaries. Second, we need to build or rebuild connections to examples of democratic collegiality, past and present, to draw inspiration and construct knowledge. Third, we need to identify the conditions needed for democratic collegiality to develop and prove sustainable. I have no space here to go into what these might be, but end by highlighting one.

We need to open a democratic politics of education around asking and deliberating on critical questions – «not mere technical issues to be solved by experts... [but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives» (Mouffe, 2007, np). One of these questions, the starting point as I understand it for Reggio Emilia's pedagogical project, is 'what is our image of the child?' A second, raised above, is what is our image of parents? And a third is what is our image of the early childhood centre?

In contemporary England, I see two images that dominate our discourse. One is the centre as business, competing in a market with other businesses to sell its products to parent consumers searching for child-care and education, functions that are thus commodified and made tradeable. The other is the service as factory or processing plant, applying human technologies (such as early intervention programmes) to produce predetermined outcomes, be it developmental or learning goals for children or improved performance by parents. This service is first and foremost a site for technical practice, deploying expert, evidence-based technologies to achieve expert, evidence-based standards.

But an early childhood centre based on democratic collegiality has quite another image: as a public space, distinct from market and family space; as a place of encounter between citizens, both children and adults; and as a collaborative workshop, with a potential for many purposes and projects – projects that are co-constructed by the centre's community and through the means of democratic collegiality. If the image of the factory and the business are matched by the image of the poor parent and the parent-consumer, then the image of the public space and collaborative workshop are matched by the image of the parent as citizen,

‘rich’ and competent, an image discussed again by Paola Cagliari and her colleagues from Reggio Emilia, to whom I give the last word:

But are parents competent ‘participants’? Usually schools do not consider them so, because they do not see themselves as social and political places and therefore do not recognise the competencies of parents as citizens... What do we mean by competency? In one sense it is a recognition that schools must give to parents, as well as to children and teachers. This recognition – again a choice based on *valu* Poor, consumer, citizen? What image of the parent in England? es – is an acknowledgement of the citizen’s right to engage in the discussion of social issues that concern everyone. Parents, therefore, are competent because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretations and ideas, which are articulated in implicit and explicit theories and are the fruit of their experience as both parents and citizens (Cagliari *et al.*, 2004, p. 30).

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