
Choosing the Right Approach: New Labour and the care and education of young children

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ABSTRACT Early Years provision in England has historically been fragmented and under-funded. In seeking to address this situation, New Labour has developed a range of Early Years initiatives with the principal aim of tackling poverty and disadvantage. This article traces the recent history of Early Years provision and critically explores the extent to which New Labour has been effective in unifying services, raising the status of Early Years practitioners, addressing under funding together with challenging disadvantage and social exclusion.

When Tony Blair's New Labour Government swept into power in May 1997 it inherited a situation where the provision of early years education and care was patchy and incoherent. The previous Conservative Government had bowed to pressure from parents and lobby groups and eventually brought about the establishment of universal nursery provision for children aged 4-5 with the publication of the Nursery Education and Grant Maintained Schools Act (1996). This particular piece of legislation extended the principle of parent choice and a market driven schools economy by introducing, for the first time, a system of vouchers which could be exchanged for part-time nursery education. Whilst welcomed by many in the private and voluntary sector, this funding came with a number of significant strings attached: for the first time providers were expected to follow a goal led curriculum framework, submit themselves to inspection by Ofsted and most importantly the principle of a mixed market economy funded by the State had been established. A significant outcome of the voucher scheme was the unofficial lowering of the starting school age with many four-year olds being admitted into reception classes in the 'dash for cash' by primary schools. These primary schools who were at the time struggling with falling rolls and surplus accommodation were, following the introduction

of Local Management of Schools, also responsible for their own budgets, so the opportunity for them to enhance their financial situation through the voucher scheme became very attractive. In many areas of the country early admission to reception classes became the norm, leading to the closure of many Pre-school Learning Alliance Play-groups which had, until this point been a major provider of places for the under-fives in the voluntary sector. At the same time many of the free standing independent nursery providers saw an opportunity to expand and benefit from a degree of public subsidy that had not previously been available.

Prior to election in 1997, key figures in Labour's team had already been alerted to the need to coordinate services for young children and their families. A ten- year strategy outlined by Moss and Penn (1996) had been presented at a conference in London attended by key figures in the Shadow Cabinet and following their successful general election win effectively became the basis of Labour's Early Years policy and the 10 year childcare strategy. A key policy priority for the incoming Government was to reshape services so that they were more flexible and responsive and for the first time, key Government Departments were brought together under the leadership of the Treasury to coordinate services for young children and their families (OECD, 2000, 2004, 2006)

However, in common with neo-liberal governments elsewhere, New Labour did not see a major role for itself in developing support services for young children and their families that went beyond setting out the framework for collaboration between service providers and providing initial funding. While the New Labour Government's action to develop coordinated services for young children is arguably one of its greatest achievements, the manner in which they chose to develop services and the significant role given to the private sector in this enterprise represents a major failing of its Early Year's policy. In our view this has had a profound effect on the quality of provision for the most disadvantaged children and families. Like their predecessors, Labour had subscribed to the view that the private sector is more efficient and cost effective than the public sector and this quickly became evident as services previously provided by the state were outsourced to the private sector which experienced unprecedented growth. Capita, a small education service provider rapidly became a major provider of services including computer systems for schools, the health service, consultancy and more recently responsibility for overseeing the National Strategy for Schools. Creeping privatisation saw a growth in Academies, and 'failing' Local Authorities were handed over to the private sector, with generally low degrees of success.

For a government faced with an expectation that universal nursery education would be available within the existing maintained systems alongside a commitment to not raising taxes, a reliance on the private sector presented an attractive option. New Labour was strongly influenced by Giddens (1998) who made a case for the involvement of the private sector in meeting the needs of the Welfare State. Despite the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD) Report 'Starting Strong' (2006) which made a series of recommendations about how a universal system of early childhood education and care could be best provided these alternative models were largely discounted. Significantly the report argued that 'a privatised system of childcare, whereby mothers bought the childcare they preferred, would almost certainly lead to an increase in social stratification.' (Penn 2007: 192) This is a warning that has largely been unheeded by neo-liberal governments, including that in the UK where within the existing maintained nursery schools there was a well established recognition that the needs of young children and families were linked to quality nursery education and that this had the potential to improve children's long-term educational chances.

From the outset New Labour's partnership acknowledged the interrelationship between economic and social reforms. They had been strongly influenced by critiques of old style public structures and recognised the need for joined up thinking with government departments no longer working in isolation. They were also persuaded by the argument that the private sector was better than the state at delivering services that people both wanted and needed. It was in this context that Tony Blair set out four principles which were to govern the 'modernisation of public services':

1. High standards and full accountability,
2. Devolution of decision-making about service delivery to the 'front line',
3. Flexibility of employment
4. Involvement of the voluntary and private sector to increase choice for users.

The first and second of these principles outlined above would appear to conflict directly with each other. A call for high standards and full accountability is difficult to marry with the notion of devolution of power to front line services. We would argue that an increasingly punitive climate of inspection, publication of school league tables and 'privatisation' of failing services is more likely to result in a tendency for those involved in 'front line' delivery to become risk averse, thereby running counter to the principle of devolution of power. Mechanisms of accountability have also proved to be unpopular with the private sector where the increased regulation of the childcare market, despite being identified as essential in the OCED Report (2004), has had an impact on their ability to maximise profits.

A recognition of the relationship between economic and social reform made clear by advocates of universal nursery provision produced a fertile climate in which to push for the development of services for young children and their families. Support for this came from a range of published sources, both national and international, which highlighted the long-term economic and social benefits of providing integrated care and education Weikart (1996), Moss & Penn (1996), European Commission (1996), OECD (2000, 2006) as well as the long-term educational benefits of high quality nursery education Ball

(1994), POST (2000) Penn, (2000), OECD (2004), Sylva et al (2003). When New Labour came into power they were faced with a choice about how to develop and expand integrated services. One option would have been to extend the provision of state funded nursery education, bringing together services for young children and families under one roof. This model resonates with nursery provision as it exists in France to this day, where free full-time, all year round, locally available care and education is available for all children aged 2-5 years . A second option would have been to develop a mixed market economy of the type generally available in the Nordic countries where high levels of state funding sit alongside a strong regulatory framework. New Labour however, whilst choosing the model of the mixed market failed to offer the same level of financial commitment as found in the Nordic countries.

In the early years of the Blair Government a number of structural changes were put in place, including the bringing together of departments with responsibility for children and families, under the direction of the Treasury. At a local level, Early Years Childcare Development Partnerships were given the responsibility of commissioning services in partnership with the private and voluntary sector. However, at the same time New Labour remained committed to State intervention in the combating of social inequality and poverty. One direct consequence of this commitment was the establishment of Sure Start, a £500 million anti-poverty intervention set up in 1998 which was specifically targeted on families with children under four years of age who were living in some of the most disadvantaged communities. As an intervention Sure Start had not just appeared out of nowhere, as it drew on international research evidence which showed that early intervention to improve the health, well-being and educational attainment of disadvantaged children was highly effective. Norman Glass the economist who is credited (Anning & Ball, 2008) with being the architect of Sure Start drew heavily on research from the USA which indicated significant long-term cost benefits to the economy including savings on remedial work with children in later life. One significant proviso of this research however, was that 'only sustained, high-quality interventions were effective' (Anning & Ball, 2008). With characteristic promotional flair the principles of family support, joined-up provision for young children and families and empowerment of the less well off was presented as a new idea – at no point was the pioneering contribution of Robert Owen or Rachel and Margaret MacMillan acknowledged. Instead the rationale for this type of intervention was almost exclusively drawn from the USA largely ignoring well established integrated services already in existence in parts of the UK (for example Pen Green in Corby and Thomas Coram in Camden), the models in Scandinavia and in particular the Nursery schools of Reggio Emilia all of which had their roots in both community and socialist ideology.

Despite being promoted by Tony Blair as 'the jewel in the crown' of New Labour's programme to combat child poverty, national evaluations have shown that 'Sure Start has made little or no difference to mother's employment rates, and therefore to poverty levels and over time the policy has been gradually

disowned' (Penn, 2007, p. 196). Sure Start has been gradually replaced with a network of Children's Centres which must have child-care as a core offer and which must be paid for by parents at the full economic cost. It is our suggestion that it is because of the particular model chosen by the Government for the universal provision of education and care with its links with benefit payments and availability for work, that little impact has been made on the levels of poverty and social disadvantage in the UK. New Labour had committed to not raising taxes, making it difficult for ministers to adopt the Nordic model where the private and voluntary sector enjoy high levels of subsidy, with the state using regulatory powers to ensure that high levels of qualification and standards are the norm. This level of subsidy comes at a cost with Nordic countries spending, well above the 1% of GDP recommended as a minimum by OECD (2006) Unicef (2008) and between three and four times that of the UK.

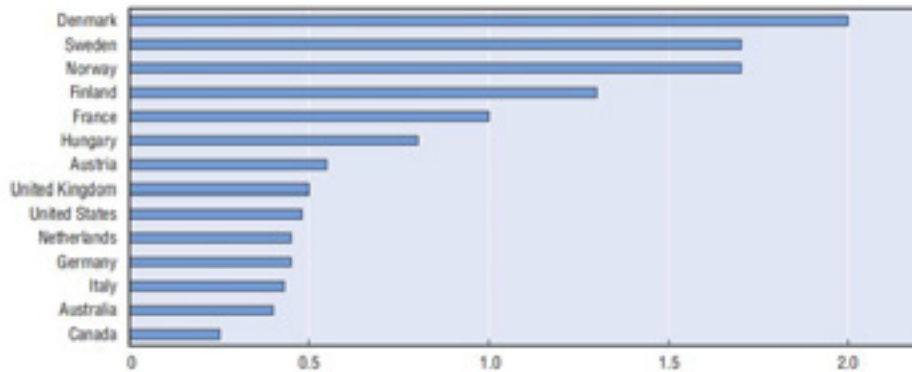


Figure 1. Public expenditure on ECEC services (0-6 years) in selected OECD countries (%). *Note:* This figure is comprised of expenditure estimates, based on replies provided by country authorities to an OECD survey in 2004. The figures provided suggest that Denmark spends 2% of GDP on early childhood services for 0- to 6-yearolds, and Sweden 1.7%. These countries – and Finland – also allocate an additional 0.3% (approximately) to the pre-school class for children 6 to 7 years. (Source: OECD, 2006, p. 105.)

A further contrast with the Nordic countries is the enormous variation in the qualification levels of staff working in early years and care in the UK, with levels of qualification ranging from unqualified 'volunteers' to degree level and sometimes higher. This is accompanied by considerable variation in the rates of pay, with significant differences between those responsible for the care and education elements of provision. Rates of pay for teachers in the maintained sector are comparable with those of teachers in Primary and Secondary schools with other qualified staff typically earning more than their counterparts in the private and voluntary sector. Some steps have been taken to address this with the Children's Workforce Development Council being responsible for

developing a qualifications 'ladder' for the Early Years workforce. In addition, the Government has set a requirement for managers of all settings offering full-time childcare, to have achieved at least a Level 3 Qualification^[1] in an appropriate area. To this end it has invested £305 million through the graduate leader fund, with the aim of having a graduate Early Years Professional in every full daycare setting by 2015. Despite this, it remains the case that at least 50% of the remaining staff must be at least Level 2. There are currently proposals to upgrade the required qualification for managers to Level 4 but it still remains the case that a significant proportion of staff (mostly women) working in daycare can have qualifications below Level 2 or none at all. According to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) volunteering is a significant part of employment in full day nursery provision and the 2006 Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey of Full Day Care Providers showed that there were 15,400 unpaid staff, 11,000 placement students, and 4,400 volunteers. This has major implications for both the quality of provision and for women who make up the majority of the early years workforce.

Within the private sector rates of pay are typically low, particularly among child-care workers where in 2006 the average wage was £5.60 per hour, only marginally above the minimum wage of £5.35. It is somewhat ironic that many of the mothers being encouraged back to work through this programme are often receiving a rate of pay that is the same as the child-care staff who are looking after their children. Although rates of pay are higher for managers and staff involved in the educational aspects of provision the DCSF (2006) report that 'the sector is characterised by average hourly pay lower than national average rates' which reinforces the low value placed on care and education of the under-fives.

Evidence from research (Sylva et al, 2003; OECD, 2006; Weikart, 1996) indicates a correlation between the qualification level of staff working in early education and care and the outcomes for children. It is also acknowledged (OECD, 2006; Feinstein, 2003) that outcomes for children and young people are also significantly affected by poverty and social class with the reduction of child poverty being a specific goal of the 10 year Sure Start project. Given that Sure Start was primarily directed at the most disadvantaged children and families and that over 80% of provision is within the private sector where levels of pay are low, it seems likely that success of early years intervention in achieving the aim of improving the educational attainment of this particular group is likely to be limited.

New Labour must accept much of the responsibility for this state of affairs as it is a direct consequence of their choice over the model of provision to adopt. The growth of the private sector began before the Labour Government came to power and was made up mainly of stand-alone providers and in 1997 the corporate share of the market was fairly insignificant. Ten years later it was the largest area of provision with 16 companies alone providing over 50,000 childcare places (Penn, 2007) as venture capital organizations and companies with limited or no experience in this form of provision saw an opportunity to

profit from childcare. More recently the impact of globalization has become apparent with the entry into the UK of corporate providers from the USA and ABC Learning which enjoyed a near monopoly position in Australia. It remains to be seen what impact the financial collapse of ABC will have on the position in the UK but in recent years the private sector have found profits declining as the necessary regulation put in place by the state has resulted in declining profits. Because of this the corporate sector has been involved in lobbying Government to introduce higher levels of subsidy to help them remain profitable. Key areas of concern in the private sector are statutory staffing levels, the requirement for them to provide for disadvantaged groups and the national minimum wage.

It has become increasingly evident that such lobbying is effective, with Local Authorities now being required to shift the funding balance in favour of the private and voluntary sector, thereby threatening the viability of the maintained Nursery Schools.

We acknowledge that there have been some positive interventions by the New Labour government in terms of access to a range of services for young children and families, with integrated provision for a range of services, e.g. health care, education and welfare being readily available through a 'one stop shop'. However we suggest that this has not been pursued in a coherent and systematic way and there has been an over reliance on the private sector. Many of these initiatives have failed to listen to the voices of those to whom they are directed which may well have contributed to the limited success of Sure Start. In the Nordic countries the relationship between childhood and women's employment is seen within the context of women's rights. By contrast in the UK women who are single parents are viewed as a drain on the economy and employment is seen as a solution to the nation's economic needs as well as a route out of poverty for single mothers. It is also apparent to us that the focus has shifted away from high quality educational provision to raising the number of mothers and lone parents entering the workplace. Recent welfare reform with an emphasis on getting mothers and lone parent fathers back into the labour force through its establishment of a new minimum wage, 'New Deals' and new tax credit systems, has led to a target of 70% employment rate for lone parents by 2010. However by 2010 these mothers and lone parents will have to make themselves available for employment once their youngest child is aged 7, and under the same conditions as any other unemployed person (Bennion, 2008). Whether this is achievable in the current economic climate, with unemployment heading for the 2 million mark is doubtful and raises questions about this particular aspect of Government policy.

Note

[1] These Levels refer to the National Qualifications Framework and run from 1-8 where the minimum qualification is Level 1 and is equivalent to GCSE Grade D-G and Level 8 is equivalent to a Doctorate.

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