
For a New Public Early Childhood Education^[1]

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ABSTRACT In this article the author highlights the problems that have arisen from a fragmented and incoherent development of early years provision. These problems are compounded when early years education is cast in terms of ensuring children are 'school ready', by which it is meant ready to be developed as human capital in a world driven by economic imperatives. The author argues that there is an urgent need for provision that is not only coherent, but much more focused on the rich and diverse needs of children in a democratic society.

England has long suffered inadequate early childhood provision, the product of prolonged under-investment and policy neglect. The result: a system split between 'childcare', 'education' and 'welfare', with fragmented, incoherent and divisive services, a mishmash of nursery classes and reception classes, playgroups and nursery schools, day nurseries and childminders. To make matters worse, England has an unduly short early childhood phase, with most children entering primary school well before their fifth birthday.

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 seemed an opportunity to set things to rights. Here at last was an administration that treated early childhood as a policy priority and was committed to action. Action there was from the start, an endless flow of initiatives issuing from Whitehall. But even if there was a frenetic feel to policy making, some good things followed. The importance of early childhood was recognised, investment increased, the first steps were taken to integrate care and education, Children's Centres got the green light.

Looking back, this was clearly an opportunity missed. Rather than building an early childhood system fit for purpose, based on democratic deliberation of alternatives, New Labour went hell for leather after expansion

and opted for a strategy that was basically more of the same. The spread of private providers in the day nursery sector left England with a vast for-profit sector.

Provision got more fragmented, incoherent and divisive. Of course, the picture is not all bleak. Committed and innovative educators and centres still manage to do good things. But this should not distract from the larger picture. After nearly 20 years of policy priority, England still has grossly inadequate early childhood provision. We have a split, incoherent and divisive system; a truncated system that is weak and unable to resist schoolification; a system premised on an exploited female workforce; a system that reduces parents to consumers, educators to technicians, services to businesses and children as – well, objects to be cared for and outcomes to be realised.

We have, on the one hand, provision that emphasises a diversity of providers, competing to win the favours of parent-consumers in a marketplace, and on the other hand, a highly regulated system, with a prescriptive national curriculum, a national inspection system and a national system of assessment of children. Competition and individual choice crossed with rigidly enforced national standards; diversity of providers delivering uniform outcomes.

This apparent contradiction is a consequence of living in a neoliberal regime. Neoliberalism can understand and justify public spending on early childhood services only in highly instrumental and economic terms: as ‘social investment’ in ‘human capital’. To ensure supposedly ‘high returns’, very precise ‘human technologies’ need to be applied to ensure outcomes that must be pre-defined. The (female) technicians to apply these technologies need to be neither well educated nor well paid, trained just enough to apply ‘evidence-based’ and ‘tightly defined’ programmes. If the school has become an exam factory, the early childhood centre is becoming a factory for early learning goals.

Finally, a neoliberal regime de-politicises. It acts as if there are no alternatives, just one right answer that experts can supply, with no democratic deliberation about critical questions and policy alternatives, no recognition of the many diverse perspectives and debates in the field, no argument about the question ‘where to?’

My own starting point is that we need to rethink, then re-form. We have to stop thinking about early childhood as a collection of bits and pieces provided by competing mono-purpose services: ‘childcare for working parents’, ‘early education for threes and fours’, ‘support for parents’ and so on. Instead we need a holistic concept, such as ‘early childhood education’, in which education is understood in its broadest sense. This is a long-established concept that understands education as fostering and supporting the general well-being and development of children and adults, their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a good life. Education, here, is about the realisation of potential, fostering the ability to think and act for oneself and acquiring democratic capabilities. Care is inseparable because it is an *ethic* that should infuse all education, an ethic that requires relationships of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness.

This integrative concept of education provides the basis for a fully integrated early childhood system, including: an entitlement to such education for all children from at least 12 months until 6 years (i.e. a later transfer age to primary school); supply-side funding, with simple and affordable charges combining a free period of attendance with an income-related fee for additional time capped by a maximum payment (perhaps £100 per month per child); a unified workforce based on a graduate-level early years teacher, accounting for at least half of all staff; and, last but not least, delivery through a common type of provision, replacing the present mishmash.

What should that provision be? The answer is Children's Centres, capable of a wide variety of projects, responsive to the needs and desires of their local communities. These would be public spaces, places of encounter for citizens both younger and older, community workshops and sites of democratic practice and experimentation. Such public services might be provided by democratically elected local bodies (e.g. local authorities) and by non-profit bodies (cooperatives, community organisations) able to implement democratic principles and accept public accountability. I see no place for markets or business providers.

Other conditions are equally important: a well-educated, well-paid and mixed-gender workforce, capable of acting as democratic professionals; active local authorities ('educative communes'), closely involved with services, providing some and supporting all, facilitating cooperation between Children's Centres and between these and other services for children, and with a key role in a system of democratic accountability for services; academic researchers working closely alongside early childhood educators, Children's Centres and educative communes; and, last but not least, a national government that creates a broad policy framework, defining entitlements, funding, provision and workforce, and setting broad values, purposes and goals – sufficient to give coherence and a common sense of direction to the national system, without stifling local interpretation, content and experimentation.

Note

[1] This article first appeared on the website www.reclaimingschools.org

Further Reading

- Moss, P. (Ed) (2012) *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education: reconceptualising the relationship*. London: Routledge.
- Moss, P. (2014) *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.
- Moss, P. & Fielding, M. (2010) *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative*. London: Routledge.

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