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The development of *Birth to Five Matters* guidance: reflections on the critical agency and collective advocacy of an English early childhood coalition

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, the English government embarked upon revision to the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) document and to associated non-statutory guidance. At the time, concerns were raised that early childhood experts were insufficiently involved in drafting the document. Consequently, an Early Years Coalition of early childhood organisations was formed to develop a version of curriculum guidance ‘for the sector, by the sector’. This paper draws on contemporaneous documents and communications from the period, coupled with the author’s own experiences as a contributor to this coalition’s guidance. It reflects the perceived critical agency and collective action of coalition partners. Further, deploying the notion of agonism, the author considers how the diversity of early childhood representative bodies involved was conducive to developing the conditions for policy contestation. The paper concludes with reflections on the potential for further collaborative advocacy in seeking greater autonomy and professionalism, for and with the early childhood workforce.

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This paper offers analysis and reflections on the work of an English coalition in the twenty-first century. The paper begins with the contextual background to the development of a coalition of organisations in forging a ‘ground up’ response to curriculum guidance changes. This is followed by an analysis of perceived critical agency and collective action in the coalition’s endeavours.

An English landscape

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England currently operates as a market-based economy of provision delivered by state, private and voluntary sector institutions (Lloyd and Penn 2012). The organisations offering this provision include schools, local authorities, charities, social enterprises, national and international companies and self-employed childminders. The early childhood system has been described as ‘confused and fragmented ...

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compris[ing] a diverse patchwork of different services and complex funding arrangements' (Archer and Oppenheim 2021, 34).

Current differences in organisational governance of early childhood provision, funding systems, qualifications, workforce remuneration, staffing ratios and many other factors result in a fragmented early childhood workforce in England (Bonetti 2018). Differences in the structural conditions, career pathways, regulatory requirements and lived experiences between these groups in the early childhood sector are rooted in long-standing policy trajectories and deep-seated cultural traditions surrounding professional roles (Archer 2020). The workforce continues to be characterised by teachers working in school-based provision and those employed (with a range of professional titles and qualifications) in nurseries and on domestic premises (Cameron, Dalli and Simon 2017).

In addition to those varying conditions and policy demands upon the workforce being complex, a further dominant discourse is that of a divided workforce: 'bifurcated' (OECD 2001) and a 'fragmented profession' (Beck 2008). These divisions are explicated in terms of legal structures and organisation of provision: private, voluntary and state maintained provision, but also in relation to the difference in group and childminding provision and to a historical care/education divide resulting in a 'split system' (Moss 2020). Such developments have been borne of particular political conditions, and thus an understanding of the influences of neoliberalism which further shape this current landscape, are central to these readings of a divided workforce.

Neoliberal conditions and early childhood education

Neoliberal logic has been described as focussing on marketisation, efficiency, increased accountability and globalisation (Baltodano 2017) privileging the power of the market over issues of citizenship, equity and social justice. It is argued that in education policy and practice, such an orthodoxy is implemented through tenets of new public management (Gunter et al. 2016). A growing corpus of international research critiques the ways in which early childhood education and educators have been positioned in relation to the dominance of a neoliberal paradigm (Moss 2014; Roberts-Holmes 2019; Sims and Waniganayake 2017).

In education, neoliberalism also manifests as the privileging of economic solutions to 'problems' of quality and effectiveness, curriculum and professionalism (Archer 2020). Children and educators are subject to disciplinary power and technologies in preparation for the future, where success is measured as children's academic achievement and their financial productivity as future citizens. In addition, the high accountability of educators is aligned with regulation and surveillance across all phases, including early childhood education (Spencer-Woodley 2014). It is argued that such regimes have pervasive influences as governments exert 'top-down pressures' shaping the 'what' of curriculum content and the 'how' of sanctioned pedagogies and assessment practices. In doing so, the purposes, intent and priorities of incumbent governments are asserted (Wood and Hedges 2016).

In an analysis of early childhood workforce reform policies, Archer (2022, 199) discerned:

neoliberal discourses of governmentality, responsabilisation, performativity and accountability, surveillance, marketisation and commodification ... [are] attempting to shape the identities and conduct of the 'ideal' early childhood educator.

This analysis echoes work by Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) who highlight how neoliberalism offers an understanding of professionalism which is limited and instrumental, viewing it as standardisable with professionalism eroded by a culture of compliance and performativity.

In addition to critique of neoliberalism's reach into curriculum content and the identities of early educators, it has also been argued that neoliberal ideology has shaped an early years 'market'. This has served to atomise individual schools and early childhood settings, framing them as competitors rather than collaborators (Archer 2020). In turn, such a framing has resulted in reduced opportunities to collectivise.

Professional associations and unions

In England, early childhood education and care (ECEC) associations and unions have evolved within this neoliberal context, and there are now multiple, national sub-sectoral organisations representing elements of this diverse workforce. Consequently, a complex landscape of ECEC membership organisations has developed over recent decades and this reflects sector diversity.

Unions

Consideration of unionisation in the field is important in contextualising formal and public opportunities for early childhood educators to collectivise. However, there would appear to be a lack of literature which details a timeline of engagement between the English early childhood workforce and union membership.

The aforementioned fragmentation of the ECEC sector has resulted in a largely non-unionised community. Whilst there appears to be a dearth of statistics on union membership in ECEC, it is known that membership is predominantly confined to early childhood educators (predominantly qualified teachers) employed in the state sector. Fewer early educators in the private and voluntary sectors in England are members of trade unions or professional associations despite a long history of organisational presence. Cameron, Dalli and Simon (2017, 35) draw on a Labour Force survey and note 'only around 10% of childcare workers belong to one'. Public sector early childhood workers are a minority of the total early childhood workforce – in the split English system private 'childcare' services are very much dominant.

Thus, education unions in England have played and continue to play a limited role in activism on issues of early childhood education as a result of their diminished membership and eroded influence (Hoque et al. 2017). Given the breadth of professional roles, the diversity of employment conditions and the qualification profile of the workforce, the development of a union focussed on ECEC has proven elusive and remains both difficult and contentious. This arguably inhibits opportunities for early educators to collectivise publicly and formally.

Organisations and movements

At the same time, a number of membership organisations have been influential in shaping the development of ECEC in England. Indeed, a multitude of early years

associations, in various iterations, have developed in England (and the wider UK) over the twentieth century and represent the diversity of early childhood provision. It is valuable to consider some of this history in reflecting on the work of the Early Years Coalition.

An early example of such an organisation is the Nursery School Association (NSA) (now the British Association for Early Childhood Education) founded in 1923. The organisation originated following the lobbying of (among others) Margaret McMillan for the Education Act 1921, which made provision for grants to organise nursery schools for children aged two–five by local education authorities (Jarvis and Liebovich 2015). In recent years, it has grown to support all provision and ‘early years practitioners with training, resources and professional networks and campaigning for quality education for the youngest children’ (Early Education 2024).

The second half of the twentieth century saw developments in various women’s liberation movements, which pushed for (among other things) the development of early education and care services to enable female participation in the workforce (Penn 2019; Press 2015). The National Child Care campaign of the 1970s is detailed by Penn (2019) in which she revisits how the movement was born of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Under Fives Charter (1979).

In terms of advocacy and activism work in the voluntary sector, Henderson (2011) offers an overview in *Insights from the Playgroup Movement*. In this collection of papers, Williamson (2011, 121) discusses the Pre-School Playgroups Association as a social movement and the then seemingly radical belief that ‘parents should be responsible and take part in their children’s pre-school learning’. Williamson details the tensions between this perspective and more conservative positions at the time.

Such organisations, whilst differing in sub-sectoral membership (although now increasingly seeking membership from across the sector), have, to varying degrees, undertaken (and continue to undertake) advocacy and lobbying work. More recently, movements in the UK, beyond the boundaries of individual membership organisations, have seen activism for policy intervention and activism against certain policy and its effects. Recent years have also seen cross-organisation advocacy and activism against the effects of numerous early childhood policies such as the intensification of assessment for accountability and the closure of some ECEC provision due to underfunding.

The prevalence of such collaborations is supported by international research. As Adlerstein and Pardo (2023) attest, research is starting to show a relational landscape where early childhood education professional associations (ECEPAs) connect to build professionalism advocating for status, employment conditions and participation in public decision-making around the nature of early childhood provision, curriculum and assessment.

A contemporary English early childhood coalition

First initiated in 2008, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the national framework for the education and care of young children in England. It is described as ‘The standards that school and childcare providers must meet for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5’ (Department for Education 2024).

Since 2008, the document has undergone numerous revisions. Iterations of the document have appeared to be influenced by differing political priorities for the life

span of a government (Basford 2019). Following a Primary Assessment Review (Department for Education 2017), the Department for Education (DfE), under a Conservative government (2010–2024), drafted amended Early Learning Goals (ELGs).¹ The DfE subsequently also began the process of redrafting the non-statutory guidance for the EYFS (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse 2019). At this time, concerns were raised by early educators and associations about an intensification of ‘school readiness’ discourse discerned in the document and that ‘early years experts were insufficiently involved in drafting’ the document (Nursery world 2019). Indeed, ‘Many in the early years sector were surprised that such an extensive process of change had been embarked upon with very little engagement with sector representatives and experts’ (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse 2019). Such critique is echoed by Santori and Holloway (2023) who suggest that the limited practitioner consultation created a tension between desk-based bureaucrats and early educators working in practice.

Against this backdrop, an Early Years Coalition was formed to provide a united voice to government to influence the redrafting of the EYFS and the government’s own non-statutory guidance. The decision to create a parallel non-statutory guidance emerged later when it became clear that the government was not engaging in serious dialogue with the Coalition and was ignoring many of their concerns:

We came together because we wanted to create a resource which pooled our members’ considerable expertise and experience and kept alive multiple possibilities for the future of early childhood education (Early Education 2020, 1)

During the initial government consultation phase there was explicit critique from the Coalition of draft ‘official’ guidance, and the Coalition positioned its work as offering an expert and educator informed alternative to the Department for Education’s publication. Sixteen early childhood associations and representative bodies met and ultimately worked to co-produce alternative guidance for the education and care of children from birth to five. The Coalition members included membership organisations, charities with pedagogical interests and unions. This collective undertook extensive consultation with a range of stakeholders and initiated the collaborative development of curriculum guidance at pace.

Work of the Coalition involved:

- October 2020 – initial consultation with the sector on the preferred content and format for the guidance
- November 2020 – working groups were assigned to draft sections of the new guidance, which were then collated and edited by the project team
- December 2020 – sector consultation on the first draft of the guidance
- January 2021 – working groups and the project team reviewed the feedback on the first draft and incorporated it into the second draft
- February 2021 – sector consultation on the second draft of the guidance
- March 2021 – working groups and project team incorporated further feedback into the final version of the guidance, which was published on 31 March 2021.

(Birth to Five Matters website, n.d.)

This paper offers analysis and reflections on this period and the work of the coalition. The following sections consider the role of ECEC membership organisations and unions in forging a ‘ground up’ response to the perceived imposition of an unnecessary and undemocratic change to non-statutory guidance.

Methodology

Critical orientation

A reconceptualised version of critical theory informs the paper, reflecting issues of dominance and oppressive structures. Critical theory also enables the interpretation and analysis of acts of domination and resistance. I draw on work by Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) which develops previous iterations of critical theory. In particular, I put to work ideas from reconceptualised critical theory which critique notions of instrumentalism. Such critique suggests instrumentality (in this case in education policy) is preoccupied with efficiency over values, ethics or purpose. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2000, 289), such a perspective ‘delimits its questions to ‘how to’ rather than ‘why should’. This technical rationality is deemed to have the intention to ‘tame, predict, supervise, control or evaluate according to already determined standards’ (Kohan, Olsson and Aitken 2015, 185). In analysing this case, I consider the features of the work of the coalition, its resistance to instrumental and authoritarian processes and the critical agency it afforded for forging alternative ways of thinking and doing policy.

Case study

This paper draws on empirical data in the form of the author’s own experiences as a contributor to the Early Years Coalition’s guidance and considers the work of the coalition and its participatory ethos of policy making. Adopting a critical perspective, the case is constructed through a dynamic interaction between theory and contemporaneous data. It aims to generate explicitly political and emancipatory knowledge in advancing theory on the work of professional associations and unions working in coalition.

Ethics

This paper has been written with cognisance of the BERA (2024) ethical guidelines. In particular, awareness of the need for transparency and the protection of individual’s privacy has been at the forefront of this endeavour. In respect of the anonymity and confidentiality of partners involved in the coalition, I have not alluded to any colleagues by name nor referred in detail to any individual organisations. Rather, I have referred to the work of the coalition and to the collective work of many individuals and organisations involved.

I also reflect on the ethical considerations of reporting from an insider perspective. I remain mindful of my positionality shaped by my multiple roles of educator, researcher and member of several of the coalition’s organisations.

Such roles position me as an ‘insider researcher’, which involves intentionally aligning one’s interests and experiences with one’s research (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019). Advantages including greater access to ‘insider’ discussions and knowledges and a deeper understanding of the politics of the organisations explored. Disadvantages might be considered to be a lack of critical distance, alongside the subjectivity and bias of the closeness of the researcher to the case. Aware of this, I have sought to draw on sources from participating organisations and published accounts from sector press to accompany my own notes and communications. I approached these data with a commitment to conscious reflexivity, and in particular contextual reflexivity (Walsh 2003). This refers to reflexivity on the historical and cultural context of the research project, and the ways in which the data and analysis are embedded in and shaped by the social field and, in turn, shape that social field.

In writing this paper, I draw on empirical data, revisiting my own meeting notes, emails, documents and online archives of the sector press of the time. I begin with initial reflections on the inception of the coalition and move to consider some key concepts I have analysed from these data.

Reflections

On 21 October 2020, I received an email inviting interest in working with colleagues, on behalf of the Early Years Coalition of organisations. This invitation to collaborate involved joining a thematic working group (one of sixteen) to draft a section of new non-statutory guidance for early childhood education and care in England. This document would later be known as *Birth to Five Matters*.

Over the following weeks, thematic working groups were developed to focus on the development and writing of sections of the planned non-statutory guidance. Online meetings were swiftly convened with colleagues from backgrounds in practice, policy, professional development and research. At this time, almost one hundred early childhood educators, researchers and advocates began working at pace to develop a ground-up version of the guidance.

In addition, the Coalition:

- produced a review of the research literature from the last 10 years to identify evidence which should be informing the changes. This was publicly launched and published and offered to the government to inform its thinking. Notably, authors of the review found no evidence to support the extensive proposed changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework.
- carried out a survey of 3270 practitioners’ views on what aspects of the EYFS should be changed to support ministers’ stated objectives. This was also published and shared with the government.
- gathered children’s voices through a small survey of what is important to parents and children in early years settings and conducted a literature review of existing research offering children’s voices.

An overview of the process is highlighted in the lead agency’s accounts:

The Birth to 5 Matters guidance was produced over a period of six months, a very tight timescale for the extensive process of consulting, drafting and finalising the guidance. 100 individuals in 20 working groups reviewed, updated and extended previous guidance, drawing on feedback from three sector consultations. Working group members and respondents to the consultation were drawn from a wide variety of roles and types of organisation to ensure the full diversity of the sector was represented. The guidance was finalised by the project team and launched on 31 March 2021. The launch video on Facebook has been viewed 47,000 times. It has been extremely well-received and looks likely to be widely used in the coming years.

Early Education (2021) Annual Accounts

In an expression of agency, solidarity and resistance, the coalition, led by the charity Early Education, generated a 'ground-up' and alternative vision indicative of a profession 'thinking and speaking for itself' (Urban and Dalli 2012, 157). I argue that the work of the Early Years Coalition, in developing sector-led guidance, illustrated the importance of plurality in the democratic politics of early childhood education. In reflecting on the convening of a coalition and its subsequent work, I draw on a number of concepts to reconsider this work in terms of

- Critical agency
- Collective action
- Sector Fragmentation
- Agonism as a reconfiguring of fragmentation

On critical agency

I draw on these data, namely a sector professional publication and personal notes from a local early years network meeting to explore the notion of critical agency:

A (Department for Education) Advisory Board of ten people has been announced, but as far as we know this group has so far met only once and is not writing the document. It does not include anyone from the private, voluntary and independent sector, nor from further education. It is unclear how the content and layout will be produced, who will be involved and how expert and practitioner input will be gathered. We hope that rather than eventually issuing a finished document, the DfE will ensure that there is wide circulation to a range of experts and practitioners to comment on and improve successive drafts. The rewrite of the ELGs and Educational Programmes on the back of the primary assessment consultation was highly undemocratic and disrespectful of the early years sector.

Nursery World magazine 1/9/2019

Lack of transparency from DfE

- The unknown expectation of DfE non-stat guidance and Ofsted
- It is of great concern what they are doing potentially to existing guidance when we've seen the plans for Early Learning Goals
- Who is going to implement and train on new document?
- Why is it a secret that it is being rewritten – What are they hiding?
- Why is more money being spent on writing a document that works for us?
- Supporting colleagues to meet these news standards
- Moving the goal posts – to make children 'achieve' things earlier!

Who is developing this document and do the early years sector have a voice?

- What is the basis for rewriting? What's wrong with our current document?
- Why change a well-respected document?
- Why are ECE experts/sector not being consulted or informed about a rewrite?

Personal notes from local early years network meeting 16/9/2019

The above quotation, taken from a practitioner publication, and my meeting notes from the same month, highlight concern from the field about a lack of engagement by civil servants with the early childhood sector. Following a period of meetings between government officials and ECEC sector representatives it became apparent that the former were reluctant to consider the breadth of evidence available and to hear the diversity of voices in the field in the revision of the EYFS framework.

This lack of meaningful engagement by bureaucrats with membership organisations and unions on the development of learning and development guidance resulted in the Coalition forging a democratic, inclusive group with diverse representation from across the sector. Such a rejection of the arguably authoritarian imposition of an amended early childhood framework is a demonstration of critical agency.

Poveda and Roberts (2018, 121) draw on theorisation by Sen's capability approach and the Freirean notion of critical consciousness to offer an explanation of 'critical agency' in which individuals consider 'both their critical analysis of the root causes of the disadvantage that they experience, as well as their agency to act on those structures to transform their situation'.

However, critical agency has also been read as both negation and creation (Rebughini 2018) where action is oriented both against and beyond the oppressive situation. In terms of negation, Rebughini (2018, 7) puts forward the notion that critical agency 'stems from a refusal to adapt oneself'. Drawing on Foucault's concept of parrhesia, understood as truth telling and a resistance to acquiescence, Rebughini develops the notion that critical agency is also simultaneously read in an affirmative sense, of looking beyond current situations and creating transformative alternatives. In this regard, the negation is not only a refusal, a pure act of resistance, but a search for an alternative way to know and to act. Thus, critical agency is seen as operating beyond a critique of a given social order and is future oriented and generative in its outlook and potential. This 'possibility thinking' also features in work by Postma (2015) who suggests that the critical agent in an educational context is not only aware of regimes of power but is future oriented and can envisage alternative modes of being.

I suggest that the development of *Birth to Five Matters* was the doing of transformational politics. I argue that the project entailed critique, but also the rejection of authoritarian moves and the reclaiming of policy space. It was the assertion of agency in creating an alternative for 'the sector by the sector'.

On collective action

These data, in the form of text from the coalition's website, illustrate my reflections on collective action:

We came together because we wanted to create a resource which pooled our members' considerable expertise and experience and kept alive multiple possibilities for the future of early childhood education. The document is intended to work with members' many values, principles and aspirations. As a coalition we encompass a range of early years traditions and approaches and reflect the diversity of experiences and views of our members. We hope this guidance does justice to the collaborations and rich discussions that took place as part of its development. We have sought to reach points of consensus and support diversity of practice and interpretation.

<https://birthto5matters.org.uk/background/>

A growing mood of frustration about a lack of authentic engagement by policy-makers (see above) was an impetus for the collaboration. In concert with this frustration was an awareness that no single organisation could or should address the challenge alone, or effectively advocate for the many different stakeholders within the system. As a result, the initiation and drafting of *Birth to Five Matters* became a collective endeavour. From inception, it was evident that the pooling of considerable expertise and experience was key to the underpinning values of the collective.

Whilst project-based collaborations have long been a feature of the ECEC sector, the formation of the wider coalition and the scale of engagement with the production of non-statutory guidance (Early Education 2020), from grass roots, had not been seen since the 1990s, when an Early Childhood Forum (which is still in operation) formed as a coalition in reaction to curriculum concerns in the aftermath of the Rumbold Report. Similarly, the Early Years Coalition project design centred on a participatory, democratic approach with included a multitude of voices; a process rich in dialogue, consultation, knowledge and experience sharing. Such a process reflects research by Mitchell, who observed, in a New Zealand context:

participatory decision-making processes that draw on a diverse range of expertise from committed individuals and organisations can generate a sound platform for ECEC policy that upholds democratic values of equity and inclusion. (Mitchell 2019, 109)

However, it is also important to highlight the inevitable, multiple, professional disagreements, differences in theoretical understandings, professional values and priorities which emerged through this process. This included differences among contributors in the importance given to historical education theories and contemporary research. A period of productive dissensus ensued, but one which served to 'disturb the complacent flow of the dominant discourse' (Moss 2006, 33).

Notably, the power of social media as a tool for collective action emerged as formative and important to the launch of *Birth to Five Matters*. As fora for professional debate and as means to galvanise the early education community around the project, platforms such as Facebook™ and Twitter™ were utilised as sites of collective action. The extensive reach of multiple professional associations and unions (beyond their traditional membership) galvanised a large proportion of the ECEC community around the project and produced a momentum which, I argue, has entered early childhood education folklore. As Giroux (2014, 240) argues:

a need for social movements to invoke stories as a form of public memory – stories that have the potential to move people to invest in their own sense of individual and collective agency, and stories that make knowledge meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative.

Notably, there was limited public response from the Department for Education to the publication of *Birth to Five Matters*. Whilst this sector-led guidance was sent to government officials, there was no formal response or acknowledgment in government communications about this document. Rather, in a reflection of continued centralised control, exclusive promotion of the department's 'official' guidance' continued.

On fragmentation

At the beginning of this paper, I highlighted perceptions of fragmentation within the English ECEC sector as inhibiting the collectivising of the workforce. In other contexts, such fragmentation has been deemed by some (Press 2007; Woodrow 2008) to be problematic, ‘hamper[ing] the system’ and working ‘against a comprehensive re-evaluation of policy across all levels of government’ (Press 2007, 190).

A number of studies, drawing on critical traditions, highlight power imbalances both between ECEC and policymakers and within the ECEC sector itself, as the basis for activist responses. The aforementioned traditions of care and education for young children and the historical divides in governance, funding and workforce based on these traditions continue to be pervasive. The idea that collective action may be inhibited by sectoral divisions is an argument expressed by MacFarlane and Lewis in an Australian context (2012, 67). Their study deploys Foucauldian ideas to explore the diversity of the ECE sector, with educators framed as ‘categorised and governed’. In a nation which has embraced a ‘mixed market’ approach of public, private and voluntary governance arrangements of provision, the research suggests that differing disciplinary and philosophical approaches result in fragmentation which can limit collective advocacy and activism. MacFarlane and Lewis assert that this fragmentation within the sector and the erosion of a specific ECE experience and knowledge base (as it becomes dominated by influences from the compulsory school age curriculum) may result in incoherence which hampers moves to collective activism.

The diversity of organisation within the Early Years Coalition and the membership of working groups inevitably reflected the structural fragmentation of the wider early childhood education and care system. Indeed, this diversity was reflected in the range of perspectives on the structure, content, process of development and design of the *Birth to Five Matters* guidance. Notably, some sector organisations chose not to participate in the Coalition. However, such fragmentation did not appear to hinder a process of productive disagreement and compromise. Indeed, this notion of fragmentation as limiting policy advocacy and activism is contested by the notion of agonism. I argue that the work of the Early Years Coalition, in developing sector-led guidance, illustrated the importance of plurality in the democratic politics of early childhood education, one that is ‘open to the prospect that something new, previously unknown can emerge from an encounter with difference’ (Moss 2014, 119).

On agonism

contrary to what neoliberal ideologists would like us to believe, political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts . . . [they] always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives’. (Mouffe 2000, 6)

Fragmentation, which is often perceived as negative in the field of early childhood education, is viewed by Bown and Sumsion (2016, 204) not as a positive/negative binary but through the concept of agonism. The authors, drawing on work by Mouffe, utilise the political theory of agonistic pluralism in terms of an approach which ‘allows a suspension of multiple voices moving in tension, where tension is not necessarily negative or positive,

but productive'. The Bown and Sumsion (2016, 206) study goes further, suggesting that the notion of fragmentation should be viewed with more criticality. They argue that the characterization of fragmentation has a totalizing and disciplining effect on a sector that could instead be reconfigured in agonistic terms. The widely held belief that the ECEC sector was 'fragmented' led the early childhood participants to feel that the extent to which they could influence politicians/policy was somewhat restricted.

On 'agonistic pluralism', Mouffe argues that it is not possible or even desirable to eradicate difference in a search for consensus. Indeed, far from being a sign of imperfection, such 'conflicts and confrontations, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism' (Mouffe 2000, 34).

Through an agonistic reconfiguring, this perceived fragmentation of the ECEC workforce (and sector professional associations) is reframed in terms of diversity and complexity, suggesting that this is conducive to the conditions for contestation. Such contestation is seen as a pre-cursor to the generation of visionary policy. I suggest that the work of the Early Years Coalition, which 'sought to reach points of consensus and support diversity of practice and interpretation' (Early Education 2020, 2) is indicative of this agonism at work.

Looking forward

In 2019–20, an innovative, inclusive model of collaboration between professional associations was successfully established in England to develop curriculum guidance 'by the sector, for the sector'. The work of this coalition was deliberately time-limited and task-specific, as the collective convened for the primary aims of responding to the government consultation and producing sector-led curriculum guidance. This work resulted in the development of *Birth to Five Matters*. By 2023–24 there had been 44,000 downloads of *Birth to Five Matters* guidance and 1.9 million page views of the associated website, indicating the success of the project. In the intervening years, members of the Coalition have continued to meet in order to keep the guidance under review in the face of external changes and are involved in wider ECEC policy discussions.

As I write this paper, the UK has a new Labour-led government promising greater engagement with the education workforce. However, in the short term, the early childhood sector in England continues to experience tumultuous times, grappling with years of policy neglect, the absence of strategic government vision and workforce planning and discursive shifts prioritising 'childcare for working parents' over the provision of universal early education and care services. Against this backdrop, a new Early Education and Childcare coalition has been formed with 30 organisations (many from the original Early Years Coalition), including children's charities, parent campaign groups, provider membership bodies, anti-poverty campaigners, NGOs, trade unions representing early educators and business lobbying groups. The *raison d'être* of the coalition is to advocate for a 'rescue and reform' of the ECEC sector: both short-term measures that will stabilise the sector now and a long-term national programme of reform and investment. The website for this new coalition details how this work requires cooperation and partnership in the form of collaborative working.

These models of collaboration reflect international research by Adlerstein and Pardo (2023, 10) who identify an early childhood association ecosystem in a Chilean context 'akin to loose-emergent connectedness ... within a neoliberal policy environment'. In an

English context, I argue that in 2020 professional associations coalesced with such connectedness around resistance to ‘top down’ policy reforms and found cohesion against the odds. Theorising how these ECEC associations and unions form such an ecosystem may constitute the basis for a broader collaborative culture and for the further development of ‘ground up perspectives on professionalism’ (Dalli 2008, 16).

The features of critical agency, collective action and a recognition of the strengths of an agnostic pluralism discerned in this case study are, I believe, symptomatic of a maturing ECEC system. Identifying, naming and further exploring these features may prove fruitful for future coalitions in the advancement of professionalism in the early childhood education and care sector. Developing the conditions which further enable policy critique and a recognition of the value of agonism may well be important precursors to collectivism in the field.

These features are, I suggest, indicative of a profession ‘thinking and speaking for itself’ (Urban and Dalli 2012, 157) and one increasingly ready to take collective action. The work of the Early Years Coalition is a case study both in collaboration and in hope.

Note

1. The Early Learning Goals are defined as ‘The level of development children should be expected to have reached by the end of the EYFS’ (Department for Education 2024).

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