

A Parent Policy or Apparent Policy? Questioning New Labour's conviction that Every Parent Matters

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Background

Every parent - teenage mums, estranged fathers, single parents, middle class professionals - matters to New Labour. Or so Every Parent Matters (EPM) (DfES, 2007a, 2007b) declared in the final moments of PM Blair's administration. But to what extent and to what end parents matter to New Labour is not clear. The paper shall argue that there is evidence both within the document and outside it, within the context of broader initiatives, to question the apparent policy.

Every Parent Matters is a declaration of the role of parents in shaping public services. Its intention is to open a 'national debate with parents, children and young people as well as service planners, commissioners and providers as to how parents can be best supported and engaged' (DfES, 2007:1). In its fifty three pages it presents a view of what effective parenting is. This is based on the premise that all good parents apparently have a 'growing appetite for discussion, information and advice' and that they should be 'empowered' to 'influence and shape public services such as schools, health, and children's services' (DfES, 2007:4). However, the nature of such 'empowerment' or the degree of their 'influence' that might be expected from parents is clouded in ambiguity.

Research Questions

The paper will argue that parents are not a homogeneous group. Indeed, that there is a catalogue of well-researched critique that 'parental power' not only ignores issues of class, race and gender but that white, middle class mothers represent the vast majority of parents involved with their child's education (e.g. Martin & Vincent, 1999). Hallgarten (2000) has likewise indicated that parental involvement is 'normally less of a protective barrier than a lever to maximize the potential of the already advantaged'. A complimentary interpretation is that EPM is a policy aimed not at the advantaged and middle class, but at the socially and economically disadvantaged. If this is so it needs clarification and interpretation.

Methods

The paper takes the form of a critical policy analysis of Every Parent Matters informed by the 'Policy into Practice' framework offered by Bell and Stevenson (2006). This is an adaptation of the policy analysis tool constructed by Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) which focuses on the context, text and consequences of policy. Bell and Stevenson (2006: 12) add four hierarchical dimensions to this framework. These have to do with understanding the transition from policy formation to policy implementation and focus on the socio-political environment, strategic direction, organizational principles and operational practices and procedures of the policy process. The model acknowledges the complexity of policy development processes; 'that policy context impacts decisively on shaping the institutional environment' (Bell and Stevenson, 2006:7). It allows for the exploration of the relationships between policy development, local context and the impact of the macro-policy environment i.e. the role of the state (ibid).

Frame

That parents should be given greater attention in policy formulation can be attributed to the underlying theories of a stakeholder society and stakeholder economy largely attributable to Hutton (1997). Approaching EPM through the lens of stakeholder analysis allows for a closer critique of the role of parents in New Labour policy making. Parents (and their children) are by default the prime service

users in relation to education and schools. By adopting the model of stakeholding, government can build upon the already established discourse of parental responsibility and rights as well as the choice agenda. They are thus able to make much more explicit their expectations for participation, engagement, and information sharing, as well as formulating new types of services that could support those parents unable or unwilling to do so successfully. To this end, parents became instruments for change in terms of the nature of schooling (standards and the forms of schooling), social cohesion (behaviour management) and social mobility (skills, training and employment).

Research findings

The paper emerges with the notion of 'parent power', 'parental responsibility', 'parental involvement', 'participation' and the concept of the 'good parent' are aspects of social practises that contain an ethical preference for certain behaviours. These preferences are seen also in the broader sweep of current government policy such as discourses on 'responsibility' and 'active citizenship' where tensions in government policy have been evident (see Gibson, 2009). Here breaking the cycle of deprivation in which many families have become entrapped conflicts with Neo-Liberal views of citizenship in which parents need to develop economic self-reliance and resilient in finding their own way without over-burdening the state. Both elements, we believe, are found within EPM.

Thus the paper contends that the focus of EPM is actually upon structures and processes and not on empowerment and participation. Vincent's (1996) 'statist' model is relevant, for it describes the attempt to 'ameliorate, improve and reform state provision' (1996:16) in a genuine attempt to support parents in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities with regards to education and responsible citizenship. On the other hand, the plethora of new types of professionals and professional bodies that have been created since EPM (e.g. Parent Support Advisors (2006), National Academy of Parenting Practitioners (2007), and so), represent an extension of the role of the state in defining what a parent is and in constructing parenting support where there is deviance. Louise Casey, Home Office adviser and former head of the government respect task force, has suggested that whole families should be placed into residential care to make them behave better (BBC News, 2009)

The paper concludes that EPM confuses the issue of what is done to parents with what is done for parents and, in ignoring class, race and gender variables, what can be done by parents in the furtherance of social and educational reform. The socio-economic groupings within each of these categories is illuminating because it defines what each group is traditionally seen as capable of, and this is questionable. The prime objective is the reconstruction of the welfare state via New Public Management and a modernising agenda that seeks to tackle issues social inclusion and cohesion via participatory democracy. However, what is presented in EPM is a recipe for perpetuating perceptions of a social and moral underclass that need to be controlled by such instruments of government as Family Intervention Projects with little hope of giving all parents 'every chance to get involved, have their say and secure what is best for their children.' (DCSF, 2007a)

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