Early Childhood Education Markets and Democratic experimentalism

Two models for early childhood education and care

Discussionpaper

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Markets and Democratic experimentalism

Two models for early childhood education and care

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Summary

The paper defines and compares two models for the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services: the market model, which is currently spreading and receiving increasing policy attention; and the model of democratic experimentalism, which has a low policy profile, though examples are given of where this model has been proposed or implemented. These are not the only models available, and the intention is not to prove that one model is objectively better than the other. Rather the intention is to resist the hegemonic tendency of the market model, by arguing it is neither necessary nor inevitable; and to move discussion of ECEC services from technical to political and ethical questions through demonstrating there are alternatives and, therefore, the need for democratic decision-making.

The first part of the paper is about the market model, based on a relationship of trade or exchange between two individuals, a purchaser and a provider. It describes the spread of this model, in particular in three countries (Australia, England and the Netherlands), considers its meaning and rationale, and examines the evidence of how the market model works in practice. A central argument is that the market model is based on certain understandings or social constructions about people and services that are contestable and also to which people seem reluctant to conform. In particular, neither parents nor practitioners willingly adopt the role ascribed to them in the market model of *homo economicus*, an autonomous and rational utility maximiser in pursuit of self-interest. Furthermore, there is evidence that for certain services many people are ambivalent about the market model, rejecting the trend towards treating everyone as 'consumers', seeing public services as different from the market-place and valuing their 'publicness'

The second part focuses on an alternative model for the provision of ECEC services: democratic experimentalism, a term drawn from the work of the Brazilian social theorist, Roberto Unger. The model of democratic experimentalism is based on relationships of dialogue and creativity between citizens. The meaning of the model is outlined, including its understandings, concepts, goals and values. ‘Choice’ figures as an important value in both models, but whereas the market model values individual consumer choice, democratic experimentalism values collective choice or decision-making.

Although democratic experimentalism is less familiar today than the market model, examples exist of where it has been proposed or implemented, and some of these examples are presented (though the process of exemplification, and more generally the ability to evaluate democratic experimentalism and understand its potential, is hampered by the lack of systematic attention paid to this model in policy or research). Attention is paid to what democratic experimentalism might mean at different levels, from the national to the individual ECEC service: how, for example, might a nursery practice democratic experimentalism? Consideration is also given to the conditions needed to nurture and support democratic experimentalism, including: understandings, values, tools, an educated workforce and time.

Finally the paper compares what the two models might mean for how ECEC systems are structured, covering areas such as access, type of service, management, workforce and funding.

In reality, models are never as pure or distinct as on paper; there are variants and overlaps. But even taking account of these, real differences remain and real choices need to be made. More

attention needs to be paid to defining different policy directions in ECEC and to the conditions that might be needed to follow them.

Any vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces and treat education as a commodity to be purchased and consumed…'Freedom of choice' will be a major principle in determining educational policy, [but] the notion of 'choice' will not simply refer to the rights of individuals to pursue their narrow self-interests in a competitive marketplace. Instead it will be recognized that, *in a democracy, individuals do not only express personal preferences; they also make public and collective choices related to the common good of their society* (Carr and Hartnett, 1996: 192; emphasis added)

Introduction

This paper is a contribution to democratic debate about an important field of service provision, early childhood education and care (ECEC), though its argument applies in large measure to schools. There are different models of provision for ECEC services, including centralised state-run systems and systems relying heavily on the provision of services by workplaces. But today, a particular model is increasingly dominant, spreading from the English-speaking liberal market economies into Continental Europe and beyond: provision delivered through markets, in which consumers shop for and purchase services on offer from a variety of competing suppliers.

The paper attempts two tasks. First, to look at the market model for delivering ECEC services and what evidence there is about how it works in practice. Second, to outline another model, which is termed 'democratic experimentalism' (a term coined by Roberto Unger (2004), of whom more later). In doing so, I will compare these models across a number of fields: the different rationalities, values and understandings that underpin them; the implications of each for the structuring of service systems and the roles of different levels of government; and the conditions needed for these models to work well in their own terms.

My aim is to argue that the market model is not necessary, by which I mean that it is neither a natural process nor an inevitable condition. It is not the only feasible strategy going forward; there are alternatives, and therefore political choices to make. The intention is to resist the 'hegemonic globalisation'[1] of the market model discourse, through offering other discourses and possibilities, thereby opening up debate about the future of ECEC. My hope is to entice discussion on ECEC services away from its present fixation on technical questions (e.g. 'what works?'), redirecting it towards more vital political and ethical questions (e.g. 'what do we want for our children and our societies?'); technical questions are important - but in their rightful, subordinate place.

[1] 'Hegemonic globalisation' has been described as "the successful globalisation of a particular local and culturally-specific discourse to the point that it makes universal truth claims and 'localises' all rival discourses" (Santos, 2004, p.149). This is akin to Foucault's concepts of 'dominant discourses' or 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980), which make assumptions and values invisible, turn subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths, and determine that some things are self-evident and realistic while others are dubious and impractical

This paper focuses on two models. But I have no wish to create a binary opposition, as if these were the only two models available to us. Nor do I claim that one is inherently and objectively better than the other. I will review evidence on how markets work in practice, some of it critical. But basically I am dealing here with two views of the world, with very different rationalities, values, understandings and goals: different people, therefore, will come to different conclusions about which model is best, depending on their view of the world.

The paper is in nine sections, with two main parts. The first part is about the market model. The first section charts *the growing reach of the market model*, with examples drawn in particular from Australia, the UK and the Netherlands; the second explores *the meaning of and rationale for this model*, what it entails and the case made for it; the third reviews some *evidence on how the market model works in practice*.

The second part of the paper is about the alternative model, what I term democratic experimentalism. I devote more space to this than to the market model, partly because it will be less familiar to many readers. The first section of this part outlines *the model of democratic experimentalism*, including its values, understandings, concepts and goals. The second section presents *some examples*, to make the point that democratic experimentalism is not just an abstract model: we can learn from experience. The third section then looks in detail at *what this model might mean in practice at different levels*, from national government to individual service. The final section in this part considers what *conditions may be necessary* for democratic experimentalism to take root and grow – just as the market model requires certain conditions to flourish.

In the penultimate section I contrast *what the two models might mean for the way ECEC systems are structured*, covering areas such as access, type of service, management, workforce and funding. The concluding section reflects on how far the two models are in practice, or need to be viewed as, quite distinct opposites, a reminder of the diversity and messiness of the real world when compared with the modeller's blueprints. However, the basic argument holds. There are different ways of thinking about, organising and practicing ECEC and choices need to be made, even if nuanced in the process of democratic debate and negotiation. What is needed now is further work to support such debate and negotiation, in particular articulating, evaluating and experimenting with the different directions open to us.

The Market Model

The growing reach of the market model

The appeal of market solutions for ECEC services has been most apparent in the countries of the English-speaking world. These countries are often referred to as liberal market economies and have long been identified with what Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) has termed a liberal welfare state, characterised by a narrowly defined role for the state and the encouragement of the market in the provision of welfare services. ECEC services were slower to develop here than in many Continental European countries, and their rapid expansion over the last 15-20 years has relied strongly on private (often for-profit, referred to below as 'FP') providers. This expansion has also occurred in a context of resurgent liberalism – economic neo-liberalism and political advanced liberalism (Rose, 1999) – supported by the growing influence of public choice and public management theo-

ries that have helped to depoliticise neoliberalism and market models, making them appear if not desirable then necessary (Hay, 2007).

The consequences of marketisation for ECEC services can be clearly seen in Australia and the United Kingdom. Until the early 1990s, 'childcare'[2] in Australia was mainly provided by not-for-profit (referred to below as 'NFP') private providers. But policy changes between 1991 and 2000, mostly in funding, led to a rapid increase in services, together with FP providers, marketisation and corporatization. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of places in FP 'childcare' services increased almost 400 percent compared to 55 percent in NFP services, and the disparate growth rate continued subsequently; by 2004, fewer than 30 percent of children were in NFP services (Sumsion, 2006). The first corporate 'childcare' business floated on the Australian Stock Exchange in 2001, with four companies listed today. The largest of these, ABC Learning, is also the largest 'childcare' business in the world today, a multi-national corporation owning over 2,300 centres in Australia, New Zealand, the US, Canada and the UK (Veevers, 2006) and valued in 2007 at AUS$2.9 billion (€1.74 billion)[3] (Bartholomeusz, 2007).

The UK has seen similar rapid growth in a 'childcare' market dominated by private FP providers. In 1997 the private nursery sector was estimated to be worth £1.5 billion (€2.02 billion), rising to £3.5 billion (€4.72 billion) in 2006, with the biggest growth in corporate providers. Today, the 20 largest owners between them provide nearly 60,000 places (about 8 percent of total nursery places) (Blackburn, 2007), including nearly 4,000 places run by Busy Bees – a chain of centres sold by a private equity company to ABC Learning at the end of 2006 Busy Bees was one of three companies bought by ABC Learning at the end of 2006 for a total of US $ 522m in cash. The largest deal was for the takeover of Chicago-based La Petite Academy from JPMorgan Partners, a financial services company, for $330m, making the Australian group the second largest 'childcare services group' in the US, with over 1000 centres. Eddy Groves, the chief executive of ABC learning, has said that the purchase of Busy Bees is "a starting point for further expansion into the fragmented UK market and throughout Europe" (Veevers, 2006: 4)[4] . Nearly 80 percent of the nursery sector in 2006 was accounted for by FP providers, divided almost equally between 'sole traders' (i.e. an owner with one nursery) and private companies.

As in Australia, the growth of a market in 'childcare' has been deliberate public policy in the UK, under both Conservative and Labour governments, supported by the introduction of demand-side funding arrangements (income-related payments to parents) intended to underpin market growth by reducing 'market failure' arising from lower income families being unable to access private providers. In England, the government's 10 Year Strategy for Childcare, published in 2004 (HM

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[2] I place 'childcare' in inverted commas to emphasise that this is a constructed concept or understanding of ECEC services; it is neither self-evident nor neutral. Later in the paper, I explain the concept further and contrast it with other concepts. For a fuller discussion and critique of the 'childcare' concept, see Moss (2006).

[3] All currency conversions are for rates of exchange on January 2nd 2008, using Yahoo Currency Converter

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Treasury, 2004), and the Childcare Act 2006 require local authorities to actively manage the 'childcare' market to secure sufficient childcare for working parents:

> local authorities take the strategic lead in their local childcare market, planning, supporting and commissioning childcare…Local authorities will not be expected to provide childcare direct but will be expected to work with local private, voluntary and independent sector providers to meet local need (Sure Start Unit, 2006).

In some important respects 'early education' is treated differently to 'childcare' with an entitlement to free (supply-funded) part-time provision for 3 and 4 year olds. But provision of this service follows a market model; it can be supplied by any provider – public or private, school or nursery – meeting certain conditions, in return for which the supplier receives a nursery education grant. In 2007, 60 percent of 3 year olds receiving this entitlement were in private provision, both FP and NFP, though this figure dropped to 21 percent for 4 year olds, most of whom have entered school (Department for Education and Skills (England), 2007).

An active market policy has gained a foothold on Continental Europe, in the Netherlands. Recent legislation (Wet *Kinderopvang*, the Childcare Act), introduced in 2005, redirects funding from providers to parents. Ideally, parents' employers should pay a third of +costs (in practice, 75 percent make some contribution), leaving parents to pay the remainder, though with most parents receiving an income-related payment from the state: "the explicit objectives of this reform are to increase parental choice and stimulate the operation of market forces" (Marengos and Plantegna, 2006: 18). One result of this legislation has been a growing market share for FP providers, from an already high level; in 2004, about 60 percent of childcare organisations had FP status (Noailly, Visser and Grout, 2007).

While both England and the Netherlands have adopted an explicit market approach to the provision of ECEC services, there are some national variations in practice, most notably: more employer involvement in contributing to costs in the Netherlands[5] ; and a stronger regulatory role for government in England, with services subject to inspection by a national agency against national standards, as well as direct government investment to develop services in economically disadvantaged areas (albeit, this investment is short term, services being expected in the long term to manage in the market).

The market model: meaning and rationale

What is behind this growing policy interest in market solutions to the delivery of ECEC? What is meant by a 'market model? What are the assumptions, values and understandings on which it is based? What are the attractions of the approach? Mostly the answers are of general applicability, not just specific to ECEC. They constitute a mindset, a way of seeing and understanding the world, people and the relationships between them.

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[5] A 2007 report on the nursery market in England concludes that employer contributions rose rapidly between 2005 and 2006 due to new tax relief measures, and that employers in 2006 accounted for 18 percent of total market income; this compares to 71 percent of income from parent fees or £2.5 billion. By comparison, demand subsidies to parents, in the form of tax credits, amounted to £360 million – or 10 percent of total market income (Blackburn, 2007)

The market model creates particular subjects, 'purchasers' and 'providers', who are in a particular relationship to each other arising from the trading of a commodity. The former should have a degree of choice between the latter and should enter into a direct contractual relationship, in which the chosen provider supplies a commodity - goods or services - to an agreed specification and price. Since purchasing power among users is unlikely to be equal, the market is supposed to produce goods of varying cost and quality, which can be matched to individual preferences and purchasing power; some purchasers will be able to pay for de luxe services, others must settle for economy models. The market, therefore, is a unique mechanism for creating a relationship between purchasers and providers, based on what has been termed an 'exchange paradigm': "The logic of the exchange paradigm requires an equal payment for each need-satisfying good" (Vaughan and Estola, 2007: 246)

The case for the market, however, goes well beyond simply being a means to match purchasers and providing. The market model, its advocates claim, is better able to: meet parental needs and preferences (choice); provide best value for money (efficiency); protect consumers against the self-interest and overweening power of providers (empowerment); improve or close failing services (discipline); and stimulate new solutions to meet unmet and new consumer demands (innovation).

> Those who favour demand side funding typically believe that markets work relatively well, that it is very important to preserve parental choice over a range of child care services, that parental choice will enforce competition between different potential suppliers of child care, that this competition will ensure that services are produced at the lowest possible cost for the quality chosen, and that suppliers will constantly seek to innovate in order to attract parental dollars. Most advocates for demand-side funding also believe that private for-profit suppliers will respond best to these market incentives (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2004: 2-3)

Competition, as this quotation makes clear, is the force driving services to deliver these benefits; alongside individual choice, competition is a central value of the market approach, since it ensures the allocation of resources with the greatest possible efficiency.

To achieve a competitive market that will produce what the consumer wants at the lowest possible price, certain conditions are assumed to be necessary:

- *well-informed* consumers who know what they want and are willing to shop around for the best buy ("rewarding providers who meet their expectations of quality at a price they can afford" (HM Treasury, 2004: 47)) and, if subsequently dissatisfied, to switch their custom from one provider to another;
- *sufficient supply*, both of individual services and of organisations supplying services to ensure choice and competition;
- *subsidy for lower income consumers* ('demand side funding') that will enable them to fully access the market; and
- *a level playing field*, so that all providers operate under the same constraints and conditions.

There is, though, a more fundamental condition. The market model is based on certain understandings (or, put another way, images or social constructions) of people, relationships and institutions. It understands subjects (both the purchaser/consumer and the provider) to be competitive, profit-seeking agents, each taking individualistic decisions about how best to maximise gain for themselves: the image is economic man (*homo economicus*), an autonomous and rational utility

maximiser in pursuit of self interest. The actions and relationships of this subject are determined by a calculative and economic rationality, a process described by Nikolas Rose in his exploration of the newly dominant politics of advanced liberalism that complements the spread of marketisation:

> [As advanced liberalism develops] the relation of the social and the economic is rethought. All aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualised along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice. Choice is to be seen as dependent upon a relative assessment of costs and benefits of 'investment'…All manner of social undertakings – health, welfare, education, insurance – can be reconstrued in terms of their contribution to the development of human capital (Rose, 1999: 141-142).

Within this market rationality, services are understood as producers and suppliers of a particular commodity and parents as potential consumers, or customers, calculating the best buy given their needs and what they can afford. The product for sale in the ECEC market is most often 'childcare' or, to be more precise, 'quality childcare'[6] , representing the commodification and transfer to the market of a 'household service', formerly produced within the home by the unpaid work of women; other 'household services' that can similarly be commodified and marketised include cleaning, cooking and eldercare (OECD, 1994; Yeandle, Gore and Herrington, 1999). The 'childcare' service can, therefore, be understood as the producer of a commodity, supplied to the purchaser in exchange for her money. Today the commodity may well include not only a certain quantity of care delivered to a defined specification but also certain predefined educational and developmental outcomes.

'Childcare' services that fail to meet their specification and to deliver their advertised outcomes, or that are unresponsive to changing consumer needs, will prove uncompetitive and be punished by parents-as-consumers not choosing them in the first place or, as dissatisfied customers, switching their custom. According to the market model, therefore, 'childcare' service must respond to market messages or close, and their users and staff move on elsewhere.

This discussion of the market approach has assumed a dualistic relationship, between purchaser and provider. In practice, especially in fields where a public policy interest is identified, the state is highly likely to intervene to mediate market relationships. The result is what has been described as a 'quasi-market' (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998), where the government controls such matters as entry by new providers, investment, the quality of service and price; it may even fund all or part of the cost of services, subsidising the service either directly or indirectly via transfers to purchasers. Here the state retains and supports the direct purchaser/provider relationship, but steers the relationship indirectly and at a distance. Moreover as the comparison above of England and the Netherlands shows, markets can be mediated by government and others (e.g. employers) in different ways and to different degrees; the 'market model', therefore, should not be regarded as homogeneous.

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[6] The product can also be, as in the case of England, 'early education'. Countries with strong market models often combine a market model of 'childcare' with public programmes of targeted services intended to provide early intervention for a minority of 'disadvantaged' children (e.g. Head Start in the USA, Sure Start in the UK). The active role of the state, including supply funding of targeted services, is justified in terms of the inability of the market by itself to respond to the needs of this group of families and the inability of the group to access the market.

Finally, it is important to make some distinctions. The movement towards a market model may be accompanied by an increase in *private* provision, in particular services provided for profit, i.e. run as businesses; the emergence of *corporatisation*, i.e. services provided by public companies quoted on national stock exchanges; and the introduction or extension of *demand-side funding*, by which parents rather than services are subsidised, usually to enable their improved access as consumers to marketised services. These trends often coincide because the same rationality that values markets also values services provided as businesses and the funding of parent consumers rather than service suppliers. But the association is not inevitable. Services that are directly publicly-funded, even publicly-run, can operate within a market, or at least a 'quasi-market'; for example, government-run schools may compete for pupils with each other and with private schools. Moreover, even a cursory look across Europe will show that 'private providers' of ECEC services come in many shapes and sizes, with varying histories and relationships to the welfare state, some going back many years: national, regional and local NGOs, both secular and religious; local community groups; cooperatives; workplaces; and businesses, small, medium and large (Humblet, 2006). So within a market-based model, the details can vary considerably, and 'private providers' need not be FP (FP) businesses or corporations.

How does the market work in practice?

There is, by now, a substantial literature on the relative merits of for FP and NFP ECEC services. Researchers "generally find that nonprofit centers produce higher quality services" (Cleveland, Forer, Hyatt, Japel and Krashinsky, 2007: 28). This is usually attributed to FP providers spending less on resources associated with quality, especially staffing:

> nonprofits make different decisions about inputs (and appear to have higher quality objectives) than for-profits in child care. Nonprofits consistently hire better-trained staff, encourage them to professional development, and remunerate their staff better than FP centres. But, partly this greater production of quality appears to go beyond the different input decisions that nonprofits make. Under the right conditions, a culture of quality appears to develop in nonprofit child care organizations, producing a quality level that is more than the sum of its parts (Cleveland et al., 2007: 17)

As already noted, studies comparing type of provider do not necessarily throw light on market approaches. Markets can operate in countries with very different mixes of providers; Canada, for example, has fewer FP services than Australia, the Netherlands and the UK. Cleveland et al (2007) do, however, draw attention to one specific instance in Canada where there is a relationship between provider type and market functioning. In what they term 'thin' markets (i.e. whether there are relatively few children in an area), they find the difference between NFP and FP services disappears. They suggest that

> in thin markets there is no opportunity for nonprofits to produce and sell a differentiated service – differentiated in higher quality…In thin markets, there are not many parents with the demand and income to support higher quality services…In thick markets, there is a sufficient mass of geographically concentrated potential consumers to allow nonprofits to aim for the higher quality end of the market (while commercial centres go for the lower end) (ibid.: 15)

Focusing more specifically on the functioning of markets, Sumsion has described the primacy of market forces since the early 1990s in Australian childcare, driven by government commitment to

"consumer choice, competitiveness, profit maximisation and a downsizing of government's role in favour of private sector expansion…and the assumption that privatization will enhance the efficiency of childcare provision" (2006: 101). However, as she goes on to note, there is a "lack of empirical evidence to support assertions about the 'automatic superiority' (Crouch, 2003: 9) of market dominated provision of social services generally (Meagher, 2004) and childcare specifically"; and that "on the contrary, in Australia and internationally, evidence abounds of an 'imperfect' market for childcare services that fails to conform to the principles of so-called market rationality" (Sumsion, 2001: 101).

As Sumsion's reference to 'imperfect' markets implies, most evidence concerns how well markets actually work in practice. A recent study in England throws some light on what is termed the supply side, i.e. the supply of services to the market. The study, for the English Department of Education and Skills (DfES)[7] , is by the global accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, and is titled *Children's Services Markets*. The overall report begins by stating the government funder's aim, highlighting the centrality of the market model in English policy: "The DfES wishes to develop an evidence-based strategy for developing the market in children's services, which are identified as education, social care, health and other services for children, young people and families" (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006a: 3). Four separate reports follow, including one on 'childcare'.

Private providers, in the childcare study, voice concerns about the impact of publicly-supported initiatives and services, including Children's Centres and schools. There is a risk of provision closing due to what is perceived to be an uneven playing field producing unfair competition: "the feedback we gathered from the PVI [private, voluntary and independent] providers who have settings in areas exposed to a less favourable market environment suggests that increased local competition is a key factor, but some believe that additional local capacity in children's centres and schools is having a significant impact" (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006b: 5). The resultant "losses may not discriminate between high and low quality capacity (which) would hamper market development" (ibid.: 6)

A second risk is inadequate supply of services for certain groups: "the capacity developed may not suit the nature of local demand, e.g. in areas where cultural factors impact demand for childcare; (and) a proportion of the market may remain under-served, e.g. working families unable to afford the full cost child care places" (ibid.: 7). The overall report identifies a number of problems in markets for children's services in general, including: local authorities not having "a strong sense of what the vision for their local market could, or should, be"; local authorities' difficulty in managing markets; and uneven playing fields between public and private providers (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006a: 5-7).

A well-functioning market also involves a demand side, that is the way consumers relate to the market; in particular, it requires an informed consumer willing and able to act as *homo economicus*. 'Consumers' need information about price and quality and to process that information efficiently, to make initial choices and then to monitor those choices once made. But, in practise, this may prove hard to achieve. Canadian researchers observe that "many parents have never purchased childcare before, and by the time they learn what they need to know, their children are old enough so that the parents may never purchase childcare again". Furthermore, working parents have "little

[7] The Department has since been expanded and renamed the Department for Children, Schools and Families

time to seek out and evaluate childcare, even if they knew entirely what they were looking for" (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2002: 39).

The English government's key 'childcare strategy' document concedes similar problems:

> 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, 2004: 67).

Experience in the Netherlands confirms that

> information is a real problem. The consumers [assumed to be parents] do not know every supplier and quite often receive information through informal networks. Furthermore the consumer is only partly able to check the quality of services…As a form of self-regulation, the sector has adopted a quality agreement with rules about a pedagogical plan, child:staff ratios, group size and accommodation. Parents, though, seem to value different aspects of quality, for example active play, the provision of different activities and short journeys. As a result, parents may overestimate a service's quality…Parents also appear to have little knowledge of the cost of childcare (Marangos and Plantegna, 2006: 19)

Another Dutch report sums up the problem: "parents and government simply cannot be present full-time while the service is being rendered and therefore a residual informational deficit or asymmetry will remain" (Noailly et al., 2007: 23).

Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky raise a further complication about the consumers' role in the market. Most studies of and advocates for the market assume parents are the primary consumers. But, arguably, children are the direct consumers, with most first-hand experience of the commodity sold on the market, and they "cannot easily communicate with the parent about what kind of care is being delivered" (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2007: 39). They are also unlikely to have a strong voice in the original choice of service, indeed they have no recognised place in the exchange transaction; reference to children's rights is noticeably absent in the market model. For example, the report of PricewaterhouseCoopers (2006a) for the English government on children's services markets makes no reference to children's rights, participation or perspectives.

Resuming the adult focus, there is evidence that for certain services many people are ambivalent about the market model. In a study of English public services, part of the joint Economic and Social Research Council and Arts and Humanities Research Council *Cultures of Consumption* programme, John Clarke found most people reject the trend towards treating everyone as 'consumers', seeing public services as different from the market-place and valuing their 'publicness':

> The idea that people expect to be treated as consumers by public services has become a central theme in public service reform under New Labour [i.e. the post-1997 UK government]…[Our research] found that people have many relationships with public services. They are citizens, experts, taxpayers and voters as well as users, and they see themselves as part of wider bodies - as members of the public or local communities. When people approach health, police or social

> agencies, they do not always know what they want. They hope to meet staff who will respect them and help them make important decisions… Our findings show that *both providers and users consistently view public services as different from commercial transactions, insisting that the process is 'not like shopping'*…This phrase was used repeatedly in the interviews. It captures the view of the people we met that public services are, and should be, centred on ongoing, personal relationships, rather than being anonymous, one-off transactions (Clarke, 2006; emphasis added).

Elsewhere, Clarke argues that "the key to unlocking public service improvement may lie in a deepening understanding of the relationship between service and user, rather than the blunt instrument of choice" (Coleman, 2006: 30).

Further evidence that using human services is not like shopping comes from the ECEC field. Consumers may switch between suppliers of mortgages or of privatised utilities such as electricity or gas. But when it comes to 'childcare', parents prove more reluctant to switch their custom.

> According to recent research, over half of [Dutch] parents had never considered changing to another provider. Only 5 per cent actually did so in 2004. Childcare is not like a supermarket product: the relationship between consumer and provider is personal and long term. A double loyalty exists: to the childcare organisation, but also - and mainly – to their children. The longer childcare is used, the more familiar and safe parents and children feel and the more personal contact they have with staff and the other children and parents. In these circumstances, a price increase or a (small) change in opening hours will not generate much change in demand (Marangos and Plantegna, 2006: 19).

Here is a central issue: resistance to adopting the identity of consumer and the vision of the market, and attachment to non-market values, such as loyalty, security and affective relationships.

That childcare markets do not work as markets are meant to do because parents do not subscribe to the necessary roles and rules is also the conclusion of 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', for seven reasons. Given the uniqueness of this study, it is worth considering these reasons at greater length:

1. "The childcare market just does not work like markets are supposed to. As a practical market it is very different from a market in theory – and indeed it is a very inefficient market" (ibid.: 38).

2. "The services which are required by consumers are complex and unusual. As our respondents unanimously see it, they want 'safety, happiness and love'…This is in a sense an impossible market. The financial exchange is inadequate as a way of representing the relationship involved." (ibid.)

3. The market is "saturated with emotions". "(Our data) are infused with the language of emotions" and "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'" (ibid.: 38-40).

4. “There is little evidence of consumer sovereignty in these local London markets, partly because of shortages on the supply side, and partly because the consumer is in a position of relative ignorance” (ibid.: 40).

5. “This 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’” (ibid.:43)

6. “This is currently a highly segmented and diverse market, with very many different types of providers, both public and private…[T]he providers are clearly aware of themselves operating in a hierarchical, classed market…[which] also has a very highly developed ‘grey market’ sector – with many informal, unregistered, ‘cash-in-hand’ operators” (ibid.: 44).

7. “Parts of [this market] position parents as employers of individual service providers – nannies specifically – to work in their own homes. Again the relations of exchange are very complex involving both personal/emotional and formal/financial aspects” (ibid.: 47).

Although this work points to a variety of problems with the market model in practice, including supply side shortages and fragmentation, the heart of the matter is ambivalent or hostile attitudes to market rationality, and its associated values and understandings. Nor is this confined to parents. Two studies, which together involved over 200 English practitioners, found that “the New Labour Government and its new managerialist emphasis on competitive individualism…ran counter to the views and experiences of participants in both studies” (Osgood, 2004: 10). Practitioners emphasised caring, collaboration and community, values which were perceived to be at odds with, and at risk from, reforms that emphasised competitive entrepreneurialism and favoured rationality, commercialism and measurability. Like Ball and Vincent, Osgood identified gender as an important influence.

> [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 (ibid.: 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, 2006:48). Actual behaviour in childcare markets throws into question the market’s understanding of the subject as *homo economicus*, an assumption further undermined by the research of Simon Duncan and colleagues into how people make decisions about parenting, partnering and work:

> People seem to take such decisions *with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what behaviour is expected as right and proper*, and that this negotiation, and the views that result, varies between particular social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states. These

> decisions are not simply individual, but are negotiated in a collective way…*Decisions are still made rationally, but with a different sort of rationality to that assumed by the conventional economic and legal model*…If people do not act according to the model of rational economic man and the rational legal subject, then legislation based on such assumptions might well be ineffectual. This is what I have labelled the 'rationality mistake' (Duncan, 2000: 1-2; emphasis added)

The word 'legislation' might easily be substituted by 'policy' or 'delivery model'.

Similar critiques have been offered of the marketisation of other human services. Writing from a feminist perspective and basing her critique on an ethics of care (Tronto, 1993), Virginia Held seeks to define limits for markets.

> Areas such as healthcare, childcare, education, the informing of citizens, and the production of culture could all be thought of as domains in which values other than economic gain [the ideal market norm] should be accorded priority…[In these areas] market norms limited only by rights should not prevail, even if the market is fair and efficient, because *markets are unable to express and promote many values important to these practises, such as mutually shared caring concerns* (Held, 2002: 29, 31; emphasis added)

Creating perfect, or even good enough, conditions for a well functioning ECEC market is obviously problematic and yet to be achieved. Some of the problems seem more susceptible to improvement than others, with the central problem, for the market model, being the inability (or unwillingness) of parents and practitioners to assume the role of utility maximisers and to adopt the values required for effective market participation. There is also a certain contradiction in the current situation that market models offer parents choice – except the choice of not participating in markets[8] .

But the problems are not confined to getting markets to function well as markets. There is evidence also, albeit patchy, that market systems are not yet able to deliver the results sought by government policies, in particular equal access to good quality services and sustainability of services. Whether this is a temporary set-back due to short-term imperfections in the market, or whether these are endemic problems in the market model is a matter of opinion.

Studies in England indicate problems of access. Ball and Vincent conclude that the childcare market does not "guarantee quality or efficiency and it dispenses services in a highly inequitable fashion" (2006: 48)[9] . One group not so well served by market models may be middle income families. I have already noted the report on the English childcare market, which suggests "working families unable to afford the full cost child care places" may be "under-served". Another English study, of several local areas, reported that in an affluent commuter area parents with higher incomes could keep prices high, so putting these services out of the reach of low to middle income parents (Harries, La Valle and Dickens, 2004).

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[8] Another apparent contradiction is how neoliberalism combines professed values of choice and flexibility with a passion, in practice, for control and standardisation (Davies and Saltmarch, 2007), applying a formidable battery of technologies for strong regulation of services (Rose, 1999)

[9] In an earlier book on the 'educational market', Ball (2003) has described similar inequalities in schooling, with middle-class families having strategic advantages when it comes to competing in market societies: "internationally, school choice policies are taken advantage of and primarily work in the interests of middle-class families" (37).

Other English studies suggest that access problems are also likely to affect children of disadvantaged parents, including black and minority ethnic parents (Kazimirski, Southwood and Bryson, 2006a, b). This may also be what the PricewaterhouseCoopers' report into childcare markets means when it concludes, somewhat opaquely, that "the capacity developed may not suit the nature of local demand, e.g. in areas where cultural factors impact demand for childcare". On the same theme, the major cross-national OECD thematic review of ECEC policies notes that the "reluctance of market providers to invest in poor neighbourhoods incurs the risk of inequity towards low income families". This problem may be ameliorated through targeting extra resources either on low income families or poor neighbourhoods. However, such targeted programmes

> miss not only a significant proportion of the children whom they are supposed to serve, but also the large group of moderate income families who are unable to afford the programmes that are on offer in a market system. In addition, targeting is generally inaccurate – that is, it does not respond to children who move in and out of risk (OECD, 2006: 117)

A Dutch study of the impact of the 2005 Childcare Act concludes that since the introduction of more market forces, "provision of childcare in 2006 has shifted towards areas with higher purchasing power and away from less urbanised areas" (Noailly et al., 2007: 18). The authors acknowledge that this might support concerns that the new legislation could lead to providers focusing on high income and more urban markets, though they conclude that it is too soon to say if this is in fact the case.

Another concern is quality. Access to services in the Netherlands appears easier than in the UK; a study there found most parents have several choices available, though nearly a third of parents with children under 4 years had no choice and the choice was more restricted in rural than urban areas (Marangos and Plantegna, 2005). There are, however, concerns about the impact on quality of recent moves towards a lightly regulated market; standards appear to have been falling even before the new childcare legislation was introduced in 2005 (Vermeer et al., 2005).

The English childcare strategy document expresses concerns about quality in the existing market, which it blames (indirectly) on parents and (directly) on failings in the market:

> Analysis of the operation of the UK childcare market demonstrates that parents may undervalue quality, and trade it off against price. Findings from an Institute of Fiscal Studies analysis of the UK childcare market suggests that price is negatively related to quality, so that parents effectively compromise on quality as childcare becomes more expensive [Duncan, Paull and Taylor, 2001]. These studies would suggest that the childcare market is not working to drive down price and drive up quality. This may indicate that parents do not have sufficient information to be able to form a full judgement of the quality of care on offer (HM Treasury, 2004: 67)

This conclusion seems to suggest that if only parents knew how to behave as consumers, then they would extract better quality for less cost. Yet it is not immediately obvious how price can be driven down and quality driven up. There is much evidence to show that the workforce is the central determinant of quality, and that a well qualified and properly paid workforce is important: "research from many countries supports the view that quality in the early childhood field requires adequate training and fair working conditions for staff" (OECD, 2006: 158). The EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-school Education) study, a major longitudinal study of 3,000 English children, pro-

vides a clear example of this recurring finding, concluding unequivocally that "settings which have staff with higher qualifications, especially with a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff, show higher quality and their children make more progress" (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart and Elliot, 2003: 2).

But as the major cost for providers, there are already pressures in competitive markets to keep labour costs low, which in turn has an adverse effect on levels of qualification. Wages in the 'childcare' sector in England are low; averaged over the period 2001-5, the average hourly pay for nursery workers was £5.95 (€8.03), compared to £14.41 (€19.45) for primary school teachers and £8.53 (€11.51) for all women workers (Simon et al., 2008). So low in deed are wages that a rise in the national minimum wage (NMW) can cause concern to proprietors:

> Six out of ten respondents to the Nursery World [a UK practitioner magazine] 2006 pay survey said they had been significantly affected by the previous autumn's NMW increase….Employers funded the increase, and consequential rises in rates for higher qualified staff, by raising fees (although some said this resulted in parents leaving) and by a combination of cutting staffing levels, running at minimum ratios, reducing staff ratios, reducing staff hours and employing younger less well-qualified staff. The indirect effects of the NMW increase, said respondents, were a fall in staff morale, less interest in training, as staff perceive that the pay differentials do not justify the extra effort, and less money available for buying equipment (Evans, 2007: 10).

The majority of manager respondents in Osgood's study "described their inability to pay staff more than the minimum wage" (16) ,while Morgan (2005), comparing the USA, France and Sweden, found poor pay and conditions were more entrenched where market forces were stronger.

The existing squeeze on workers' pay in market systems seems to be compounded by means-tested demand-side funding that is intended to enable lower income families to participate. As the final report of the OECD review of ECEC comments "demand-side funding is, in general, under-funding and the burden of costs in market-led systems falls essentially on parents, who, in the market economies, pay fees ranging from 35% to 100% of the costs of child care, unless they belong to low-income groups" (OECD, 2006: 116). Moreover, parent subsidies may not be passed on fully to providers and they make it difficult for services to plan for the longer term. Of course, supply side funding is no guarantee of good employment conditions and demand side funding might be designed to achieve better results. However, demand side funding tends to be associated with a view that 'childcare' services are essentially a private responsibility and cost (arising from the commodification of formerly private household work), with public funding consigned to the role of providing limited support for low income families; such an understanding is not conducive to sufficient funding to support a well qualified and well paid workforce.

In sum, supporters of the market model argue that a well functioning market will enable more parents to get better quality services through competition driving price down and quality up. The reality is that driving down price is more likely to lower quality: the workforce accounts for most of the costs of 'childcare', the workforce in most market systems already experience low pay and are (compared, for example, to teachers) poorly qualified, and quality is associated with the pay and qualification levels of the workforce.

Two other problems in the markets, as they are now, can be identified. First, the imperative of competition can override the benefits of collaboration. Thus the private sector managers in Os-

good's studies "tended to take an insular and defensive view of their interests and were sceptical about sharing practices for fear of losing a competitive edge over other providers" (Osgood, 2004: 16). Consequently, most did not participate in local networks and other groupings: one manager commented that "you're all in competition with each other, so sitting on these things would be like liaising with the competition" (ibid.).

Second, there is some evidence of considerable instability among services in markets: a lot of services prove unsustainable and close. Between 1999 and 2003 in England, the rate of childcare places closing was higher than government had expected: 626,000 new childcare places were created, mostly in 'out-of-school' services, but 301,000 closed, with the closure rate particularly high among family day carers, where it exceeded new places (National Audit Office (UK), 2004). The private sector remains vulnerable in England; at the start of 2007, the average vacancy rate was 22.5 percent, a doubling of the rate five years before, "confirming that growth in day nursery capacity has not been fully met by higher demand" (Blackburn, 2007).

Similar experiences, of high closure rates among private services, are reported in other countries. In Flanders, 65 small-scale private nursery centres opened in 2003, but 42 closed (Vandenbroeck, 2006); while Prentice (2005) quotes research in Canada (British Columbia) showing that a third of centres operating in 1997 had closed by 2001, with FP services at much greater risk. In 2003-4, 349 centres opened in the province of Ontario, but 256 closed during the same year.

Finally, there appears to be no evidence on innovation in 'childcare' services in market systems. Innovation, as defined above, involves developing and applying new methods and practices to improve current performance and to meet unmet and new consumer demands. But there is no research on the extent or nature of innovation in market systems, or indeed comparisons between innovation in market and non-market systems or between public and private services.

The Model of Democratic Experimentalism

Changing direction: the model of democratic experimentalism

It is time now to introduce *an* other (not *the* other) model for the provision of ECEC services, what I have termed 'democratic experimentalism'. To re-iterate the introduction, I do not claim that this model is the only alternative to the market model. Nor do I claim that it does the same as the market model – only better. Just as the market model is inscribed with distinctive values, understandings, concepts and particular goals, so too the model of democratic experimentalism has distinctive qualities. Each model, therefore, has its own logic or rationality, which determines what is necessary and desirable, what makes sense and what should be strived for. Like all models, in the real world neither model is likely to be found in a pure form, nor to function perfectly; we are more likely to find approximations than perfect replicas.

The market model is based on a relationship of trade or exchange between two individuals, a purchaser and a provider; the model of democratic experimentalism on relationships of dialogue and creativity between citizens. The market model posits a utility-maximising *homo economicus*, focused on individual (including family) needs and benefits and freed "from what are construed as the burdensome chains of social justice and social responsibility" (Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007: 3). This active and autonomous risk-managing subject is engaged in a calculative and contractual

relationship with a commodity-providing and self-interested provider, kept up to the mark by the discipline of competition; without such competition, resources will be wasted and provision will be unresponsive. This subject is also an adult, the child being treated as an object for whom care or education is needed and on whom outcomes are wrought. ECEC is depoliticised, being "displaced to the private realm – becoming matters for domestic deliberation or consumer choice" (Hay, 2007: 85) (although the degree of displacement will vary depending how far government regulates the market).

The model of democratic experimentalism, by contrast, presumes a subject who is capable and willing to adopt a public as well as a private role, with a sense of social justice and responsibility, and who is a citizen concerned with collective as well as individual well-being, bearing both rights and responsibilities. This subject can be child or adult, children being viewed as agents and rights-bearing citizens in the here and now, whose views and experiences need full expression in the processes of democratic participation that are central to this model. Central values of this model are participation, dialogue, trust - and choice.

It is important to make clear at this point that the use of the word 'choice', in the context of this model, refers to the democratic process of *collective* choice or decision-making, not the *individual* choice of the market model: 'choice' is thus a value in both models, but understood in different ways. As a recent report into Britain's democracy puts it:

> We do not believe that the consumer and the citizen are one and the same, as the new market-driven technocracy seems to assume. Consumers act as individuals, making decisions largely on how an issue will affect themselves and their families. Citizenship implies membership of a collective where decisions are taken not just in the interest of the individual but for the collective as a whole or for a significant part of that collective (Power Inquiry, 2006: 169)

Bentley makes a similar distinction and blames a shift from collective to individual choice-making for the contemporary crisis of democracy:

> Liberal democracy combined with market capitalism has reinforced the tendency of individuals to act in ways that reduce our ability to make collective choices. This is the underlying reason for the crisis in democracy … Not enough people see democratic politics as part of their own personal identity to sustain the cultures and institutions through which political legitimacy is created. The result is that our preoccupation with making individual choices is undermining our ability to make collective choices. Our democracy is suffocating itself (Bentley 2005: 9, 19)

As well as different understandings of the subject – adult and child – the two models have different understandings of ECEC services themselves. In democratic experimentalism, an ECEC service is not a provider of a private commodity to a customer. It is a public good and a public responsibility[10] , an expression of a community taking collective responsibility for the education and upbringing of its young children. Services feel a responsibility for and wish to be open to all local families, not just

[10] Fielding (2001) distinguishes 'responsibility' from 'accountability'. 'Accountability' is predominantly contractual and legal, "a largely negative instrument of social and political control" (699). 'Responsibility', the term I use here, is primarily a moral concept, and "elicits and requires a felt and binding mutuality…[it] tends to be a largely positive, morally resonant means of encouraging mutually supportive endeavour to which both, or all parties feel reciprocally and interdependently committed" (ibid.: 700)

for those wanting and able to pay for childcare; and because of their commitment to participation, these services want to be both inclusive and responsive to the needs of all families. In democratic experimentalism, ECEC services, along with schools, are recognised as unique and uniquely important public institutions, since all citizens attend them on a regular basis for a considerable period of time. They are, therefore, vital to the creation of social cohesion and solidarity.

Viewed in this way, ECEC services (and schools) are understood to be forums, or places of encounter, for citizens, young and old, in which many projects are possible – social, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, economic and political. Here are just a few of these projects, to give a hint of the potential of these social institutions, definitely not a complete inventory:

- Construction of knowledge, values and identities
- Researching children's learning processes
- Community and group support and empowerment
- Cultural (including linguistic) sustainability and renewal
- Gender equality and economic development
- Democratic and ethical practice

The last example includes the practice in ECEC services of democratic politics around a range of issues concerning children, families, education and the relationship of these issues to society. These issues are brought into the public realm and politicized, that is they move from the private realm or the realm of technical expertise to become subject to public processes of deliberation, decision making and human agency (Hay, 2007); examples of political issues will be given below.

Rather than 'delivering' predetermined 'outcomes', the ECEC service in the model of democratic experimentalism is a potential, a place of possibilities, some predetermined - but many others that are not, proving unexpected and surprising, a source of wonder and amazement. Surprise, wonder and amazement are possible and valued when not subject to the tyranny of predetermined outcomes, but also because of the importance attached to 'experimentalism'. This goes beyond innovation or responsiveness; it is far more than simply meeting existing or new consumer preferences. It means services engaging with families – children and adults - in the creation or co-construction of new knowledge, new understandings and new desires. Services become like workshops or laboratories, where new theories can be created and tried, produced from the encounter of different perspectives and identities; in this way, participatory democracy is a condition for experimentation. The results of this experimentalism are what Negri and Hardt (2005) term "immaterial production", which includes "the production of ideas, images, knowledge, communication, cooperation, and affective relations…social life itself" (146). Such immaterial production, they argue, is based on cooperation, collaboration and communication – "in short, its foundation in the common". In the model, the immaterial products created by the experimentalism of ECEC services are not appropriated as private property, but made freely available for the common good.

The term 'childcare' is quite inadequate to describe the breadth and complexity of the services in this model; in the sense of providing a safe and secure environment for children while their parents work, 'childcare' is just one of the many possibilities that services provide. While it is recognised to be important in societies where most parents are employed or studying, these services are not centred on this function and are not 'childcare services'. Other terms might be used to talk about such services: 'kindergartens', 'Children's Centres', 'schools' (reclaiming this term for a service practising education in its broadest sense) are just some of the possibilities.

Not just on paper: some examples of democratic experimentalism

The model of democratic experimentalism is less developed than its market counterpart. It lacks the theoretical and policy attention lavished on the latter, by international organisations, governments, academics and companies. But it does exist. There are examples where democracy, and to a lesser extent experimentalism, have been explicitly proposed as a basic value for ECEC services; and some where these values have been acted on to create services. Occasionally these examples are part of and supported by national or local government, enjoying the backing of formal democratic institutions. More often they are local upwellings that have emerged from a particular combination of local conditions and serve a small area; but these local projects provide evidence of the large reserves of inventiveness, solidarity and commitment to the public good that are available in our societies, reserves that are too often ignored and underused.

Some of these examples are cited in this section; further research would reveal more. They demonstrate the existence and viability of the model in practice, albeit not always in complete form. They provide pointers as to how the model might be implemented in practice, which is the subject of the section after this.

The first example is not of actual policy or provision, but of an international organisation recognising and proposing the centrality of democracy for ECEC services. The recently completed OECD thematic review of Early Childhood Education and Care, the most important cross-national study in this field, concludes its final report with a call “to aspire toward ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy”. This means “an early childhood system founded on democratic values”, that encourages “democratic reflexes in children”, and that recognises the “democratic dimension” in parental involvement, “that is the exercise by parents of their basic right to be involved in the education of their children”. (OECD, 2006: 218-219). The report envisages “early childhood services as a life space where educators and families work together to promote the well-being, participation and learning of young children…based on the principle of democratic participation” and notes that “this principle can also work effectively in management” (220).

This conclusion by OECD is inspired, in part, by a national policy, the Swedish national preschool curriculum, with its clear commitment to democracy as the basis for ECEC services:

> Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason, all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values (Ministry of Education and Science (Sweden), 1998: 6).

Other Nordic countries, too, pay explicit attention to the importance of democracy in their early childhood curricula. Wagner (2006) argues that democracy is central to the Nordic concept of the good childhood and notes, in support of this contention, that “official policy documents and curriculum guidelines in the Nordic countries acknowledge a central expectation that preschools and schools will exemplify democratic principles and that children will be active participants in these democratic environments” (292).

The strong value attached to democracy in the Nordic states is expressed not only at the level of the individual citizen but also in strong decentralisation of responsibility to local authorities and individual ECEC services. Unitary central governments create national frameworks that include strong material conditions, entitlements to access, and values and goals for services. But these

frameworks are broadly defined, leaving considerable scope for local authorities and individual services to interpret and also to experiment with a wide variety of pedagogical theories and practices. I shall return to the relationship between central and local levels of government, and also state governments in federal systems, in the next section.

After these international and national sources of inspiration, there are examples of local experiences built on democracy as a basic value. The best known is the city of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, where the municipality has created, since the early 1960s, a network of ECEC centres for children from 0 to 6 years, termed 'municipal schools'; they have achieved worldwide fame and recognition for their pedagogical practice, the US magazine *Newsweek* singling out a Reggio Emilian nursery school as the best nursery in the world, while the OECD *Starting Strong* report praises Reggio Emilia, by name, for its outstanding work (OECD, 2006: 207). This work has been based on a strong commitment to democracy, both as a reaction to a previous experience of authoritarian Fascist government (Dahlberg, 1995) but also as a positive principle. I will return later to give some examples of what this means in practice, but for the moment refer to the words of three Reggio pedagogistas (experienced educators who each work with a small number of centres to deepen understanding of learning):

> [The educational project of Reggio Emilia] is by definition a participation-based project: its true educational meaning is to be found in the participation of all concerned. This means that everyone – children, teachers and parents – is involved in sharing ideas, in discussion, in a sense of common purpose and with communication as a value…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 entire experience, a way of viewing those involved in the educational process and the role of the school. The subjects of participation then, 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…This idea of participation, therefore, defines the early childhood centre as a social and political place and thus as an educational place in the fullest sense. However, this is not a given, so to speak, it is not a natural, intrinsic part of being a school. It is a philosophical choice, a choice based on values (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004: 28-29)

Another feature of Reggio Emilia that provides inspiration is its commitment not only to democracy but also to experimentation: it can indeed be described as a pedagogical experiment in a whole community, which has run for more than 40 years. The municipal schools have been likened to "one big laboratory, a 'workshop of learning and knowledge'" (Rinaldi, 2006: 81) and "a permanent laboratory, in which children's and teachers' research processes are strongly intertwined and constantly evolving" (ibid.: 126). Experimentation is based on deep curiosity, a desire to border cross disciplines and perspectives, an openness to uncertainty and complexity, and a recognition of the importance of research – not by outside experts (though they have long-standing and productive collaborations with leading academic researchers such as Jerome Bruner, Gunilla Dahlberg and Howard Gardner), but by local participants, understanding that

> research can and should take place as much in the classroom and by teachers as in the university and by 'academics'…The word 'research', in this sense, leaves – or rather, demands to come out of – the scientific laboratories, thus ceasing to be a privilege of the few (in universities and other designated places) to become the stance, the attitude with which teachers approach the sense and meaning of life (Rinaldi, 2006: 148)

Reggio Emilia is an example of a commitment to democracy and experimentation that links together individual centres, both to each other in a network of services, and to an active local authority. It has stood the test of time well, the first centre being founded more than 40 years ago. Over this period, this network of municipal centres has shown an ability to maintain its democratic principles and, through experimentalism, generate new thought and practice. By singling out Reggio Emilia, it is not my intention to imply it is the only experience at the level of a local authority founded on and permeated by democratic values and a desire to experiment: other communities in Italy could be cited (see, for example, Fortunati, 2006 for an example of a similar experience in a small Tuscan commune), and there could well be examples from other countries.

Last but not least, democratic experimentalism can be practiced at the level of individual centres. An example is the Sheffield Children's Centre. Started in a northern English city in the early 1980s as a local community initiative, the Sheffield Children's Centre now provides a wide range of services for hundreds of children and young people, from infancy to 18 years, as well as their families, in an inner city area of economic disadvantage; its work has also extended to initiating projects in Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. The Centre, run as a cooperative, provides a range of 'core' services, including ECEC and free-time and play services for school-age children, but also a variety of other services for families in its local community and beyond, many of whom are from minority ethnic backgrounds: health services, language workshops, a contact centre where children can meet parents from whom they are separated, support for terminally ill children and parents, adult training opportunities, an advocacy, welfare rights and legal support service, and many more besides. As well as more formalised services, the Centre's workers provide important support by 'walking alongside' families in difficulty, as this family vignette illustrates:

> I came to the centre for help with domestic violence. They found us a refuge and went back to the house to get our things. My husband left the country after this and they found us a house in Sheffield and helped us furnish it. They got us school placements and gave us a baby place at their nursery and got me a place on an access course in college. My children go to the violence support group. Everyone knows it's the place to go for help. They never turn anyone away. The centre has kept us alive and safe and it has helped get over the violence. He would have killed us. In our community there is no escape and it is expected women stay with their husbands. The centre gave us a different path to escape and the centre's cultural workers made it ok with our community (Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado, in press; see this reference for many other family vignettes and a fuller description and analysis of the work of the Centre).

Underpinning this work is a strong commitment to diversity (most unusually, it has a gender mixed workforce, with almost equal numbers of men and women, but diversity covers many other dimensions including ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, age and disability); to children's rights; to equal opportunities; and to democracy, building on its original and continuing cooperative status.

> [The Centre's identity] reflects the desire of ordinary people to influence social change based on local demands. The centre began because local people expressed concerns about the cultural inappropriateness of a mainstream provision close by and it grew because its aim was to reflect diversity in all its practices. This aspiration has been its strength and its greatest challenge and locates the centre, as described by Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 171) as 'a site for democratic practice and minor politics' (ibid.)

Sheffield Children's Centre provides a vivid and well documented example of the ECEC institution in the model of democratic experimentalism: inclusive, participatory and, consequently, innovative – but in response to and in dialogue with the community of which it is part, not individual consumers. In a study of the Centre, Delgado has drawn on the work of Manuel Castells on network societies (Castells, 2004) to argue that it can be viewed as "a grassroots social movement, which has developed a number of innovations based on values and beliefs and on an attempt to embrace social inclusion" (Delgado, 2006: 2). In so doing it has made the transition from a 'resistance identity' to a 'project identity': "Like *resistance identities, project identities* resist domination, but they also propose – and eventually implement – alternatives to oppressive mainstream ideas" (ibid: 207, original emphasis).

Are there other individual centres that, like Sheffield Children's Centre, exemplify democratic experimentalism, centres generating innovative projects through participation and responsiveness to the conditions and values of their local communities, centres that are motivated not by the disciplines of the market but by a deep sense of responsibility and a commitment to participation and inclusion? On the basis of first-hand knowledge, written accounts and word-of-mouth descriptions I believe there are, and in most countries. How many are there? That is impossible to say, partly because they have received too little policy and research attention; our ability to evaluate the model and its potential is severely hampered by this neglect.

The final example, of democracy and experimentalism proposed as basic values, is not specifically about ECEC services. The work of the Brazilian social theorist Roberto Unger has the ambitious goal of imagining how to reform contemporary societies to empower humanity. He seeks an alternative to proposals for change that are either so radical as to appear unachievable or so incremental that they are achievable but trivial. He finds this alternative in what he has termed 'democratic experimentalism', which can, he argues, bring about major, long-term change through cumulative reforms, gradual and piecemeal. This strategy requires a desired direction for change, "a credible image of change" (the central question, Unger says, is 'where to?'), and the power of human imagination and hope, "which helps form the possibilities it envisages".

Unger extends the concept of experimentation to services, such as education, but makes it clear that experimentation is contingent on democracy:

> The provision of public services must be an innovative collective practice, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below…Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain (Unger, 2005: 179).

Unger is a provocation because he argues for democracy, experimentalism and markets and competition: "the quarrel of the left cannot be with the market…[but] the left must deny the natural and necessary character of the existing form of the market…The basic impulse of the left should be: markets yes, free civil society yes, representative democracy yes" (Unger, 2005: 178). He also offers an original prescription for the role of government. He rejects the idea that government should simply privatise service provision, being reduced to regulating the activities of profit-driven providers of services within a market model: "Europeans should refuse to choose between mass provision of low quality, standardised service by governmental bureaucracies and the profit-driven

privatisation of public service" (Unger, 2007: 80). Instead government should actively help to "produce new social agents who can provide those services competitively and differentially in a form which is both customised and innovative" (Unger, 2005: 179), encouraging and supporting experimental provision. Further, it should monitor and propagate the most successful experiments. But, government should also provide services itself and not as a residual provider of last resort: "government should experiment with the new and the difficult in the provision of public services…its approach to public services should be revolutionary" (ibid.). Although Unger offers no examples himself, the role played by the municipal government in Reggio Emilia immediately springs to mind.

I shall return to Unger's ideas at the end of this paper, when considering the relationship between the two models.

Democratic experimentalism: what the model looks like

In this section, I want to sketch out what a model of democratic experimentalism might mean for the provision of ECEC: how it might be implemented. Two points about democracy need to be made by way of introduction. First, democracy involves certain formal institutions and procedures: elected governments, legislatures and governing committees, for example. But there is much more to it. In the words of John Dewey, democracy is "primarily a mode of associated living"; it is "a personal way of individual life:…it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (Dewey, 1939: 2).

The model, therefore, is not just about putting in place certain structures and procedures, important as these are. It is about furnishing conditions that foster certain ways of everyday living and relating. It also presumes, just as the market model does, a particular type of human subject, and may be just as vulnerable as the market model if that subject proves more mythic than real.

Second, as indicated in the preceding section, the model in its ideal form applies at and to several levels: from the national or federal, through the regional and the local, to the individual institution – the children's centre, kindergarten or nursery. It is possible to have an individual centre working with democratic experimentalism or an individual community, but ideally all levels should be committed to the model, to form a mutually supportive system. The discussion in this section, therefore, addresses all levels and their inter-dependency. The argument is that different levels have responsibility for different democratic choices and that each level should support democratic practice at other levels, above and below it. Thus, national levels should ensure more local levels have important decisions to make and are supported in doing so democratically – in other words, creating 'democratic space' and conditions for active democratic practice; while the democratic health of the wider society depends on ECEC centres and schools that practice democracy.

National level

What is the democratic space at national or federal level? What democratic choices should be made there? Most fundamentally, the choice is which model of service provision to choose – for example, a market model or a model of democratic experimentalism. Of course, there will always be some scope for more local levels to adopt other models, but this scope will be limited by national policy decisions, especially in more centralised states.

Let us assume the choice has been made for a model of democratic experimentalism, a collective choice made after democratic dialogue and deliberation. Then the next choice is to define a *national framework* of entitlements and standards that expresses democratically agreed national values, expectations and objectives; and assures the material conditions needed to make these entitlements and standards a reality, enabling other levels to play an active role in implementation. This framework needs to be clear and strong, without smothering regional or local diversity, a difficult balancing act that needs to leave space for the practice of democracy at more local levels. To take some examples, it might mean: a clear entitlement to access ECEC services for children as citizens (in my view from 12 months of age), together with a funding system that enables all children to exercise their entitlement; a clear statement that early childhood services are a public good and responsibility, not a private commodity; a framework curriculum that defines broad values and goals but allows local interpretation and augmentation; a fully integrated early childhood policy, the responsibility of one government department; a well educated and well paid workforce for all young children (at least half of whom are graduates); and active policies to reduce poverty and inequality.

To encourage and support democracy and experimentalism in local authorities and individual centres, national government can recognise democracy as an explicit and important value for the whole system of early childhood education, as in Sweden and other Nordic countries. It can also combine a coherent and comprehensive national framework with strong decentralisation, creating space for local decision making and experimentation. This relationship, of national leadership and democratic decentralisation, is advocated in the recent OECD report on ECEC policy and provision:

> The decentralisation of management functions to local authorities is a gauge of participatory democracy. At the same time, the experience of ECEC policy reviews suggests that central governments have a pivotal role in creating strong and equitable early childhood systems, and in co-constructing and ensuring programme standards. In sum, there is a strong case to be made for ministries in-charge to retain significant influence over both legislation and financing within a framework of partnership. Through these instruments, democratic governments can ensure that wider societal interests are reflected in early childhood systems, including social values such as democracy, human rights and enhanced access for children with special and additional learning needs. In this vision the state can become the guarantor of democratic discussion and experimentation at local level, instead of simply applying policies from the centre" (OECD, 2006: 220).

A final thought on the role of national government. In its report for the English government on 'Children's Services Markets', Pricewaterhouse-Coopers suggests that the government should "articulate a vision for market provision" (2006a: 5). Government can assume a similar role if adopting the model of democratic experimentalism: it can 'articulate a vision for democratic experimentalism', a vision that is recognised to be provisional and contestable, but that is nevertheless an important reference point for others.

Provincial, state or regional level

I shall move now to more local levels of government. In so doing, I am conscious of skimming over a level of provincial, state or regional government that is important in many countries, for example Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Spain and the United States. A full discussion of the model of democratic experimentalism in ECEC would need to take greater account of this level of government, located between national and local. However, coming, as I do, from the most centralised

country in Europe, I feel somewhat ill-equipped to go in any depth into issues of federalism and regionalisation.

Some of the opportunities and dilemmas that arise in federal systems are discussed in the country note on Germany prepared as part of the OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care. That identifies decentralisation and local autonomy – both at state (regional) and local levels – as a "strength of the German system" (OECD, 2004: 44). But at the same time, the country note identifies two conditions as being needed if these features are to be a strength rather than a weakness: a practice of diversity that involves a rigorous and critical process of development and evaluation; and "certain common, national standards, in particular in those areas that concern equity between families, and the right of children to provision and quality". But in reality, such standards in Germany – the national framework referred to in the previous section - are underdeveloped:

> Only access to kindergarten is covered by a national norm, taking the form of a limited entitlement to part-time kindergarten for children from 3 upwards. Otherwise there are large differences between *Länder* in levels of provision. Similarly, funding arrangements vary between *Länder*, including what parents are required to pay. In the long-term, such diversity seems unacceptable and not in the interests either of children or families. ECEC services operate under different regulations and now with different education plans, albeit defined within a broad common frame. Where to draw the line between diversity and standardisation here is a difficult issue, but the review team find it difficult to understand why there should be such different expectations concerning access to non-kindergarten services or, in the kindergarten field, such different norms in basic structural matters as group size, staff:child ratios and in-service training (OECD, 2004: 44-45).

The early years field needs to pay more attention to the situation of federal states (and those states that, though not federal, devolve power over education to regional governments, such as the Autonomous Communities in Spain). The issues, it could be argued, are similar to those in other states, particularly those that practice strong local decentralisation: the relationship between central and local responsibilities, between coherence and diversity, between citizen rights and local perspectives. But another layer of government does, undoubtedly, increase complexity and may introduce qualitatively different issues. Not least, does a regionalised system weaken the next level of government, the local level? It is to this level that I now move.

Local authority level

The model of democratic experimentalism involves each level supporting democratic practice at other levels, partly through creating space for such practice. This means strong decentralisation to the local level (OECD, 2006; Power Inquiry, 2006). What does democratic experimentalism involve at this level?

Some years ago, I visited an Italian city with a rich experience in early childhood education. The head of the services in this city – *not*, as it happens, Reggio Emilia – described their work over 30 years as a 'local cultural project of childhood'. This term captures what democratic experimentalism at its best and most active can mean and achieve in a local authority or commune or municipality. It captures that idea of political commitment, citizen participation and collective decision-making that may enable a community to take responsibility for its children and their education (in its broad-

est sense): responsibility not just for providing services but for how they are understood, for the purposes they serve in that community and for the pedagogical practice that goes on within them.

Furthermore the term ‘project’ embodies a concept of experimentation as a desire to explore different perspectives, create new understandings and practices and to be open to new and unexpected possibilities. Here, Carlina Rinaldi (2005) explains why in Reggio Emilia they choose to use the term ‘project’ to describe learning processes in their ‘municipal schools’, but her comments could equally well apply to the broader cultural work of a local authority – what might be termed ‘municipal learning’ through experimentation:

> [Learning takes] many directions and often leads to unexpected places. It is a process of constructing, testing and reconstructing theories, which are our interpretive models of the world. This is a group process: each individual – child or adult – is nurtured by the hypotheses and theories of others, and by conflicts with others that force us constantly to revise our theories about reality…
>
> We use the term ‘project’ to define this complex situation, involving constant dialogue between children and adults…The word ‘project’ evokes the idea of a dynamic process, a journey that involves the uncertainty and chance that always arises in relationship with others. Project work grows in many directions, with no predefined progression, no outcomes decided before the journey begins (19)

The local authority or commune working with democratic experimentalism creates a space for democratic enquiry and dialogue from which a collective view of the child and his or her relationship to the community is produced and local policy, practice and knowledge develops. This in turn is always open to democratic (re)evaluation and new thinking. Such local projects may be actively encouraged by national levels of government (though in Italy, local projects have been the result of local governments with strong democratic traditions, willing and able to use space made available to them by a weak national government).

How local cultural projects of childhood can be actively encouraged, what other conditions they need to flourish and what structures and processes may sustain them are all important subjects for further research. We perhaps need rather fewer studies of the effectiveness of this or that technical programme, and rather more studies on how and why certain communities (or individual centres) have managed to become local cultural projects, capable of developing an approach that is participatory, experimental and researching. Nor should we expect that these projects can be equally successful and innovative in all local areas; some communities will be more creative, curious and democratic than others – though we should not underestimate the potential for creativity, curiosity and democracy that may exist in local areas or among individual citizens.

But even where local cultural projects of childhood fail to thrive, the local government level can still make an important contribution to democratic experimentalism. Local authorities interpret and augment the national framework, in areas such as curricula. They can affirm the importance of democracy as a value, and they can support democracy in the nursery. And they have an important role to play in the provision of ECEC services.

In the market model, the local authority manages the market, to ensure adequate supply and strong competition: it plays no role as a provider. In democratic experimentalism, the local authority

nurtures the development of democratic social institutions provided by a range of 'social agents'. It actively promotes: collaboration between them, fostering networks and shared projects; democratic practices within them; and experimentation, individually and collectively. But it also acts as a provider itself, not of all services, but of some, both to ensure it has direct experience of what it means to create democratic experimental services and (as Unger suggests) to serve as a pace setter for experimentalism.

In the nursery

Finally, I want to consider democratic experimentalism at its most local level, in the early childhood institution itself: bringing politics into the nursery – or the crèche, preschool, kindergarten, nursery school or any of the other terms we use to describe settings for collective early childhood education. It is necessary to start by re-iterating an earlier distinction: between democracy as a principle of government and democracy as a form of living together. I do not want to set them into opposition; it is possible to imagine a nursery that had both very democratic structures (for example, management by elected representatives of parents and educators) and a strong democratic ethos that placed high value on sharing and exchanging perspectives and opinions. But the two need not go together; or they may overlap but by no means fully. Moreover, even with democratic structures of government involving full representation from all adults involved in a centre, it is unlikely that children would play an equal role in these decision-making structures - though they could have influence on decisions through a democratic ethos of listening and dialogue.

So democratic practice covers a large area of possibilities and democracy in the nursery can take many forms. It might, perhaps, be more useful to think of the 'democratic profile' of a nursery, indicating in what areas, in what ways and with whom democracy was practiced.

The starting point needs to be how we imagine, construct or understand this institution: what do we think the nursery is? I have already mentioned two common understandings, at least in the English-speaking world. These are understandings that permeate the market model: the early childhood institution as an enclosure where technology can be applied to produce predetermined outcomes (the metaphor is the factory); and the early childhood institution as business, selling a commodity to consumers (the metaphor is shopping).

But there are many other understandings, some of which are more productive of democratic experimentalist practice: in particular, as already outlined, the early childhood institution as a public forum or meeting place in civil society or as a place of encounter and dialogue between citizens, from which many possibilities can emerge, some expected, others not, and most productive when relationships are governed by democratic practice. The early childhood institution in which democratic practice is foregrounded creates one of the new spaces that is needed if democracy is to be renewed: to use Bentley's term, it can be a place for 'everyday democracy'. In particular, it offers democratic practice that is not representative (through electing representatives) but direct: the rule of all by all. This space offers opportunities for all citizens, younger and older, to participate – be they children or parents, practitioners or politicians, or indeed any other local citizen. Topics ignored or neglected in traditional politics can be made the subjects of democratic practice.

Bringing democratic politics into the nursery means citizens having opportunities for participation in one or more of at least four types of activity; and following the earlier discussion of a 'democratic profile', the extent and form of that participation can vary considerably, giving different nurseries

different profiles. First, *decision-making* about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery, addressing John Dewey's principle that "all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them" (Dewey, 1937). This is closest to the idea of democracy as a principle of government, in which either representatives or all members of certain groups have some involvement in decisions in specified areas. Examples might be nurseries run as cooperatives by a staff or parent group or nurseries run by a community of some form. Another example would be the elected boards of parents that all early childhood centres in Denmark must have, which are involved in pedagogical, budgetary and staffing issues (Hansen, 2002). How much power, in theory or practice, such bodies exercise may vary considerably.

Second, *evaluation* of pedagogical work through participatory methods. In the book *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007), the authors contrast a technical language of evaluation, 'quality', with a democratic language, 'meaning making'[11] . The language of 'quality' involves a supposedly objective observer applying externally determined norms to an institution, to make a decontextualised assessment of conformity to these norms. The language of 'meaning making', by contrast, speaks of evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to an assessment that is contextualised and provisional because always subject to contestation. 'Quality' offers a 'statement of fact', 'meaning making' a 'judgement of value'. The two languages work with very different tools, 'quality' with checklists and similar standardised templates, 'meaning making' with pedagogical documentation, which I explain below.

Third, *contesting dominant discourses*, confronting what Foucault terms regimes of truth, which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with power. This political activity seeks to make core assumptions and values visible and contestable. Yeatman (1994) refers to it as 'postmodern politics' and offers some examples: a *politics of epistemology*, contesting modernity's idea of knowledge[12] ; a *politics of representation*, about whose perspectives have legitimacy; and a politics of difference, which contests those groups claiming a privileged position of objectivity on a contested subject. But we could extend the areas opened up to politics, that are re-politicised as legitimate subjects for inclusive political dialogue and contestation: the *politics of childhood*, about the image of the child, the good life and what we want for our children; the *politics of education*, about what education can and should be; and the *politics of gender*, in the nursery and the home. These and many other subjects can be the subject of democratic engagement within the early childhood institution, examples of bringing politics into the nursery.

It is through contesting dominant discourses that the fourth political activity can emerge: opening up for *change*, through developing a critical approach to what exists and envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action. For as Foucault (1988) also notes, there is a close connection

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[11] The term 'languages of evaluation' was coined by Reggio Emilia, when they translated and published the book in Italy, Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, changing the original English subtitle of 'postmodern perspectives' to I linguaggi della valutazione – 'languages of evaluation'.

[12] Modernity's idea of knowledge "aims at formulating laws in the light of observed regularities and with a view to foreseeing future behaviour of phenomena" (Santos, 1995: 14); it adopts values such as objectivity, order, stability and universality. A postmodern idea of knowledge would emphasise knowledge as always partial, perspectival and provisional, "local knowledge created and disseminated through argumentative discourse" (37).

between contesting dominant discourses, thinking differently and change: “as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible”

Conditions for democratic experimentalism

Understandings

The model of democratic experimentalism needs supportive conditions, providing a rich environment in which democracy can flourish. I have already referred to one of these conditions: a commitment to and support of democracy by all levels of government and an image of the institution as a public forum or meeting place. Democracy is unlikely to thrive where, for example, government prioritises consumer over collective choice and early childhood institutions are seen and understood as if they were businesses selling commodities and/or factories for producing predetermined outcomes.

But other images or understandings are also important for bringing politics into the nursery, for example the image of the child, of parents and of workers. I have already outlined how democratic experimentalism presumes a particular subject, adult or child, who is socially responsible and a rights-bearing citizen. More specifically, the *child*, in the model of democratic experimentalism, is understood not only as a competent citizen, but also as an expert in his or her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to; he or she has the right and competence to participate in collective decision-making. There is recognition, too, that children (but also adults) have, in the words of Malaguzzi, a hundred languages in which to express themselves[13] , and that democratic practice means being ‘multi-lingual’. The importance of such multi-lingualism is highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: “[young children] can “make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes *in numerous ways*, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language” (2005: 7).

Parents in a democratic institution are seen as competent citizens “because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas…which are the fruits of their experience as parents and citizens” (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004: 30).

Last, but not least, *workers* are understood as practitioners of democracy. While recognising that they bring an important perspective and a relevant local knowledge to the democratic forum, they also recognise that they do not have *the* truth nor privileged access to knowledge. As Paulo Freire puts it, the educator may offer his or her ‘reading of the world’, but his or her role is to “bring out the fact that there are other ‘readings of the world” (Freire, 2004: 96), at times in opposition to his or her own. This understanding of the worker is embodied in what Oberhuemer (2005) has termed ‘democratic professionalism’:

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[13] Rinaldi describes the theory of the hundred languages as “one of Malaguzzi’s most important works”:
The hundred languages of children is not only a metaphor for crediting children and adults with a hundred, a thousand creative and communicative potentials….But above all it is a declaration of the equal dignity and importance of all languages, not only writing, reading and counting, which has become more and more obviously necessary for the construction of knowledge (Rinaldi, 2005: 175).

it is a concept based on participatory relationships and alliances. It foregrounds collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders. It emphasises engaging and networking with the local community…[T]here is a growing body of literature which questions traditional notions of professionalism, notions which distance professionals from those they serve and prioritise one group's knowledge over another (13).

Values

Democratic and experimental practice needs certain values to be shared among the community of the early childhood institution, for example:

- *Respect for diversity*, through adopting a relational ethics that gives the highest value to diversity. Gunilla Dahlberg and I have explored such an ethics – the ethics of an encounter – in our discussion of ethics in early childhood education (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). The ethics of an encounter, associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, starts from Levinas's challenge to a strong Western philosophical tradition that gives primacy to knowing and leads us to 'grasp' the other, in our desire to know: by 'grasping', we make the other into the same. An example is developmental stages, a system of classification that gives adults possibilities to 'grasp' – possess and comprehend – the child. The ethics of an encounter attempts to counter this grasping through respect for the absolute alterity of the Other, his or her absolute otherness or singularity: this is another whom I cannot represent and classify into my system of categories, whom I cannot seek to know by imposing my framework of thought and understanding[14] .

- *Recognition of multiple perspectives and paradigms*, acknowledging and welcoming that there is more than one answer to most questions and that there are many ways of viewing and understanding the world (the importance of recognising paradigmatic difference – for example, between positivistic and post-foundational paradigms - and the failure to do so in many policy documents is discussed further in Moss, 2007);

- *Welcoming curiosity, uncertainty and subjectivity*, and the responsibility that they require of us;

- *Critical thinking*, which is
  a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable: to stand against the maxims of one's time, against the spirit of one's age, against the current of received wisdom…[it is a matter] of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter" (Rose, 1999: 20).

The importance of such values for fostering democratic practice is captured in these words by three *pedagogistas* from Reggio Emilia, on the subject of participation in their municipal schools:

[14] The implications for education are very great:
Putting everything one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the Other into the Same, as everything that does not fit into these categories, which is unfamiliar and not taken-for-granted has to be overcome…To think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy (Dahlberg, 2003: 270).

> Participation 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, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with those of 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 et al., 2004: 29).

Tools

As well as shared understandings and values, the practice of democratic experimentalism in early childhood institutions needs certain material conditions and tools. Of particular importance is pedagogical documentation, by which practice and learning processes are made visible[15] and then subject – in relationship with others - to critical thought, dialogue, reflection, interpretation and, if necessary, democratic evaluation and decision making: so key features are visibility, multiple perspectives and the co-construction of meanings (for fuller discussions of pedagogical documentation see Dahlberg et al., 1999; Rinaldi, 2005). Originating in early childhood centres in Northern Italy, particularly in the city of Reggio Emilia, pedagogical documentation has since been taken up in many countries, both in Europe and beyond.

Pedagogical documentation has a central role to play in many facets of the early childhood institution: ensuring that new knowledge is shared as a common good; evaluation as meaning making; planning pedagogical work; professional development; and in research by children and adults. Cross-cutting these particular uses, is the contribution of pedagogical documentation to democratic practice in the early childhood institution.

Loris Malaguzzi, one of the great pedagogical thinkers of the last century and the first director of the early childhood services in Reggio Emilia, saw documentation in this democratic light, as his biographer Alfredo Hoyuelos writes:

> [Documentation] is one of the keys to Malaguzzi's philosophy. Behind this practice, I believe, is the ideological and ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education…A political idea also emerges, which is that what schools do must have public visibility…Documentation in all its different forms also represents an extraordinary tool for dialogue, for exchange, for sharing. For Malaguzzi it means the possibility to discuss and to dialogue "everything with everyone" (teachers, auxiliary staff, cooks, families, administrators and citizens…[S]haring opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss real, concrete things – not just theories or words, about which it is possible to reach easy and naïve agreement (Hoyuelos, 2004: 7).

Carlina Rinaldi, Malaguzzi's successor as director of Reggio Emilia's services, also speaks of documentation as democratic practice: "Sharing the documentation means participation in a true act of democracy, sustaining the culture and visibility of childhood, both inside and outside the school: democratic participation, or 'participant democracy', that is a product of exchange and visibility" (Rinaldi, 2005: 59).

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[15] Visibility can be achieved in many ways: through notes or observation of children's work, videos or photographs, taped conversations, children's drawings or constructions in different materials – the possibilities are almost endless

As indicated above, documentation today is widely practiced in various forms and for various purposes. An example with which I am particularly familiar is the Mosaic approach developed by my colleague Alison Clark to give voice to the perspectives of young children. This approach uses a variety of methods to generate documentation with children: these methods include observation, child interviewing, photography (by children themselves), and tours and map making. The documentation so generated is then subject to review, reflection and discussion by children and adults – a process of interpretation or meaning making. Inspired by pedagogical documentation, the Mosaic approach has been used for a range of purposes, including to understand better how children experience life in the nursery (the main question being 'what does it mean to be in this place?') and to enable the participation by young children in the design of new buildings and outdoor spaces. Here is yet another example of how pedagogical documentation is a key tool for democratic practice, in this case young children's contribution to decision-making (Clark and Moss, 2005; Clark, 2005).

It is important to keep in mind that pedagogical documentation is not child observation; it is *not*, and would never claim to be, a means of getting a 'true' picture of what children can do nor a technology of normalisation, a method of assessing a child's conformity to some developmental norm. It does not, for example, assume an objective, external truth about the child that can be recorded and accurately represented. It adopts instead the values of subjectivity and multiplicity: it can never be neutral, being always perspectival (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Understood in this way, as a means for exploring and contesting different perspectives, pedagogical documentation not only becomes a means of resisting power, including dominant discourses, but also a means of fostering democratic and experimental practice.

Educated workers

Not only does democracy in the ECEC centre require workers who are understood, both by themselves and others, as practitioners of democracy "with a professional obligation to create an educational environment which will sustain the development of democratic virtues and practices" (Carr and Hartnett, 1996: 195). It also requires a workforce whose initial and continuous professional development supports them in this role. This requires a capacity to work with uncertainty and to be open to the possibility of other perspectives and knowledges – of the otherness of others. Aldo Fortunati, working in another local cultural project, in the Tuscan town of San Miniato, describes the early childhood worker as needing to be

> removed from the fallacy of certainties, [assuming instead] responsibility to choose, experiment, discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities rather than the anxiety of pursuing outcomes, and maintaining in her work the pleasure of amazement and wonder. [He or she must be able] to free herself from an outcome different from that which the children come up with as they construct their own experience (Fortunati, 2006: 37).

Important, also, is the ability to discuss, exchange, reflect and argue, in short to be able to dialogue. Dialogue, Paulo Freire says, is the way "people achieve significance as human beings…It is an act of creation…[it is] founded upon love, humility, and faith" (Freire, 1996: 70); it cannot exist without critical thinking, "thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity" (ibid.: 73); "it is the opportunity available to me to open up to the thinking of others" (Freire, 2004:103). Carlina Rinaldi shares Freire's belief in the centrality and transformatory potential of dialogue. It is, she says, of absolute importance, "an idea of dialogue not as an ex-

change but as a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result" (Rinaldi, 2005: 184). Note Rinaldi's rejection here of the 'exchange paradigm'.

An important role in supporting a democratic workforce is that of critical friend or mentor, for example the *pedagogista* of northern Italy, an experienced educator working with a small number of centres to support dialogue, critical thought and pedagogical documentation. Working in a democratic way with children and adults in these centres, especially with pedagogical documentation, the *pedagogista* can make an important contribution to the continuous professional development of practitioners of democracy and to democratic practice throughout the nursery.

Time

Before finishing this discussion, I want to flag up what seems to me both a major issue and an issue that is particularly difficult to get to grips with: time. Democratic experimentalism in ECEC services, indeed anywhere (including schools), takes time – and time is in short supply today when we are so unceasingly busy. A strange feature of English policy in early childhood and compulsory schooling, perhaps too in some other countries, is the emphasis given today to 'parental involvement' when parents appear never to have been busier. So on the one hand, policy values employment for fathers and mothers; while at the same time, policy values parents being involved in their children's education, as well as endlessly (and rather tritely) emphasising their role as 'first' educators. There is an interesting tension here – though less so than might at first appear as involvement is primarily understood in policy terms as parents reinforcing taken-for-granted educational objectives and targets (parents-as-assistants): involvement understood as critical democratic participation (parents-as-citizens) is likely to make more demands on time.

Far more thought needs to be given to the question of time, and how we might be able to redistribute it across a range of activities and relationships, in particular to enable parents to participate in a democratic and experimental early childhood institution without having to forego participation in paid employment. Ulrich Beck, for example, addresses this when he raises the concept of 'public work' that would provide "a new focus of activity and identity that will revitalize the democratic way of life" (Beck, 1998: 60) and suggests various ways of paying for public work. Unger also identifies the need for bridging the gap between the 'production system' and the 'caring economy'.

> It is fundamentally important that every able bodied adult should have a position in both the production system and the caring economy…We have to try different things. It can be weekend work. It can be a month in the year. It can be two years in everyone's life (Unger, 2005: 180)

While Unger here is envisaging a changing relationship for the whole population, the need to enable parents, already carers, to have time to participate in ECEC services (and schools) can be subsumed into this discussion. This might be facilitated by his proposal "to fashion legal arrangements that facilitate the division of work time between the production system and the caring economy" (Unger, 2002: xcviii). One direction to take might involve moving away from current parental leave policies, narrowly defined as providing full-time care for very young children or temporary care for children who are ill, towards a far broader 'time credit' policy, giving citizens the right to a certain amount of paid leave over a working lifetime, to use for a variety of purposes, including participation in children's services.

Nor is the need for time confined to parents. Workers in ECEC services need space in their working lives to devote to documentation and dialogue, not just to prepare future work but to be able to reflect upon, interpret, exchange and evaluate current practice.

Structuring ECEC systems under the different models

What implications do these different models have for the way ECEC systems are structured, in particular access, type of service, management, workforce and funding?

Under the market model, services provide a specific and specified product to consumers willing and able to pay: most commonly, 'childcare for working parents'. Access, therefore, is determined by consumer need and purchasing power and is likely to be mainly to single function specialist services, for example nurseries supplying 'childcare' for children of working parents. These services are managed by their owners, who respond to consumer demand and to the need to make a return on capital, though this may be mediated by the extent of government regulation and the system in place for ensuring compliance. The workforce is viewed, first and foremost, as technicians, delivering prescribed technologies to achieve prescribed outcomes, with earnings set at a level that ensures 'affordability' for consumers and return on investment for owners. Funding relies mainly on consumer fees, supplemented by demand-side subsidies paid in some form (e.g. tax credits, vouchers) to lower income parents.

In the democratic experimental model, access is an entitlement of citizenship and is to a multi-purpose service, a 'Children's Centre', a public institution offering a range of functions to all families in the local community, irrespective of parental employment status. Publicly-funded services are provided by a range of public and private sector organisations, the main condition being a willingness to be experimental (as, for example, the local authority has been in Reggio Emilia) and democratic, as well as conforming to the common conditions specified in the national framework of entitlements, standards and objectives (which would include, *inter alia*, a common policy on parental fees, staff qualifications and pay). Democratic in this context means adopting a participatory approach, as outlined above, and involving parents and workers systematically in management, including the planning and dispensing of budgets (for example through some system of elected governing boards or management committees). FP providers are not, therefore, excluded on principle, but have to find ways of reconciling business imperatives with democratic and experimental practice and the national framework of standards and entitlements.

Services work within the democratically agreed national framework, whilst leaving substantial scope for local and institutional interpretation and additional goals. Oversight is supplied through the democratic participation of children and adults, including the use of *pedagogical* documentation as an evaluative tool, and through the close involvement of pedagogistas. Municipal politicians are expected to participate in documentation, so gaining first hand knowledge of the services for which they are responsible, rather than relying simply on reports or 'quality' evaluations from managers or inspectors; indeed, a major goal of democratic experimentalism is to connect democratic services with the formal structures of local democracy. Services that caused sustained concern and proved unable to reform would be closed – but only as a last resort and after much collaborative work.

The workforce is viewed as reflective democratic professionals, whose initial and continuing professional development equips them to work in a democratic and experimental milieu. A strong

emphasis is placed on qualities such as dialogue, research, border crossing and critical thinking, and there is parity of qualification, pay and other conditions with other similar professionals, for example school teachers. Lastly, there is supply-side funding, with services directly supported with public money in recognition of their role as key public institutions, serving no single consumer group and purpose but a community and a variety of citizens – children, parents, the wider community - and purposes.

Some concluding reflections

No model of service delivery will ever offer the one right way and no model is likely to work perfectly, even in its own terms. Models are born in particular contexts and reflect particular views about how the world is and should be; ultimately they always fail to encompass the complexities and the contradictions of the world. They also date, the taken-for-granted dominant discourse at one point of time coming to seem irretrievably outmoded and strange at another.

Yet despite these qualifications, the models outlined here, but also others not covered, do offer us - as societies and individual citizens - real and important collective choices that need to be addressed and decided on through democratic politics. Deciding between models matters, as do the deliberations, dialogues and confrontations that produce the decision. A healthy democracy needs the energy and stimulation of decisions that matter, decisions that ask us to consider who we are, what matters to us here and now and in the future and what we want our societies to be.

Perhaps then the first conclusion to be drawn is the need for democratic societies to value and nurture utopian thought, to support the articulation and discussion of alternative directions and to promote experimentation in steps taken to pursue these different directions. This is not to say that democratically elected governments should surrender all claims to determine the broad direction of policy; it is to say though that they should leave room for alternatives and that they should recognise the existence of such alternatives. Too often, or so it seems, policy documents by governments and international organisations reduce alternatives to small points of policy detail, ignoring the need to recognise different directions and models and to argue the case for one over others; (the English government, for example, has never set out the alternatives for the future direction of ECEC services – then argued for a market model. Pilot projects, too, are often synonymous with how to implement one approach, rather than encouraging diverse experimental cultural projects of childhood.

A second conclusion concerns the relationship between models. It is perhaps unavoidable in papers of this kind to present different models, approaches or methods as clear-cut and oppositional binaries: model A is like this, model B like that and never the twain shall meet. But in practice things are usually messier, a model can be applied in a variety of forms, and there are examples in the real world where distinctions blur and black/white differences on paper look greyer in reality.

Are markets and democratic experimentation incompatible? Unger, for example, is strongly for democracy and experimentation, yet also wants to foster greater competition between service providers. He speaks of “the organization of cooperative activity among small and medium-sized producers who also compete with one another” (Unger, 2002: lxxxvii) and of government helping to produce “new social agents who can provide those services competitively and differentially in a form which is both customised and innovative” (Unger, 2005: 179). Others, however, argue a fun-

damental contradiction between democratic and market approaches, for example Carr and Hartnett, with whose comment I began this paper: “any vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces”.

Perhaps an element of competition, de jure or de facto, is inevitable, unless a service system runs on the basis of random allocation of children to ECEC services, removing any element of parent (or child) say in the matter – an unlikely prospect in a liberal democracy. Competition may also occur between different experimental projects, even if it is the non-commercial competition of researchers anxious to make the most original and exciting discoveries or seeking to be the first to achieve some common goal. But having acknowledged competition may figure in both models, like choice, another term held in common, the meaning of the term is very different.

There is, I think, a difference between competition as a predominant value and acting as a method of discipline to the point of some ‘suppliers’ going under; and discipline as good-natured rivalry and friendly comparison in a system that prioritises values of collaboration and support. A system based on survival of the fittest differs qualitatively from a system based on the collective strength of networks. Even in the latter system some children and parents will choose to use different services than the majority in their community, perhaps because they are drawn to another direction or form of experimentation. But services working with democratic experimentalism should be responsive enough to their local communities and participatory enough in their working practices to ensure that most families act on what most families now say: that what they really want is a ‘good’ local service, not market choice – only in this case with most families being actively engaged in creating and evaluating a collective view of ‘good’.

In this paper, I have examined two very different directions for ECEC services to take. Though there may not be total separation between the two models discussed in this paper, they are profoundly different, so much so that they do confront us, as citizens, with an important political and ethical choice.

The market model leads to a well known destination; in today’s neoliberal climate, this destination is well publicised and the direction clearly signposted. The other destination, democratic experimentalism, is harder to find and ignored by many, but offers great possibilities. In my view, we need to learn about and from the scattered communities and projects that have already made the journey and are practicing democratic experimentalism, and about the directions that need to be taken to get to this destination.

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