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Educational parenting programmes – examining the critique of a global, regional and national policy choice.

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Abstract

Educational parenting programmes are an integral part of parenting policy. The use of parenting programmes in England as an element of UK government parenting policy since the late 1990s has attracted the critical attention of academics in education, social policy and other related fields. This paper puts parenting ‘support’ and, specifically, the use of educational parenting programmes in England, in the wider global and regional context. It examines the drivers of that policy choice, the international and European framework within which parenting policy and programmes sit, and makes comparisons with other countries in Europe and Asia. In addition it uses evidence derived from research conducted into key initiatives and programmes in England from the 1990s to 2015, along with international data related to evidence based parenting programmes, to examine the validity of the critique of parenting support in England over the last two decades. In doing so, the paper presents the first comprehensive challenge to critical scholars’ interpretation of parenting support policies in England.

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Key words

Parenting support; evidence-based; parenting education; parenting programmes; England.

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Biographical note

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1 Introduction

Focus

This paper challenges the academic critique of evidence-based parenting education programmes made over the last two decades. It focuses on four main aspects of the critique, presenting counter evidence that undermines its validity.

In this introduction, first parenting support and education are defined. Then English policy in relation to parenting support is summarised, followed by a summary of the academic critique of that policy. The main part of the paper addresses four key aspects of the critique in turn: its narrow, Anglo-centric focus; its view of neo-liberalism as the explanatory policy driver; its generic approach to evidence-based parenting programmes, which has two elements to it - the limited range of stakeholders it acknowledges; and its ignoring of large parts of the evidence base for the effectiveness of parenting education. A discussion concludes the paper.

Defining parenting ‘support’, and parenting education

In the context of parenting ‘support’ and education, ‘parent’ is taken to refer to the main caregiver for a child. There is no presumption that the parent is the biological, or legal, parent of the child. Similarly, the term ‘family’ refers to the group of adults and children forming a care-giving unit. Support for parents, children and families is not a new facet of government policy, neither are preventative or early intervention policies. In the UK context, a raft of nineteenth century legislation, including the Factory Act 1833, which regulated child labour, or the 1870 and 1880 Education Acts which introduced compulsory school attendance, can be seen as being examples of such policies. Similarly, the establishment of the National Health Service, national vaccination campaigns, child support, and the National Health Service (Family Planning) Act 1967, all represent aspects of family and parent support. However, since the 1990s, ‘family support’ and ‘parenting support’ (or ‘parenting education’) have come to represent two differing strands of government policy. UNICEF has distinguished between the two, and has stressed that they are not synonymous, and can exist as policies in relation with each other, or separate from each other. ‘Family support’ describes policies which relate to services such as social welfare, health and well-being, along with the re-focusing of budgetary support for families, for example, as cash payments and credits (UNICEF, 2015). By contrast, ‘parenting support’, or ‘parenting education’, refers to, ‘organised services/provisions oriented to affect how parents execute their role as parents by giving them access to a range of resources that serve to increase their competence in childrearing’ (Daly, 2013, 162). It does not, in the current paper, refer to parental engagement or involvement in education. Of the two forms of ‘support’, ‘parenting support’ is the narrower of the two, being focused on parents and parental engagement and practices’ (UNICEF, 2015, 8). Provision of ‘parenting support’ in countries across the world suggests that there are three core elements of this policy:

- Information and awareness raising – advice and information services (such as leaflets and information provided in websites), information campaigns, telephone helplines, web-based and other parenting courses and programmes;
- Education and skills development – targeted parenting programmes, intensive interventions including case work to change beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions;
- Provision of social support – relationship and network building through social services, social work and other one-to-one aid, mentoring and befriending. (UNICEF, 2015).

It is these elements of parenting ‘support’ that are the focus of much of the critique of the parenting

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policy approach.

The English policy experience 1997-2018

The emergence of ‘New’ Labour following Tony Blair’s election as leader of the Labour Party in 1994 continued the process of that party adapting to the long-term success of the Conservative Party, whose extended period in office had seen a redirecting of British government policy away from the welfare state and economic interventionism model of the post-war consensus towards a new model of ‘neo-liberalism’, characterised by market liberalisation, accelerated deindustrialisation, and attempts to roll-back welfarism. That political context underlay ‘New’ Labour’s 1997 general election manifesto, *New Labour because Britain deserves better*, in which the party set out its approach to family policy: ‘Labour does not see families and the state as rival providers for the needs of our citizens ... But families cannot flourish unless government plays its distinctive role: ... Society, through government, must assist families to achieve collectively what no family can achieve alone’, (Labour Party, 1997, 26) This statement underpinned ‘New’ Labour’s family policy, and, in particular, its approach to family ‘support’, which included parenting education and parenting programmes during its 13 years in office (1997-2010). It also informed what would become known as the ‘rights and responsibilities’ agenda. During its time in government, ‘New’ Labour implemented a large number of policy initiatives that established a framework for child and family support. The extent of ‘New’ Labour initiatives in this policy area was so great that ‘parenting support became part of a master trend around family services as a means of combating child poverty and social exclusion’, (Daly, 2013, 169).

‘New’ Labour policy included the introduction of Sure Start Local Programmes in 1998, with a stress on universal, area-based provision for all families with children in targeted areas of high deprivation. Each of the 250 Sure Start centres established between 1998 – 2002 provided five core services: home-visiting; support for families and parents; play, learning and childcare; primary and community healthcare; and support for children and parents with specialised needs. Sure Start as a centrally-funded initiative was curtailed in 2005 when the programme was passed to local authorities (LAs), with no ring-fenced funding. The ‘New’ Labour approach was further evidenced by three major pieces of legislation – Every Child Matters (HM Government, 2003), the Children’s Act (HM Government, 2004), and The Children’s Plan (Department of Children Schools & Families, DCSF, 2007). This policy was based strongly on the ‘rights and responsibilities’ approach to government and families with, for example, The Children’s Plan stating that ‘government does not bring up children – parents do – so government needs to do more to back parents and families’ (DCSF, 2007, 5). The government also showed its support for ‘evidence-based’ parenting education with its Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder/Programme (PEIP), which ran from 2006-2011. PEIP provided full government funding to provide evidence-based parenting programmes at LA level, and was delivered in three ‘waves’, until it provided parenting education ‘support’ across all of England. It was aimed at parents of children aged 8-12, and had a focus on children at risk of anti-social behaviour (although LAs were given a degree of freedom to implement PEIP parenting programmes, and, typically, PEIP offers were made beyond ‘at risk’ groups). The PEIP focus on ‘at risk’ groups was a policy direction that was enhanced by the ‘Respect Agenda’, launched by Tony Blair in January, 2006, which attempted to apply preventative and early intervention strategies to crime and anti-social behaviour issues. That strategy included parenting courses, and attempts to address the issues through schools, LAs, and parents.

The ‘New’ Labour period came to an end with the election of the Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition government in May 2010. However, the new coalition government built much of its child poverty strategy on the Child Poverty Act 2010, which was passed with cross-party support.

The early and preventative approach to family policy that was such a feature of ‘New’ Labour’s agenda, remained a notable element of the coalition government’s first child poverty strategy, *A New Approach to Child Policy: Tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families’ lives* (Department of Work and Pensions, DWP, and Department for Education, 2011). That strategy set out the coalition’s approach to tackling poverty up to 2020, and reaffirmed the aim of meeting, ‘income targets for 2020 [along with] the duty to minimise socio-economic disadvantage’ (DWP & DfE, 2011, 8). A key element of that strategy was to address the contexts of poverty through early and preventative intervention, including parenting ‘support’. This policy approach was underpinned by a number of significant reports and reviews delivered in the first years of the Coalition, reports that had a strong cross-party base, and continued the themes established by ‘New’ Labour. These included those by Field (2010), Allen (2011a, 2011b), Tickell (2011), C4EO (2010), and Munro (2011). The common themes were a stress on the importance of early, and preventative, intervention, the importance of the early years of a child’s life and the role that parents and families had in those early years. Within that analysis of the issue and policy solutions, there continued to be a clear role for parenting ‘support’.

The importance of parenting ‘support’ was highlighted by the high-profile launch of the Coalition’s CANparent trial initiative (Cullen *et al*, 2017). Launched by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, CANparent was offered to all parents and carers of children from 0 to 5 years old. The CANparent trial ran from 2012-2014 and was notable for being an attempt to provide universal parenting education offers, and because the chosen delivery method involved the use of a quasi-market model which utilised vouchers offered to all parents of children under 5 in the trial areas. Despite the mixed results of the CANparent trial (Cullen *et al*, 2017), David Cameron reaffirmed his government’s belief that parenting ‘support’ was a universal requirement, announcing in January 2016 that the Conservative government’s Life Chances Strategy would contain provision, ‘for significantly expanding parenting provision’ (Gov.UK, 2016, 8). In the event, the 2016 UK European Union membership referendum marked both the end of Cameron’s tenure, and put on hold developments in relation to parenting ‘support’. Nonetheless, there is every reason to believe that parenting policy and parenting education will continue to have a place in future parenting ‘support’ policies. For example, the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF), founded as a result of the Allen reports, and largely funded by the UK government, recently released its *Realising the Potential of Early Intervention* (Early Intervention Foundation, October 2018) which reaffirmed strongly the key elements that have underpinned parenting ‘support’ since ‘New’ Labour took office – evidence-based practice, early and preventative intervention as the best option in terms of fiscal policy, long-term outcomes, and children’s futures. Within this model, the EIF sees parenting ‘support’ and education as having a particular role in ‘reducing problematic behaviour’ in young children, as well as ‘reducing criminal behaviour and improving children’s mental wellbeing’ in adolescents (Early Intervention Foundation, October 2018, 11).

Critiquing parenting support in the UK

The emergence of parenting ‘support’ in the 1990s, and its continued presence as a part of UK government policy, has generated a substantial body of academic writing in the UK that has subjected the policy to a critique which set it firmly within a neo-liberal context. That context determines the focus of the critique, for example, in terms of power relations, and dominant discourses of ‘support’ and ‘inclusion’. The critique stresses the neo-liberal imperatives underpinning parenting ‘support’ in relation to class, with the policy being seen as an attempt to re-construct the working class (Dwyer, 2004; Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2010, 2011; Heron & Dwyer, 1999; Klett-Davies, 2010; Marandet & Wainwright, 2016; Penn, 2007; Reay, 2008; Robson, 2010; Vincent, 2001; Wainwright & Marandet, 2013, 2017). Similarly, the imperatives of neo-liberal policy lead to

parenting ‘support’ being subjected to the critique in relation to issues of gender, particularly those relating to motherhood and ‘mothering cultures’ (Aitken, 1999; Bagley & Ackerley, 2006; Cottam & Espie, 2014; Gambles, 2013; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013; Holloway, 1998; Vincent & Warren, 1998; Vincent, Ball & Braun, 2010). Edwards and Gillies also addressed both class and gender issues, using a large-scale survey of over 1112 parents of children, 8-12 years old, in an attempt to delineate the processes of family life and parenting attitudes, values and needs in relation to obtaining support for parenting (Edwards and Gillies, 2004). Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson have also presented a combined class and gender critique of the policy, drawing together elements of both approaches to question the aims and purposes of parenting ‘support’ which, it is argued, impacts most negatively on working-class mothers who are faced with differing options than those faced by middle class mothers in the ‘New Economy’ (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014, 2016). Finally, Gillies *et al* (2017) have adopted a different approach to the question, focusing on the issue of brain science which was a particular facet of Allen’s reports to government (Allen, 2011a, 2011b). Gillies’ case being that, ‘the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of neuroscience conceal the deeply political and moral nature of decisions about what is best for children’, (Gillies *et al*, 2017, 19).

Space considerations make it impossible to consider in detail the extensive literature that represents the critique of this policy. However, the essential outlines of the critique of educational parenting programmes and parenting education of the parenting ‘support’ agenda can be drawn. The larger part of the critique of parenting ‘support’ has been undertaken in terms of UK government policy in respect of parenting in England. There have been more focused critiques of parenting programmes themselves, attempting to address parenting education in terms of its effectiveness. These critiques are fewer in number than policy-focused work, and are still, typically, presented within the context of the primary critique of policy (Lucas, 2011; Ramaekers & Vandezande, 2013; Cottam & Espie, 2014; Wainwright & Marandet, 2013). The over-arching policy critique highlights the imperatives of neo-liberalism; the ‘New Economy’; the privileging of the parenting norms of a fraction of the middle-class, with a particular focus on ‘mothering’; a deficit model of working-class parenting; an attempt to resocialise the working-class; the belief that parenting is a ‘context-free’ skill that can be both taught and learnt through the use of parenting education informed by experts; and that parenting ‘support’ policies can be used as an important tool to roll-back welfarism and, ‘shape the social context in which future citizen-workers are raised through the provision of parenting education and support’, (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014, 95). The explanatory core of this analysis is that the negative aspects of parenting ‘support’ policy flow from the fact that it is an expression of neo-liberal ideology and policy.

The broad outline of the critique of UK parenting ‘support’ has remained consistent since the late 1990s, when the policy emerged as an element of ‘New’ Labour’s appeal to the electorate, then a part of government policy. The argument is that origins of the policy lie in the context of ‘New’ Labour’s intention to continue with an inherited, Conservative, neo-liberal agenda of reframing welfare provision and transforming the state’s relationship with the individual. That project seeks to relocate responsibility for parental and child ‘failure’ from the wider system to the individual, whose fortunes in the neo-liberal economy and society are taken to be a result of personal choice. Such narratives of parental failure have also been used to refocus political and popular concern away from societal failure and issues surrounding policing and the legal system, a strategy that Jensen examined against the backdrop of the 2011 riots in London and other English cities, and characterised as representing the, ‘cultural politics of parent-blame’, (Jensen, 2018). The parents and families who are subject to the implementation of parenting education programmes are, through that learning, to be reconciled to their experience of economic and social disadvantage. Gewirtz, for example, argued that the motivating strategy of ‘New’ Labour in this field was to carry out a programme of the resocialisation of the working-class based on the values of a fraction of the middle-class which were

lauded by the government. Gewirtz gave this supposed project the term, ‘cloning the Blairs’, and argued that it aimed to ensure that, for example, standards of educational ‘excellence’ would be achieved by ‘making the many behave like the few’, (Gewirtz, 2001, 366). This argument was subsequently developed by Reay, who examined ‘New’ Labour’s attempts to reform school-level education, reform that, she argued, was based on further enshrining middle-class values, aspirations and needs in the education system. As part of that process, ‘New’ Labour sought to make parents responsible for their children’s engagement with formal education as part of a hegemonic project that, ‘sedimented and augmented middleclass advantage in the educational field’, (Reay, 2008, 647). Gillies has written extensively on the question of parenting ‘support’, and has focused both on the role and effects of parenting education programmes, as well as the underpinning early and preventative intervention models of social provision. Utilising her qualitative work with a sample of young people at risk of school exclusion, and a smaller sample of 22 of their parents, Gillies argued that parenting education in this context was of little practical use. At the best, ‘parenting classes in the context of these kinds of problems [school exclusion and SEN education] tended to provide reassurance rather than any practical help or solutions’, (Gillies, 2010, 58).

2 Four limitations of the critique

There have been some responses to the critique of UK parenting ‘support’ and parenting education, in relation to ‘New’ Labour’s ‘Parenting Early Intervention Programme’, 2006-2011 (Cullen *et al*, 2013), and the ‘CANparent’ trial, 2012-2014 (Cullen *et al*, 2017). However, there has been little attempt to respond to the general critique of the policy as outlined above. The intention here is to respond to the critique of UK parenting ‘support’, with a stress on parenting education, in four ways. Firstly, the narrow focus of the critique will be examined, and UK policy will be put in its global and regional policy contexts. Secondly, the critique’s characterisation of parenting education as being above all else a product of neoliberal government priorities will be challenged, with a range of similar policy in dissimilar political and economic contexts being examined. The generic nature of the critique will be questioned by examining two further limitations, the third and fourth. The third involving an examination of a full range of stakeholders involved in parenting ‘support’, as opposed to the critique’s focus on national policy makers. The final, fourth element, being a consideration of the scientific data relating to the impact of parenting education programmes, including large data sets relating to the real world roll-out of parenting education programmes.

i) A narrow Anglo-centric focus

The context (ignored in the academic critique) to the UK, and particularly, English, experience of family policy and parenting support policies from 1997 onwards is of global and regional frameworks relating to children’s rights, and expectations of national government support for children, parents and families.

With few exceptions, work on parenting ‘support’ is narrowly focused on the UK, ‘New’ Labour, and succeeding governments which have maintained a policy approach that can be defined as ‘neo-liberal’. The drivers are, therefore, located within the political decision-making processes of Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’, which sought to adjust but not fundamentally challenge the legacy of the neo-liberal policies of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Parenting ‘support’ is seen as a policy choice that has been made to fit the ideological demands of a situation where roll-back welfarism, pro-market, and limited government form the parameters of government. Within that model of economy and society, policy options, such as cash transfers, direct social aid, and support for a more egalitarian society - policy solutions in the field of parenting that have been suggested, for example, by Gillies, Edwards and Horsley (2017, 165-172) - have little place. Instead, in a polity such as the UK’s, and particularly, England, since the late 1990s, family and parent support

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policies are subordinated to the neo-liberal model of parenting ‘support’. However, the difficulty with this analysis, based on an Anglo-centric focus of the development of parenting ‘support’, and the stress on parenting education, is that such policies and measures are in place in all high and middle income countries, in addition to many low income countries, and that these policies are based on global and regional frameworks.

Mapping the development of that global and regional contextual framework

The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) proved to be a significant step in the recognition of the rights of children, and the development of child-oriented policy. The treaty, signed by all UN member states in 1989 (with the exception of the USA and Somalia) set standards to be followed by all signatories, and provided reference points against which states’ policies can be measured. The Convention consists of 54 Articles (UNICEF UK, 1990) built around four core principles, ‘non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child’ (UNICEF, 2008, no pagination). States are obliged to submit regular reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, detailing the status of children in relation to the UNCRC, and policy development designed to address obligations under the UNCRC. The Convention marked a major development in the global, regional and national recognition of the rights of children, and established a new vision of the child:

The Convention provides a universal set of standards to be adhered to by all countries. It reflects a new vision of the child. Children are neither the property of their parents nor are they helpless objects of charity. They are human beings and are the subject of their own rights. The Convention offers a vision of the child as an individual *and* a member of a family and a community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development. Recognizing children’s rights in this way firmly sets a focus on the whole child. Previously seen as negotiable, the child’s needs have become legally binding rights. No longer passive recipient of benefits, the child has become the subject or holder of rights. (UNICEF, 2005, no pagination).

The UNCRC created obligations for governments in relation to a wide range of policies impacting not only on children, but also, given the stress on the child as part of ‘a family and a community’, on the contexts of children’s lives. Legal systems, budgetary considerations, and family policy were all seen as impacting on children, and should, therefore, be the focus of government policy.

The subsequent development of family and children’s policy at the regional (for example, European) and national levels, took the lead from the UNCRC. The Council of Europe Strasbourg summit of October 1997 resulted in an action plan, agreed by the 40 member states of the Council, which included a ‘programme for children: [in which] the Heads of State and Government encourage the adoption of a programme to promote the interests of children, in partnership with the international and non-governmental organisations concerned’, (Council of Europe, 1997, no pagination). As a result, the Forum for Children and Families was established in 2001 under the auspices of the European Committee for Social Cohesion. The Forum has, subsequently, ‘acted as a focal point for questions relating to children and families in Europe’, (Daly, 2007, 8). This step also recognised the importance of ‘parenting support’, which, in addition to that of ‘family support’, is important both in the context of policy development, and is the focus of this paper.

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The European framework for child, family and parent support continued to be built, with the establishment, in 2004, of the Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on Children and Families, which has a remit to support parents to provide for the best interests of their children. It was the Committee of Experts that commissioned the report, *Parenting in contemporary Europe: a positive approach* (Daly, 2007), which established key parameters for supporting parents in their role as carers of children. They were based on five guiding principles: parenting as a stage in the family process; parenting as an activity that needs support; there is no standardised way of correct parenting; that parents have both rights and responsibilities as the carers of children; parenting involves both parents and children (Daly, 2007). Reflecting the UNCRC, the report argued that parenting was a private activity but one that is informed by society and is also a sphere for public policy; that all parents need support at times; and stated that 'good parenting benefits both child and parent and indeed can only be defined as positive when it operates to the mutual benefit of both', (Daly, 2007, 10).

Subsequent to the Committee of Experts' reporting, the Council of Europe (Committee of Ministers) made *Recommendation Rec(2006) 19* on policy to support positive parenting. These recommendations relate to children, family policy, parents and parenting, and apply to all 47 Council member states. Member states are to 'acknowledge the essential nature of families and of the parental role and [to] create the necessary conditions for positive parenting and implementation of children's rights', (Council of Europe, 2006, no pagination). The detail of the *Recommendation* included guidance on policy, including that designed to support parents to 'acquire the necessary competence to fulfil their responsibilities towards their children', (Council of Europe, 2006, no pagination), and to promote education designed to enable positive parenting. In addition to the Council of Europe, the European Union, in the form of the European Commission, has also issued guidelines relating to parenting support for EU member states with its *Parenting Support Policy Brief* (European Commission 2013). This document noted the 'growing number of initiatives in the area of parenting support in Europe', (European Commission, 2013, 5) since the 1990s and sought to consolidate key messages from the EU experience of parenting support. The policies of parenting support were described as being characterised by services that, 'are mostly universally accessible and include counselling, provision of support and information, and training programmes', (European Commission, 2013, 5), while the aim of parenting support programmes was defined as being, 'to enable people to become better parents, provide better support to their children and create a positive family environment', (European Commission, 2013, 5).

In terms of the recommendations to European governments, the European Network of National Observatories on Childhood, referencing Recommendation 1074 (1988) of the Parliamentary Assembly recommendation to the Council of Ministers (which predated the UNCRC by a year), made it clear that it was 'the State's responsibility to create the right conditions for positive parenting', (ChildONEurope Secretariat, October 2007). In promoting that position, the Council of Ministers adopted Recommendation (94)14 in November 1994, which included recommendations in respect of, 'socio-pedagogical support to parents [...] dedicated to the family for a positive parenthood', (ChildONEurope Secretariat, October 2007, 11). Daly has provided a definition of 'positive parenting' in this context: 'positive parenting refers to parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child', (Daly, 2007, 11)

ii) Neoliberalism is not the only policy driver

Policies to promote and deliver parenting 'support' are not just to be found in developed, high-income countries such as the UK. In UNICEF's report on the global context of family and parenting 'support', the Director of UNICEF's office of research noted that, 'family and parenting

support is increasingly recognized as an important part of the national social policies and social investment packages aimed at reducing poverty, decreasing inequality and promoting positive parental and child well-being', and that, further, 'UNICEF places family support and parenting support at the centre of its global social protection agenda', (UNICEF, 2015, 5). Parenting 'support' has two aspects in this global context, health-related interventions, and parenting education 'support'. The latter may have health elements, particularly in terms of mental health and well-being, but the primary focus is on parenting knowledge, competence and parent-child relations. But there is also, in some regions, the use of cash transfers, alongside parenting 'support' to form a package of measures; this is particularly the case in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF, 2015, 16).

Evidence-based parenting support across national and political regimes

Almost all national governments, with the exception of some in Central and West Africa, have implemented parenting 'support' policies utilising socio-pedagogical interventions to a greater or lesser extent. What is of particular interest to the current examination of the critique of educational parenting programmes is that these policies are actively pursued in contexts that are both similar and markedly dissimilar to those in the UK and England. The ubiquity of parenting 'support' underpinned by early and preventative intervention approaches, with the aim of enabling positive parenting, suggests that key elements of the critique may not be as well-founded as its supporters believe.

Although the central focus on parent learning, and parenting education, is present in parenting 'support' policies in place throughout Western Europe, there is, nonetheless, a wide variation in the specifics of those policies. Identifying key features of parenting 'support' in England, France, Germany and Italy, Daly noted that, for example, whereas in Germany, there is 'a range of general advice/information for families as well as education of parents and some [parenting] training', the use of evidence-based, standardised parenting programmes is 'low' when compared to England (Daly, 2013, 164). In the Netherlands, there is a long tradition of parenting 'support' (Knijn & Hopman, 2015), which has, historically, focused on child healthcare delivered via child healthcare centres, but now also include 'preventative tasks such as "light" forms of parenting support, for instance related to issues such as the prevention of negative child-rearing practices', (Knijn & Hopman, 2015, 645). The increasing stress on parenting 'support' in the Netherlands since the 1990s was a result of the impetus provided by the children's rights and well-being agenda of the UNCRC, and a number of high-profile cases of child neglect and death. As elsewhere, evidence-based interventions are increasingly the fore in the Netherlands, taking place in the context of the restructuring of social provision in the Dutch welfare state model, along with the decentralisation of that provision, with a greater stress on neighbourhood provision and support. The over-arching approach to parenting is that it is, 'a job for which parents need to be well-prepared and taught proper skills', (Knijn & Hopman, 2015, 651). Government funding for parenting programmes has, since, 2007, been dependent on the scientific and evidence-based nature of parenting programmes. Some 70 such parenting programmes are offered, one example being the Triple P [Positive Parenting Program] parenting programme. This aspect of the 'turn to parenting' has proved contentious, with, 'the evidence-based approach debate strongly divid[ing] policy makers, experts and professionals working in the field', (Knijn & Hopman, 2015, 653). The Dutch case, then, exhibits a number of similarities with the English case – a presumption of the need for parenting education, early and preventative intervention, standardised and evidence-based programmes, all in place against a backdrop of the restructuring of the welfare system. That restructuring in England during the period of the UK 'New' Labour government saw a renewed focus on childhood as a key period for long-term economic achievement. The policy encapsulated in *Every Child Matters* (HMSO, September 2003) was designed to ensure five 'well-being' outcomes for children. Two of those outcomes, 'enjoying and achieving', and 'economic well-being' (HM Government, 2003, 6-7) stressed the importance for children of families and schools supporting their

acquisition of life skills in order to ensure future economic, social and personal success in adulthood. This melding of long-term individual, family and schooling priorities with those of wider society and the economy, also saw expression in the transformation of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) into the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2007 (in 2010, the incoming coalition government established the Department for Education). However, other national examples provide examples of parenting ‘support’ in different policy contexts, and suggest that the English and Dutch examples do not represent a universal experience of the use of parenting ‘support’. However, other national examples provide examples of parenting ‘support’ in different policy contexts, and suggest that the English and Dutch examples do not represent a universal experience of the use of parenting ‘support’.

Belarus is an exception among former Soviet bloc countries in that its transition to a post-Soviet model was only partial, and, under the long-term governance of President Alexander Lukashenko, has resisted neo-liberal forms of economic organisation, and associated forms of welfare reform. Belarus is not a candidate for entry into the European Union, and has close relations with Russia. It has very high educational levels, low levels of social inequality, and is, ‘an upper middle-income country with extensive state provision for families and children’, (Bruckauf, 2015a, 42). Family support in Belarus is a combination of direct material support, universal family allowances, social benefits and services: ‘means-tested social assistance includes cash allowances for children over 3 years of age, free food for children under 2 years, subsidies for technical means of rehabilitation and personal care for families with disabled children, statutory labour, tax, housing, health guarantees and privileges’, (Bruckauf, 2015a, 43). There is, in addition, extensive social provision, with a range of social services designed to support parents, families and children. This is a strongly welfarist model, a continuation of late Soviet practice, but included in that provision is parenting ‘support’ in the sense of Daly’s focus on parenting information and education aimed at parents and parental engagement and practices. Through its network of 148 centres of social services provision, which include “crisis rooms” and “hot lines”; these centres provide targeted provision for vulnerable families, but are also open to all families. In addition, ‘both universal, preventative campaigns and services, and targeted intervention focused on families and children in socially dangerous situations are implemented in the country’, (Bruckauf, 2015a, 44). Information campaigns, focused on mothers, families, children, and a ‘Best Family of the Year’ competition is held. Further, since 2009, the Minsk Centre of Social Services to Families and Children has, in collaboration with Russian and Swedish NGOs, run a Father School. This provides educational and socio-psychological support for new fathers and fathers-to-be. The initiative runs in all the local districts of Minsk, and in a few other towns and villages. The fathers’ education training, ‘is delivered in a small group format through specially trained male volunteers who have to be fathers themselves’, (Bruckauf, 2015a, 44).

China represents a partial contrast to Belarus on the one hand, and countries such as England, on the other. Since 1978, China has been engaged in rapid industrialisation, and is now the second largest economy in the world, classed as an upper-middle-income country. The core of China’s family policy remains the ‘one-child policy’, although, since 2014, that policy has been partially relaxed. China’s industrialisation has been accompanied by rapid urbanisation and the dislocation of families, as large numbers of workers migrate internally within China, leaving families in rural areas. Whereas the one child policy can be seen in terms of policy designed to curtail demographic growth and thereby enable industrialisation, China’s move to parenting support can be understood in terms of the government’s response to stresses on the family which have arisen in consequence of industrialisation and China’s emergent, now prominent role in the global economy. By 2012, it was estimated by the ‘All China Women’s Federation’ that there were some 61 million ‘left behind’ children in China (Bruckauf, 2015b). Against this background, and within the context of a strongly top-down political structure, the Chinese government introduced its Five Year Plan for Family Education in 2005. While

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acknowledging the strong, traditional reliance of Chinese society on the family as a provider of social security and a welfare safety net, the Five Year Plan:

provided for the development of a training manual on family education with special focus on children's rights and gender equality. It required school-based parent education programmes as well as parenting support service centres to be established in 80 per cent of communities and 60 per cent of villages in China. The national guidelines on family education published in 2010 further emphasize the role of family awareness and education for nation building. (Bruckauf, 2015b, 56).

The importance of parenting 'support' was recognised at the 12th National People's Congress in 2014 as a high social priority. Working with NGOs (specifically, Save the Children), the Chinese Centre for Child's Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility have developed the manualised parenting education programme, 'Purposeful Parenting for Working Parents'. This programme has three key modules, 'Parents' Well-being', 'Understanding Your Child', and 'Remote Parenting', and is aimed at helping migrant parents maintain parent-child relations despite the demands, and impact, of separation. In addition, the All China Women's Federation has carried out extensive work to support 'left behind' children and the grandparents who typically look after them. Over 80,000 volunteer mothers have been recruited by the All China Women's Federation since 2012, and it provides training around parent skills and knowledge (Bruckauf, 2015b).

A generic rather than a specific critique

The critique is not only characterised by the narrowness of its national focus, but also by failures to identify exactly what parenting education, training, and courses are being subjected to the critique. There are exceptions, but where specific programmes are examined it is within the overarching critique of policy (Lucas, 2011; Ramaekers & Vandezande, 2013; Cottam & Espie, 2014; Wainwright & Marandet, 2013). Typically parenting education, and parenting programmes are referred to in a generic fashion, without any engagement with individual programmes (for example, Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Wainwright & Marandet, 2013; 2017; Gillies, 2005b; Gewirtz, 2001). The difficulty here is that there are a very great number of parenting programmes, many 'home-grown', others with scientific bases. The UNODC has identified a range of evidence-based programmes, as well as providing governments with guidance on the differing aims and purposes of programmes (UNDOC, 2009, 2010). Parenting programmes do not all have the same foundations or intentions, and, as a result, it is difficult to subject parenting education and programmes to a generalised critique. The issue of the critique being largely a generalised one has two key weaknesses. The first being a function of the dominant focus on parenting 'support' as being essentially a policy level issue that is designed, delivered and experienced entirely in tune with UK government policy. By focusing largely on policy-making at UK government level, or at party political level, the critique fails to account for the multiple stakeholders who are key to the design, delivery, and, importantly, the experience of parenting education. The second issue relates to the failure of much of the critique to engage with the extensive empirical research on the effectiveness and efficacy of evidence based parenting 'support'. Both of these issues are addressed below.

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iii) Ignores multiple stakeholders

The critique of parenting ‘support’ typically addresses issues of intentions, goals and desired outcomes in relation to the provision of parenting education and parenting programmes through a focus on top-level strategy, that is, national policy makers, particularly UK policy makers. However, such an approach fails to engage with differing actors at differing levels, and their intentions, goals and desired outcomes. The reality of parenting education provision is that it is not characterised by a direct policy imposition of top-level actors onto agency-less parents. Rather, parenting education programmes may be chosen, or recommended, by senior politicians, but they are designed and developed by academics from a variety of disciplines; the implementation of programmes are often in the hands of NGOs, local government, schools, and other bodies; the programmes are delivered by a range of facilitators, some of whom are professionals, while others are trained peers of the recipients; and, finally, parents, families and children all display agency in their acceptance, or not, of parenting education. Each of these five levels of parenting ‘support’ policy and practice represent differing contexts to parenting education provision, and each modifies and develops parenting education programmes.

Strategic policy

At the top-level, it is the case that national policy makers have argued that parenting education programmes as part of parenting ‘support’ policy have a key role in delivering policy solutions in the fields of youth offending, anti-social behaviour, poverty, ‘troubled families’, and social inclusion and cohesion. Daly, in her review of parenting support in England examined the popularity among policy-makers of parenting ‘support’ and parenting education (Daly, 2015b). She highlighted four factors: it is a policy that is seen by policy-makers as having the potential to improve child outcomes, especially in relation to education and health; it is seen as a way of minimising child risk; it is also seen to contribute to parental well-being, which is important as a factor in child well-being; and, finally, policy-makers see the policy as building social capital and promoting social inclusion and cohesion.

The degree to which these policy convictions are accurate is debateable. An example is the Troubled Families Programme, 2012-2015, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition policy which was targeted at ‘turning around’ 120,000 of the most ‘troubled families’ in England. The policy was developed in the aftermath of the 2011 riots, and budgeted £448 million over three years to ‘support’ those families who, ‘are involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour; have children who are excluded from school or regularly truant; have an adult on out-of-work benefits’ (GOV.UK, March 2015). Parenting orders, parenting education, including parenting programmes, and family intervention projects were all part of the policy. However, government claims regarding the success of this early intervention family ‘support’ policy were challenged, with, for example, the NIESR reporting that the Troubled Families Programme showed no, ‘consistent evidence that the programme had any significant or systematic impact’ on the key metrics of the programme (NIESR, 2016). Nevertheless, policy-makers continue to see parenting ‘support’ policy, including parenting education and training, ‘as a “solution” to a range of problems which resonate in today’s risk-orientated societies’ (Daly, 2015b, 642). It is this level – the policy-making level – that the critique of parenting ‘support’ and education is largely focused, and, perhaps, has most resonance. However, beneath this level, there lie four more levels that impact upon the nature of parenting education as experienced by parents, families, and children.

Programme designers

Evidence based parenting programmes are regarded by policy-makers as being a key provision in contemporary parenting ‘support’. However, the primary goals and outcomes of parenting programme designers are not the same as those of policy-makers. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2010) produced a review of 23 evidence-based parenting programmes that provides comparative details of the aims, intentions and desired outcomes of a wide range of different parenting programme designers. Interestingly, the high-level policy focus of UNODC is tackling drug misuse and crime; that high-level policy target does not, however, represent the primary focus of the large majority of the parenting programmes reviewed. The review provides the levels of evidence for each of the programmes, describes their content, the risk level focus, and the ages of children that the parenting programme relates to. The assessments also present the intentions and goals of the programme designers. The latter present a different approach to that which motivates high-level policy-makers. Examples include:

- *Triple P*: The programme also aims to promote parent confidence, reduce parent stress and, in the case of two-parent families, improve couples’ communication and consistency in relation to parenting, thus reducing known risk factors and strengthening protective factors associated with behavioural problems. (UNODC, 2010, 5).
- The *Incredible Years* parent, teacher and child training series features three comprehensive, multifaceted and development based curricula for parents, teachers and children. The series is based on cognitive social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of the family and of teacher socialization processes, especially those affecting young children. It is based on the premise that negative reinforcement develops and maintains negative behaviours in children and critical or coercive behaviour in parents and teachers, and that parents and teachers must therefore change their own behaviour in order to improve the social interaction of the child. (UNODC, 2010, 13).
- *Parenting Wisely* is a self-administered online programme that teaches parents and their children important skills for enhancing relationships and decreasing conflict through behaviour management and support. (UNODC, 2010, 62).
- *Staying Connected With Your Teen*: The programme focuses on strengthening family bonds and establishing clear standards of behaviour, helping parents to manage their teenage child’s behaviour more appropriately and, at the same time, to encourage the child’s independence. In this way, the programme seeks to address specific risk factors in the family and peer domains, including drug abuse by a parent or sibling, parental tolerance of drug abuse, poor and inconsistent family management practices, family conflict, lack of family communication, involvement and bonding and association with delinquent and drug-abusing peers. (UNODC, 2010, 76).

The primary concerns of these, and the majority of the other programmes, are personal relationships between adults, between adults and children, managing and understanding behaviour (particularly of, and by adults), and strengthening family relations.

Local authority commissioners

One of the main issues raised by the critique of parenting ‘support’ is that parenting education and parenting programmes are utilised in a targeted fashion, with identified parents and families who are deemed to be problematic, and are working-class parents whom governments seek to re-fashion in a middle class mode. This model could be used to characterise the use of such parenting ‘support’ in

the Troubled Families Programme, and the earlier Respect Action Plan, 2005-2007, which aimed to tackle anti-social behaviour using a variety of tools, including greater use of parenting orders and parenting programmes. However, this is not the complete picture at policy-making level, as illustrated by David Cameron's high profile support for the universal parenting education initiative, the CANparent Trial 2012-2015 (Cullen *et al*, 2017), and the subsequent reassertion of the importance of universal parenting education provision under the Life Chances Strategy (subsequently shelved following Cameron's resignation in the summer of 2016). However, the large-scale parenting 'support' programmes of the 'New' Labour government exhibited universalist aspects, despite the policy-maker stress on targeted parenting education. The key here was in the third level of policy implementation, that is, at the level of Local Authority (LA) providers.

The Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), 2006-2011, was a large-scale parenting programme initiative, funded by central government but delivered at local level through LAs in England. An initial 'pathfinder' period, September 2006-March 2008, which offered three evidence-based parenting programmes in 18 LAs was followed by an additional two programmes being added to the offer which was, eventually, available in all English LAs. The programmes in question were Triple P, Incredible Years (school age), Families and Schools Together (FAST), and Strengthening Families Programme 10-14. The central government focus of the PEIP was on parents of children at risk of anti-social behaviour; it was, therefore, a high-level policy targeted at specific parents. However, LAs were given the freedom to make their own assessment of needs at the local level, and to design their roll-out strategy. As a result, the targeted approach of the policy-makers was, in many LAs, revised, and a universal offer was made at local level under the PEIP. LA strategic and operational leads typically stressed that their LA's parenting 'support' strategies sought to incorporate different levels of need, and that, as a result, parenting education and parenting programmes had to be offered on as wide a basis as possible (Lindsay *et al*, 2008). The prevalence of universal offers under the PEIP, something that was driven by LA decision-making on the basis of LA level perceptions of local parent demand for parent education, led to a broader range of class backgrounds of those parents who took part in the PEIP than the critique of parenting education would suggest. Instead of the participating parent cohort being uniformly 'working-class', the evaluation of the PEIP showed that the targeted strategy suggested by policy-makers had been diluted by LA strategists, and operational managers, in order to meet a wider parenting need. For example, of the 6143 parents who took part in PEIP between 2008-2011 (i.e., following the pathfinder stage), and took part in the evaluation, 28% had university-level education, while 30% had fewer than five GCSE passes, and 23% had no secondary education qualifications (Cullen *et al*, 2013, 1034). Although the parents education levels (used as a proxy for class) were skewed to low attainment, the range of education levels was wide, and a substantial number of the parents had a university level education.

Facilitators

The fourth level in the operation of parenting programmes is composed of the facilitators of those programmes that are delivered face-to-face, either in groups or on a one-to-one basis. There is evidence from parenting education initiatives across England that facilitators have their own perceptions of their role. That role is not perceived as being a didactic, 'top-down' role, rather it is a role that facilitators typically regard as involving a 'mutual-reach' element, as defined by Warin (2009).

Examples of facilitator intentions can be found in the CANparent Trial, 2012-2015, which was rolled out in two phases, the first in 2012-14, and the second phase, January 2014-2015. Organisational and funding changes were made between the two phases, but the provision of a

universal parenting education offer in the trial areas remained (Cullen *et al*, 2017). The CANparent Trial evaluation included detailed, semi-structured interviews with 24 of the parenting programme facilitators, who were involved in the CANparent delivery of four programmes – Parent Gym, Triple P, Understanding Your Child’s Behaviour (Solihull Approach), and FAST (Families and Schools Together). The interviews included questions about the role of facilitator and how the facilitators’ saw their work (Lindsay *et al*, 2016). The facilitators described their role as being open and welcoming, and that they felt it was important for them to create a secure, relaxed environment that would enable ‘parents and carers to cohere as a group, and be in a position to take advantage of the learning that was on offer’, (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 85). Typically the facilitators saw their role as being different from that of a teacher, or an ‘expert’. One facilitator explained, ‘I’m very keen to point out that I’m not an expert parent, I’m a parent in training. I’m not a teacher, I’m there to facilitate, and my role is to help shape the sessions, and to talk about practical things that [programme] believes passionately in’, (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 85). In addition, facilitators stressed that personal qualities, experience and the desire to build relationships with the parents were all central to their role. For example, a facilitator explained, ‘you have to have the sort of personality that people want to open up to. You have to be really non-judgemental [...] Nobody can get it [being a parent] perfect, so it’s about saying everybody needs a little bit of help sometimes, and that’s the help and support we’re going to provide’, (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 87). In terms of the facilitator-parent relationship, the facilitators argued that the relationship had to, ‘be characterised by trust, empathy, confidence in the facilitator and the programme, and a sense of equality and professionalism’, (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 87).

Mothers – and fathers

Parents’ views of taking part in parenting programmes represent another level in delineating the desired intentions, goals and outcomes of those involved in parenting ‘support’. Extensive evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, of parent views of participating in evidence based parenting programmes has been generated by the evaluations of the PEIP and CANparent initiatives. For the PEIP evaluation, Waves 2 and 3, quantitative data was gathered on 6143 parents (Lindsay *et al*, 2011, 24); while for the much smaller CANparent Trial, phase 2, data was gathered on 164 parents (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 38). This quantitative data is discussed below. In addition to quantitative data, qualitative interviews were conducted with parents in order to generate rich data concerning the experience of taking a parenting programme. For the PEIP, wave 2 and 3, 75 parents were interviewed and many gave accounts of the positive impact on themselves, their children, and family life, of the parenting programme they attended as part of the PEIP. Details are presented in the evaluation report (Lindsay *et al*, 2011). One example was of a mother who attended a Strengthening Families Programme, 10-14 (SFP10-14), who explained that:

Without that (SFP10-14) programme my daughter wouldn’t be here, she’d be somewhere else. I’d got to that stage where I am thinking: ‘No, I can’t do this anymore.’ You know, and I was willing to open that door and say: ‘Goodbye. Go to your dad’s.’ But no, it was definitely down to the programme. ‘Cos I mean to say when we had finished we was more...when she came back from school we would sit down and we would talk about the programme. And we’d talk about what we went through that day and things like that. And I found that my daughter would come and talk to me afterwards and she still comes and talks to me, which is nice because she would never talk before. She would bottle

everything up or go and talk to her friends and what have you, but she would never say anything to me. She does now. (Lindsay *et al*, 2011, 67)

Similar qualitative data was reported by the 25 parents and carers who were interviewed as part of the evaluation of the CANparent Trial. Typical parent/carer reporting on the experience of taking part in a CANparent parenting course included, ‘it was really well planned, very thought through, very much from a parent’s perspective, very much from a mother’s and a father’s perspective rather than an academic’s or an expert’, (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 71-72); ‘I thought it was really good fun; I just thought this is great because she [the facilitator] wasn’t standing dictating to us, which I think would be the worst thing’, (Lindsay *et al*, 72); ‘All our kids were in the same class so it was good ...and the fact you’re on the course together always means you’ve got a common interest before you start so that was nice’, (Lindsay *et al*, 74). Parents reported changes resulting from attending CANparent in relation to increased confidence, increased knowledge and understanding, improved communication between family members, positive changes in children, and more positive behaviours (Lindsay *et al*, 2016, 76-77).

iv) Ignoring key parts of the evidence base

There is substantial evidence of the effectiveness of evidence-based parenting programmes, not only at the level of randomised controlled trials (RCTs), which have been criticised as being ‘severely limited in their application to real-world complexity’ (Gillies *et al*, 2017, 43), but also in terms of real-world roll-outs of parenting programmes which provide evidence of their effectiveness as well as their efficacy.

An extensive literature exists in relation to the effectiveness of evidence-based parenting programmes. Work by Barlow focusing on the effectiveness of parenting programmes in relation to behaviour problems in children, and maternal psychosocial health (Barlow *et al*, 2000, 2003, 2009) has shown that there is good evidence that evidence-based parenting programmes have a positive impact, and that evidence has been increasing over time. A systematic review of published studies of the effectiveness of parenting programmes aiming to improve behaviour in 3-10 year olds, published between 1970 and 2000 produced only 16 studies that met the review standard of an RCT and at least one standardized outcome measure. Nonetheless, ‘these studies suggest that structured parent education programs can be effective in producing positive change in both parental perceptions and objective measures of children’s behavior and that these changes are maintained over time’, (Barlow *et al*, 2000, 356). A later meta-analysis (Barlow *et al*, 2003), and an update (Barlow *et al*, 2009), focused on the impact of parenting programmes on maternal psychosocial health, and found, over 20 studies, significant improvements in terms of depression, anxiety, and maternal stress. Such findings have helped underpin policy recommendations in a number of areas, including support children and families in highly disadvantaged settings in developing countries. The review of published literature from 2000 to 2012 carried out under the auspices of United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2013) to provide a summary of ‘empirically based recommendations for supporting child caregiver relationships in the context of AIDS and poverty’, (USAID, 2013, vii) presented a range of findings in relation to differing aspects of child and family relations. Noting that most of the evidence-based (involving RCTs and standardised outcome measures) came from the USA UK, Canada and Australia, and that this evidence base needed widening, the review still considered ‘more than 600 relevant peer-reviewed papers on 83 synthetic and systematic reviews of parent support’, (USAID, 2013, 1). The report organised its findings into five categories of parenting

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programme organized by the central purpose of each: preparing for parenthood; promoting early child growth; child behaviour management; family relations and child protection; and parental well-being. The literature coverage of the five themes varied, as did the evidence of effectiveness, but, overall, the review concluded that, ‘families, parents, and children affected by HIV and AIDS are very likely to benefit from parent support’, (USAID, 2013, 35).

Beyond the level of RCTs, there is a developing literature on the effectiveness of parenting programmes when rolled out into real world conditions, i.e., evidencing the efficacy of the programmes. Gray, for example, used a large data base relating to the PEIP roll-out, 2008-2011, and the LA service-led sustained implementation phase, 2011-2016, using data relating to ‘1390 parents who took part in the effectiveness trial phase, and 3706 from the sustained implementation phase’ (Gray *et al*, 2018, 3). Addressing the issue of real-world complexity, Gray concluded that:

The current study demonstrated that effectiveness can be maintained when services lead on provision of EBPPs [Evidence Based Parenting Programmes]. Present findings indicated that improvements in child behavior and parental mental well-being were significantly maintained during sustained implementation, whereas improvements in parenting laxness and over-reactivity were significant in the short-term but better maintained in the longer term under sustained implementation. (Gray *et al*, 2018, 9).

The PEIP was an important element in the ‘New’ Labour government’s family policy, and provided fully-funded evidence-based parenting programmes – Incredible Years, Triple P, Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities in the initial roll-out, with Strengthening Families Programme 10-14, and Families and Schools Together being added later (Cullen *et al*, 2013).

The later CANparent Trial, part of the coalition government’s family policy, was carried out on a much smaller scale, and was only part-funded in an attempt to introduce a quasi-market in parenting education (Cullen *et al*, 2017). Despite weaknesses in the delivery of the CANparent programmes, similar results were apparent in terms of the effectiveness of the parenting programmes, indicating that, ‘universal parenting programmes can be effective in improving parents’ sense of parenting efficacy and mental well-being when delivered to the full range of parents in community settings’, (Lindsay & Totsika, 2017, 1). Outside the UK, a population level offer of Triple P in Longford and Westmeath, the Republic of Ireland, was evaluated in conjunction with two comparison regions which did not receive the intervention. The evaluation findings were that:

Children in the intervention sample experienced lower total difficulties [as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire], emotional symptoms, and conduct problems than children in the comparison sample, and they were less at risk of scoring within the borderline/abnormal range by 4.7% for total difficulties, 4.4% for conduct problems, and 4.5% for hyperactivity in the total population. (Doyle *et al*, 2018, 772)

Smaller-scale, qualitative studies also indicate that parenting programmes have lasting, positive effects, for example Zeedyk’s work with 21 parents who undertook a Parents Altogether Lending

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Support (PALS) programme, which, ‘showed that the majority of participants felt the programme had had lasting effects on their ability to manage their children’s behaviour and empowered them as adults,’ (Zeedyk, 2008, 99).

Discussion

State-origin parenting support is not a new area of policy, however since the 1990s it has developed in new ways. Parenting support has come to mean, ‘organised services/provisions oriented to affect how parents execute their role as parents by giving the access to a range of resources that serve to increase their competence in childrearing’, (Daly, 2013,162). A key element of that ‘support’ has been the use of evidence-based parenting programmes, parenting information and training. This development has been the subject of a critique which places parenting ‘support’ in the context of the UK’s shift from a social-democratic mode of politics and economics to a ‘neo-liberal’, market dominated mode. That shift, it is argued, has underpinned the refocusing of parental support to a policy that impacts negatively in both gendered and class terms. This paper has sought to review the critique of parenting ‘support’, and has highlighted a number of issues with the critique as it has developed over the last three decades.

The argument advanced here is that the proponents of the critique of parenting ‘support’ have adopted too narrow a focus in their work. That focus is the UK, ‘New’ Labour and succeeding governments who have pursued a neo-liberal approach to social policy, including family policy and parenting. However, parenting ‘support’, and parenting education, is a global and regional policy choice. The adoption of the UNCRC in 1989 acted as a catalyst to governments’ adopting parenting education policies, particularly evidence-based parenting programmes. The global and regional frameworks, including the UNCRC and the recommendations of the Council of Europe, and the European Commission, all have a role for parenting education as a valid, and viable, policy. The UNCRC was a watershed in securing the rights of the child globally, and has acted as the context, and the spur, to family and child policy development that has a specific place for parenting education. The value of such policy is seen by the UN, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission to lie across a range of concerns, including child development, parental well-being, the development of protective factors in relation to crime and society, and the enhancing of life chances.

Central to the critique is the view that parenting ‘support’ policy is an expression of the over-arching, and dominant, framework of neo-liberalism that has characterised UK government policy for some three decades. However, even within Europe it is not just the UK that has developed parenting ‘support’ policies that utilise evidence-based, manualised parenting programmes, parenting education and knowledge. Countries with notably different traditions and policies in relation to parenting support have also incorporated parenting ‘support’ into parent, child and family strategies. For example, Sweden has a stronger social democratic model of parent and family support than England, yet all parents of children from birth to 18 years have the right to attend parenting courses free at the point of delivery (Rooth *et al*, 2017). Belarus provides perhaps the most divergent parent, child and family support policy model from that in England, with extensive financial and material support, including payment transfers. Yet Belarus also utilises universal and targeted parenting education programmes and information, and has developed a specific fatherhood support scheme, all as part of an early and preventative intervention policy approach.

Further afield, societies and economies exhibiting marked differences with England’s, also utilise parenting ‘support’, with, for example, China, having embarked upon a large-scale programme. Parenting ‘support’, parenting education, parenting programmes, and early and preventative

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intervention models of intervention are not merely a facet of a UK system wedded to neo-liberal, ‘New Market’, anti-welfarism policies.

This paper also challenges the critique of parenting ‘support’ in relation to the limited scope of the critique’s approach to the intentions, goals, and outcomes that motivate those concerned with parenting ‘support’. The proponents of the critique largely focus on UK policy-makers when discussing parenting education. Yet policy-makers are only one level, or layer, of those concerned with parenting education. The motivations of policy-makers incorporate a range of policy areas that they have seen as, potentially, being impacted upon by parenting education and ‘support’. However, the motivations of evidence-based parenting programme designers, the providers of programmes (for example, English LAs under the PEIP roll-out), the facilitators of the programmes, and, most importantly, the parents who take part in parenting education, suggest that a focus on policy-makers is limiting in terms of the conclusions that can be made. The final area in which the critique of parenting education, and, particularly evidence based parenting programmes, is lacking, is in regards to the evidence base of both the effectiveness and efficacy of evidence based parenting programmes. There is substantial evidence both of the effectiveness of evidence based parenting, and of their continuing effectiveness following large-scale roll-out, i.e., of their efficacy. Taken together, issues with these areas of the critique of parenting support since the 1990s, particularly in respect of parenting education and evidence-based parenting programmes, suggest that its advocates need to revisit their contesting of what is a popular global, regional and national policy choice.

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