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# A Storm in a Tea-Cup? 'Making a Difference' in Two Sure Start Children's Centres

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**Title: A storm in a tea-cup? 'Making a difference' in two Sure Start Children's Centres.**

### **Abstract**

Sure Start Children's Centres were central to the last UK Labour government in improving outcomes for children and families. Yet participation by those who 'ought' to attend was and remains a focus of concern. Using the work of Foucault this paper explores parental participation in two Centres to examine how 'government operates at a distance', through the everyday interactions of those who inhabit these spaces. In exploring micro-practices the humble cup of tea can be seen, not only as a small act of caring but a site of power and struggle over what these spaces meant to parents and practitioners.

**Key words:** parenting, policy and practice, intervention, Foucault, Sure Start

### **Sure Start Children's Centres; an agenda for change**

Since 2010 there has been a reduction in the number of Sure Start Children's Centres in England from 3632 in 2010 to 3350 (Teather, 2012). Sure Start Children's Centres and Sure Start Local Programmes before them were regarded as a key 'policy vehicle' for the abolition of child poverty and vital in constructing an integrated children's service (Glass, 1999). Engrained in these

new institutions was New Labour's responsabilisation agenda. Whilst Children's Centres were open to all families with young children, with this right came responsibilities. Investment brought with it regulation; the regulation of parents, invariably mothers (Lister, 2006). At a micro-level the right to attend came with an implicit responsibility to engage in some sort of personal change; 'activation' and 'transition' implicit in a social investment state. Sure Start Children's Centres reflected the social investment approach in which the concept of change was embedded; changing communities, attitudes, values and behaviours (Lister 2006). The extent to which this change needed to happen was reflected in the level of disadvantage within a community (DfES, 2006); the greater the level of disadvantage the greater the change required. Yet despite claims of tailoring support to the needs of local communities (Pearson and Thurston, 2006) criticisms were levied at Children's Centres for failing to attract families who were most in need of support (NESS, 2006). Hence prompting fears universal services were being dominated by the 'sharp elbowed middle classes' (Cameron, 2010). Today the pressure on Children's Centres has been sharply refocused. Centres must attract at least 85% of the neediest families in their areas, ensuring they 'regularly attend' (OFSTED, 2011) if they wish to be regarded as outstanding. Hence the findings of this paper continue to be relevant to those delivering services within these ever changing spaces.

Yet whilst the numbers and remit of Children's Centres in England has undergone change since the Coalition government came to power in 2010, with movement towards a more targeted than universal approach (HM Government,

2010) the key functions of creating change remain constant. In order to ensure parents are open to change they need to be tamed and trained into ways which allow them to incorporate the messages being delivered via the Children's Centres. Therefore to elicit change, parents need to use Children's Centres and this requires Children's Centres to shake off the stigma associated with seeking support. This is difficult given much of their work has been one which requires identifying who is at risk, focusing on both preventing and protecting (France and Utting, 2005, p.80). Drawing on the work of Foucault (1977, 1988) and the concept of governmentality (Rose, 1990; Miller and Rose, 2008) the paper explores how 'the right' to a cup of tea got in the way of Centres meeting outcomes. The concepts of power and change are used to explore the way Centres enacted government not in a top down heavy handed way but in small everyday processes. Sources of tension were apparent as parents made these spaces their own, sometimes in conflict with how they 'ought' to be used. Within this tension the humble cup of tea became embroiled in the struggle for power.

## **Methodology**

Between 2008 and 2009 an ethnographic methodology was used to study two Sure Start Children's Centres. One situated on the edge of a small rural market town, being in the 70% of disadvantaged areas, the other on the edge of a large town, in the top 30% of deprived areas in the UK serving a larger geographical area (DfES, 2006). Both Centres offered a range of services including universal health services, breastfeeding support, stay and play groups and group/one-to-

one outreach parenting support. Neither Centres offered nursery or pre-school provision.

Over eighteen months, a total of sixty-two days were spent in the two Centres. Six focus groups with staff, two with parents, sixteen formal parent interviews, and eight other formal interviews with managers, head teachers and health staff. Days in the field involved participation and observation in various activities and groups, and talking and listening to parents, staff and volunteers. In order to gain an understanding of what Centres meant to those who did not attend I also went out into the wider community, talking to parents in other settings such as toddler groups, pre-schools and other spaces parents with young children inhabit. In an attempt to 'find', the 'hard to reach' and those who are more socially isolated I visited a small number of groups which supported vulnerable people.

The range of methods employed enabled a multi-perspective and multi-level analysis of the issues of participation. As an ethnographer I sought to 'get up close' (Pole and Morrison, 2003) not to 'study people' from an objective perspective but to 'learn *from* people'; how they actively construct meaning in their day-to-day interactions (Spradley, 1980: 3). Yet I was also acutely aware I was entering a space which was already full of practices and meanings; where participants were already engaged in constructing their own meanings of what Centres meant to them. Hence using interviews and focus groups enabled me to take my interpretations back to participants for their reflections on my

interpretations to seek depth, detail and perspective in order to explore multiple realities. Analysis was guided by Spradley's (1980) ideas of social meaning. I engaged in a process of trying to understand the multiple meanings of these new spaces for those who worked in them, those who used them and those who walked past them. Central to this analysis was the work of Foucault<sup>ii</sup> and the concepts of power, change and difference.

### **Foucault, power and difference**

The construction of Sure Start Children's Centres was both a central tool in the Labour government's fight against social exclusion but also a means to centralise services for families. These new 'centres' required new experts with new expertise. They can also be regarded not only as a new type of 'panopticon' (Foucault, 1977), a place where parenting practices are exposed, but also where new knowledge is produced and enacted. This new knowledge constructs and creates new 'problems' which then need to be professionally managed by 'little engineers of the human soul and their mundane knowledge' in the shape of technologies and procedures (Miller and Rose, 2008: 12). Hence Centres are involved in the 'dual process of problematizing and acting on individual behaviour' (Miller and Rose, 2008: 5). These new 'domains and enclosures' (Foucault, 1977: 12), like schools, are important in the dispersal of power and regulatory practices, without them the state would not be able to assert its authority, 'able to shape and manage 'personal' conduct without violating formally private status' (Miller and Rose, 2008: 12). Therefore, in order for Centres to have an impact parents must in some way engage, opening up

the possibilities for observation and identification of those who are required to undertake some form of change. Hence the concept of 'progressive universalism' adopted by the Labour government was key (HM Treasury, 2004). The principle involved the offering of services to all in order to identify those who required further support, with 'stiletto interventions to target those most in need' (HM Government, 2012). The concept became embedded within the discourse of policy documents and guidance for service providers and slipped into the language of practice, unchallenged and accepted.

Early intervention in the lives of children and families is a fundamental premise on which the social investment state is built and can be regarded as part of the process of 'discipline', of governance at a distance rather than control (Hendrick, 2009). The need to produce what Foucault (1977) calls 'docile' or 'teachable' bodies (Hoskin, 1990: 31), being open and receptive to change is essential in order to be able to take on board the dominant discourses of how one 'ought' to be, to absorb the messages being 'modelled' within these new institutions. Hence power can be seen to operate as a complex web; not directed in authoritarian tones upon passive, unyielding recipients but instead infused in everyday micro-interactions, processes and practices, many of which become culturally accepted and hence unnoticed. In doing so all are implicated.

For institutions such as Sure Start Children's Centres, the idea of 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1977) is highly implicated in the process of governmentality.

Centres are not only an instrument of power (through government at a distance), but also a model of power; bridging the power between the welfare state (and economy) and the family as a site of discipline and self-regulation. In order to fulfil this function, there needs to be some way of Centres identifying those who need support. This calls for some sort of categorisation which must inevitably be preceded by a discussion of what or who is considered 'normal' and hence, what is abnormal or deviant. 'Normalisation' processes construct those who were seen as being in need of support within Centres. Identification of those who are at risk of social exclusion within this model of intervention is necessary in order to intervene (or invest) early and hence prevent poor outcomes (France and Utting, 2005). Therefore, change is at the heart of the process of engagement.

### **The offering of tea**

How then does the humble cup of tea become entwined in governing? After all the offering of a 'cuppa' is synonymous with British culture, a mark of caring, of relationships, of giving time to another, to listen and share; a social activity that promotes a sense of togetherness and community. Tea plays a part in the construction of everyday life, providing boundaries to, and segmenting parts of the day (Southerton, 2006); a 'temporal maker' in everyday practices (Thomas and Bailey, 2009: 615). The 'tea and chat' strategy has been the focus of debate (Mills and others, 2012), recognised as a way of developing trusting relationships. With such cultural significance of this public display of hospitality, of welcoming and care, to withhold or control the offering of tea contains



powerful, yet rarely acknowledged meaning. For a researcher tea was also a fundamental instrument for engagement. Entering spaces where I was neither worker nor service user, where my role was ambiguous, 'strange' and 'marginal' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 113), was stressful and these small acts of meaning gave a structure to my research day. 'Putting the kettle on' also provided many opportunities for informal ethnographic interviews with both staff and parents.

### Tea and rules

As I joined in the activities and groups, the ritual of 'the break' within the Centres also became a focus of my attention. I was intrigued at the irregularities of the ritual and began to observe closer. Although there were no formal guidelines, rules or procedures about whether or not hot drinks could be offered in groups, tea and the offering of a 'cuppa' varied. In most drop-in groups run in Children's Centres where parents and carers accompanied children, no hot drink was offered. Instead a cup of water and sometimes but rarely juice was provided to parents at 'break' time. In contrast parents attending groups run by Children's Centres in buildings such as village halls, hot drinks were almost always provided usually with 'rules'. In one community in a relatively poor part of town parents were greeted with the offer of a hot drink, often accompanied by a biscuit or even cake. This outreach group was extremely popular with parents who would not otherwise have engaged with the Children's Centre despite it being only less than a mile away. However, the rule was drinks must be consumed around the hatch from which they were served. The providing of a

'safe hot drinks space' applied to a number of groups, with safe spaces being constructed using a range of everyday available objects. For example, one group used a selection of display boards to arrange a 'corral' where parents could consume their hot drinks.

#### Exceptions to the rules

Other exceptions to how these 'rules' were applied within Children's Centre settings included specialist groups such as the young parents group, the dads' group and breastfeeding groups. Here hot drinks and invariably some sort of snack was offered. The reasons for this was based around two themes, nurturing and attracting vulnerable or 'hard to reach' parents. In the breastfeeding groups, justification was constructed around a narrative of 'nurturing'. Breastfeeding a baby meant mothers would have '*not been able to get a drink*' and hence appreciated the gesture. This rationale legitimated the providing of hot drinks to these mothers. Mothers who were bottle-feeding were not offered a hot drink when they attended the clinic in the Children's Centres. Closely tied to this is the demands on Centres to meet targets which required Centres to increase the number of babies who were breastfed (DFES, 2004; Sure Start, 2008). Likewise, increasing the number of fathers who participated in Children Centre activities was also monitored within this framework. Hence fathers and groups offered at the weekend were similarly provided with hot drinks and food. Food carrying even greater symbolic meaning than even hot drinks (Douglas, 1975). Yet the universal offering of tea was problematic as will be seen in the following sections.

### **Claiming professionalism: 'Not a coffee morning/not a toddler group'**

The hot drinks issue cannot be seen in isolation of other themes which were beginning to emerge from the research. Alongside these tentative observations was an emerging narrative from the staff perspective around the definition of a Children's Centre. This narrative took a number of forms, one of which was threaded through with the way staff constructed themselves as professionals, as experts. To do this they positioned themselves in terms of 'the other', the other being other provision and in this case they were 'not a coffee morning or a toddler group'. In the following Ann is a Centre worker, she was asked about the importance of letting parents know what Centres had to offer:

*.... And if parents don't know what's on offer it's just going to be like a coffee morning again, not that there is anything wrong with parents supporting each other and chatting, but a drop-in is not a coffee morning, there is more involved. (Staff Focus Group 07/08).*

Hargreaves (2012) identified the use of 'contrastive rhetoric' in relation to how secondary school teacher's positioned themselves in relation to primary schools teachers. Similarly Centre staff positioned themselves and what they offered as being different from what was offered in 'non-expert' spaces, 'non-professionalised spaces'. Children Centre run groups had to evidence they were 'doing something to improve outcomes for children' and making a difference. The difference that Centre staff tried to make in the many groups which I observed was to improve the parent-child relationship.

Within toddler groups I visited there was a great deal of variation. Some groups were run in schools where there was a higher degree of control over the activities within the group, including whether hot drinks were offered or not. Many were run in dusty church halls, often by women who had been running the group for many years, sometimes having been a parent attender themselves. Parents use of toddler groups as opposed to Children's Centres groups was also expressed using a similar contrastive rhetoric. The most often stated reason was *'here you can be yourself'*, where *'the kids can play and you can chat'*. The lack of restrictions within these groups as opposed to the Centres was also highlighted; *'it's so relaxed, it's just not health and safety mad like it is down there'*.

*'Being yourself'* was clearly linked to the concept of surveillance and the fear of being judged, another dominant theme in my research. Within toddler groups the space was almost always constructed so mothers and occasionally fathers had somewhere to sit and space for children to play. The atmosphere was invariably informal, noise levels high and groups often very busy. There was usually an activity laid out for children and parents to engage in and there was always tea.

*Parent. Another thing, because of all the health and safety stuff that they have, they've taken away tea and coffee and all you get is water. (Parent at community group, Fieldnotes 06/09).*

The offering of a hot drink on the one hand can be seen as a 'banal act' of caring (Horton and Kraftl, 2009: 18), a way of building relationships with parents, encouraging trust and producing a warm and nurturing environment, yet on the other a risk. It is no surprise then that the main reasons staff gave for not providing hot drinks was health and safety. The narrative of risk was frequently used by Children's Centre staff to justify their decisions, with reference made to the danger hot drinks posed to young children and babies, particularly in busy groups. The atrocity story (Dingwall, 1977) was regularly used to illustrate to parents why hot drinks were withheld. According to staff there were few complaints from group participants, instead this discourse was taken on board and reinforced by parents. Staff did not have to exercise power once the discourse was established parents fulfilled the role of governing themselves. However, participants in the outreach group did question the rule and hence created a storm in tea cup in order to voice their need for a cup of tea.

### **The storm in the tea cup**

For parents attending Centres having a hot drink and meeting other parents was one of the main reasons to attend and a key message for engaging parents. Not only were Centres where parents could 'get professional advice on health and family matters, learn about training and job opportunities' but also where they could 'just socialise with other people' (Directgov, 2010). Staff however used official discourse, reflecting social policy and practice guidance to construct the image and expectation of what they offered. Central to this was

the idea of being a 'hub', 'middle' or 'centre' of advice, information, expertise and support, through which they would 'make a difference' in terms of outcomes for children and families. Parents (almost always mothers) regarded the cup of tea as representing freedom from rules and regulations, symbolic of 'time for us'. They wanted and felt the need for a cup of tea. Yet, this need was rarely voiced within the Centres. Staff in Centres on the other hand had a role to play; it was not enough to provide a safe space for children to play and for parents to socialise. They must also be seen to be fulfilling a role, achieving some sort of outcome and collecting evidence to show they were making a difference to the lives of children and their families (Friedman, 2005). Hence for staff in Children Centre drop-in groups one of the main things they could influence, could change, was the child-parent interaction. In 'manipulating the proximal variables associated with poor outcomes' (Clarke, 2006: 716), improving the parent-child interaction was a priority for Children's Centre staff. However, unable to access the home environment for the majority of children, staff only had interactions within the Centres on which to make judgements of this quality. This was problematic as will be seen in the following excerpts, as many parents used the Centre mainly for socialising, somewhere to sit back and interact with other parents. Not only did this distort the picture presented to staff of parents' capacity to interact with children, it also created some tension about what staff were trying to achieve within the Centres.

*Chloe (Centre worker). See that is the thing, it is not just about letting their children play. We are telling them to play with their children and interact with their children..... The main thing is their (the children's)*

*safety and if you (the parents) are chatting and having a drink especially with your back to them, who's going to look after their children (Staff Focus Group 01/09).*

For staff, one of the implicit reasons for not offering tea and coffee in groups was that providing hot drinks encouraged parents to socialise and talk and hence not to interact with their children. Nonetheless, parents were not always compliant with the wishes of staff and resisted. In one outreach group this played out over the year I attended, illustrating the way power is claimed and reclaimed by both staff and group participants, through the battle for a cup of tea.

In one Children's Centre drop-in parents had been given the opportunity to have a hot drink in a 'safe area'. However, staff had found parents were sitting in this area with 'their backs to their children' and not interacting with them. As a result the rules were changed again and parents were requested to drink their tea in the kitchen where children were not allowed. What happened over the next few weeks was a form of resistance. Instead of parents complying with the staff's request to drink in the kitchen and then come back out to the group, parents squashed themselves into the kitchen to drink and socialise. Whilst staff communicated these concerns as a health and safety issue, parents regarded this otherwise.

*Jasmine. Well like the Monday group, we were allowed to have tea and coffee there right, then we weren't allowed to have tea and*

*coffee around the tables we had to go in a separate area which was fine.*

*Me. What was the reason for that?*

*Suzi. I think it was because everyone was drinking coffee and not playing with their kids. (Parents Focus Group 06/09).*

The mother above was clearly aware that the issue was not one of health and safety but of interacting with children. For them the combination of playing with their children, socialising with other parents and having a cup of tea was possible and something they thought was encouraged by Centres.

These parents then chose not to go back to the Children's Centre drop-in group, in other words they did not become 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977). They resisted the discourse of health and safety, which was seen as protecting the child. Staff saw them as putting their own needs first, that of having a cup of tea, rather than interacting with their children. The 'good attender' takes on board the discourse on offer from Centre staff and uses it both inwardly, internalising this discourse, and outwardly to 'police' other parents about the drinking of hot drinks. The 'good attender' also wholeheartedly joins in the activities and shares their issues with staff who can then support or signpost them to the relevant agency. Hence for staff it is not enough that parents just come to a Children's Centre, there is an expectation of what parents will and should do once there, that is interact with their children. Not to do this means the role and purpose of Children's Centres is threatened, as there is a danger they may be 'seen as a



coffee morning or toddler group'. Yet these mothers were 'doing their best' both for themselves and their children willing to engage with Children's Centres but resisting the de- and re-construction of their sense of self and what it meant to be a 'good' mother (Hey and Bradford, 2006). Hence 'behaving badly' might be seen as 'care of the self' (Ball and Olmedo, 2012).

### **Tensions and contradictions**

For many staff there were contradictions and tensions in what they felt parents needed and what they thought they *ought* to be providing. Some members of staff appreciated that offering a hot drink represented more than physical sustenance.

*Sandra. There is still a need for why they go to the toddler group. If they go to a toddler group to talk to other parents because they never get to talk to other people then that is fulfilling a very real basic need (Staff Focus Group 07/09).*

However, staff had constructed their meaning of a Centre as something that was 'more than a coffee morning', hence distancing their services from the provision that attended to some of these 'very basic needs'. Yet the 'regulatory gaze' (Foucault, 1977) is never far from the thoughts of staff in a culture of 'outcomes-based accountability' (Pugh, 2008). This approach encourages services to focus attention on results in order to move away from processes, therefore making better outcomes their primary focus (Friedman, 2005; Pugh, 2008).

Yet this was not reflected in either Centre managers' or Local Authority strategic staff views of 'the hot drinks issue', none of whom articulated the need to ban hot drinks from Centre groups. Instead one manager highlighted the time in the kitchen chatting and making drinks was an important part of the process for parents to get to know staff. The *'bit in the middle that seems to have been forgotten, the bit that nurtures parents, builds trust and gets to know them whilst making tea'* (Centre Manager). Whilst trust here is seen as something to develop within the individual, uni-directional enabling 'them' to trust 'us', creating high trust relationships at both an interpersonal and institutional level (Schoorman et al, 2007) it is argued creates opportunities for engagement in a more authentic, democratic process of change. Trust is therefore essential for the success of organisations (Hargreaves and Fink, 2012). Nonetheless, the need to meet outcomes is not far from the discourse. Whilst not expressed in authoritarian, top-down displays of power, it is integrated into everyday practices. Staff themselves had taken these discourses and enacted them within their session.

What emerges is the offering of hot drinks as a key strategy for encouraging and sustaining hard to reach, marginalised or 'special case' groups participation in Centre activities. Here the symbolic order tea can be regarded as more powerful than cold drinks to perform this function (Douglas, 1975). Yet it might be argued, practitioners used 'discretion', to 'translate nebulous policy into practical action' (Evans and Harris, 2004, cited in Gilbert and Powell, 2010: 14).

However, in this case there were no 'set rules', no prescribed policy on the offering of hot drinks within both Centres, as the decision was left to the 'discretion' of the practitioner running the group. Where this might arguably 'liberate' practitioners from the rules of whether tea is served or not what happens is this exercise of discretion produced what Gilbert and Powell described as, the 'paradoxical space for the operation of power as enticing resistance and inviting surveillance' (Gilbert and Powell, 2010: 12). Hence practitioners were concerned with meeting outcomes prescribed through the discourse of 'quality' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2008) and which Rose calls 'human technologies' (Rose, 1999). Here then the exercise of discretion is not used for 'liberatory practice' (MacNaughton, 2005: 44), but rather one that is underpinned by the ongoing need to make a difference in ways which produced measurable outcomes (Author et al., 2012). Hence the cup of tea can be seen as being located within a complex web of power relations.

## **Conclusions**

This paper seeks to create a space for confronting, deconstructing and disrupting what it is those who work and use Centres Centre see them as being and to look beneath the surface of what Centres seek to do. On the surface the offering or the withholding of a cup of tea might be regarded as such a trivial and minor act that it does not deserve reflection or discussion. However I have shown that this small act is heavily symbolic; it is a political act. It represents not only those meanings associated with creating relational spaces but also

represents what Centres are; spaces where government is performed at a distance (Latour cited in Miller & Rose, 2008: 16). In the drive to improve outcomes for children, to make 'the other', 'the same', to reproduce 'normative and normalised middle-class' (Lawler, 2005: 431) something was forgotten. The unintended consequences were that some of the 'little things', the primacy of supportive relationships between parents, and the care and respect for 'the other', got lost as professionals too became part of the machinery of government.

The challenge for these spaces is that they are watched and judged themselves, just as parents and children are. They are judged not only in terms of the numbers of parents that they are reaching but also in terms of the difference they are making to improve outcomes for children. As such what they did and how they performed their role was also constructed within these power relations. From this perspective it is clear that Children's Centres are political spaces, but at the same time 'depoliticised' (Fielding & Moss, 2011: .21) as part of the disciplinary processes of the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1977). Here the drive to evidence outcomes focuses practitioners' attention on end results. Consequently the processes, the means to achieving those results, can go unexamined and hence government operates at a distance.

In the spirit of a Foucauldian perspective, where there is restraint there is the possibility of liberty. 'Deliberately practicing for liberty' (MacNaughton, 2005:

.50) questioning these small acts, these micro-processes creates the possibilities for freedom. 'Democratic practice' (Moss, 2011: 3) seeks to challenge 'regimes of truth', enabling resistance and acknowledging the struggle in competing discourses of the care of the self and the care of others (Hey and Bradford, 2006). In this paper I have argued that resistance is happening and being performed actively at a micro-level, in everyday practices rather than in grand ways. In doing so, this is a more powerful form of resistance as it is hidden and elusive to change.

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<sup>i</sup> The term used throughout this paper is 'parent' as it reflects the discourse of policy and practice. Its use is not on the basis of inclusivity which would degender a highly gendered set of arguments in which essentially it is mothers who are the primary focus of policy.

<sup>ii</sup> Both Foucault's 'archaeology' and 'genealogy' have informed this analysis. Archaeology in the excavation of the discursive roots of language to explore how, where and when implicit meanings that construct boundaries to what is considered acceptable; the rules, have emerged and genealogy in exploring the way this discourse is central to the performance of governmentality (Foucault, 1980).