

Reflections on my experience of co-producing early childhood policies in England.

Under the Coalition Government co-production, a particular form of participatory governance via an interactive dialogue with policy stakeholders, was implemented widely in the conceptualisation, design and implementation of early childhood policies. In doing so the Department for Education built on the strategies employed by the preceding Labour Government to involve 'active citizens' in formulating and delivering public policy (Barnes et al, 2007).

Using my own experience of involvement in this co-production process, my paper locates the DFE co-production process within Skelcher and Torfing's (2010) institutional taxonomy of participatory governance. Their category of 'interactive dialogue through governance networks' provides the best fit.

Co-production as a way of sharing the design and delivery of publicly funded services with service users and agencies representing service users has been strongly promoted by the New Economics Foundation and NESTA, the national policy innovation charity. It is seen as a revolutionary approach to public service reform, resulting in services which are more effective for the public and more cost-effective for policymakers (Boyle et al, 2010).

The process may aid civil servants' understanding of potential and actual policy impacts 'on the ground' and potentially encourage their absorption of research knowledge (Ouimet et al, 2009). Examples of recent early childhood policy decisions are used to illustrate how nevertheless politics continues to trump policymaking, irrespective of a commitment to co-production.

I argue that these examples support Skelcher and Torfing's (2010, p. 88) contention that such decisions reflect "... wider political processes, which may generate compromises by actors or the exercise of authoritative rule by power holders". They also support Fenwick and colleagues' notion (2012, p. 417) that in such partnerships..." decision making is not necessarily negotiated among 'partners,' but

rather it is state actors that dominate the interaction where there are asymmetries of decision making towards the advantage of the state in achieving policy goals and fulfilling accountabilities.”

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