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Workshop submission

CHILD-REARING – AN ANXIOUS EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE?

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 2009. International instruments such as the UNCRC, and related national laws and policies, raise questions about the proper relationship between governments and families. They raise questions, too, about the relationship between adults and children, the citizenship status of each, and the ways in which these bear upon the conditions for human flourishing. The UNCRC may be seen, among many other things, as a set of aspirations for a more just world where the most vulnerable people are protected from harm and neglect; as an attempt at demarcating a universal conception of childhood; or as a surveillance device that operates, at an international level, to monitor governments' provision for children and, at a national level in many of the signatory countries, as a motivation for child-focussed legislation, policies and programmes which, at their most intrusive, inspect the dark corners of family life for parental behaviours and household conditions that impair children's current well-being or may lead to their later incapacity or moral demise. In the latter case, an implicit consequentialism justifies government or expert intervention in child-rearing

Child-rearing, like teaching, is a risky business. Trust, time and place are intimately connected with the risks of each and with the anxious associations between practices and their supporting institutions. School teaching has long been subject to misguided projects of luck-exclusion or luck-diminishment, in which agents of government have joined hands with educational experts in an effort to ensure the effective and efficient achievement of pre-specified learning outcomes (Pendlebury 1995; 1992). In the wake of an increasingly legislated global regime of child care and protection, child-rearing has now, too, become a domain for expert intervention in the name of improved outcomes for children.

So we may ask: Is it ever appropriate for governments and their agents to intervene in family life and in the ways families choose to care for and rear their children; and if so, under what conditions and with what risks and caveats?

In a recent paper, Paul Smeyers (2008) assembles a set of reminders for the purpose of defending a notion of child-rearing as an educational practice in which expert and government intervention should be strongly discouraged. His consideration of child-rearing as an educational question is itself a reminder about a pervasive aspect of human life which falls within the broad domain of education but remains a largely neglected topic in philosophy of education. Regarding child-rearing as a practice will, Smeyers argues, enable us to “do justice to the responsiveness to which each child is entitled”. It will also enable us to withstand some deeply troubling tendencies in contemporary society, namely, “the tendency to see the relationship between parents and children in technical terms; the tendency to see child-rearing as free of risk; and the tendency to see child-rearing as a kind of responsibility understood as liability, “where parents and children are seen as ‘rivals’ of each other.” Associated with and perhaps partly constitutive of these troublesome tendencies is a contemporary regime of performativity coupled with excessive codification and expert interventions in many aspects of human life and practice.

In this workshop I aim to tease out, rather more fully than Smeyers does, what might be entailed in a relational account of child-rearing as a practice. I shall consider especially the fragile relationships of trust that are, in part, constitutive of the practice. In so doing, I will pursue Smeyers’s suggestion that the discourse of rights comes into play when the context of trust appears to be fragile or disintegrating. En route, I shall challenge what I take to be a parochial conception of families and households, and their educational capabilities.

Pendlebury, S (1995) Luck, responsibility and excellence in teaching. In: JW Garrison and A G Rudd (eds) *Gaps: Ideas Missing from the Educational Conversation*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

Smeyers, P (2008) “Child-rearing: On government intervention and the discourse of experts” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 6, pp 719-738.

Smeyers, P and Wringe, C (2003) Adults and children. In: N Blake, P Smeyers, R Smith & P Standish (eds) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp 311-325.