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Policy and Practice in Childcare and Nursery Education

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ABSTRACT

Historically there have been three strands of policy concerning provision for young children. *Nursery education* has traditionally been provided for three and four-year-olds as a free, part-time, school based service provided by qualified teachers, and is regulated by education legislation. *Childcare* for working parents is a full-time care service for children 0–5 to cover working hours, provided by nursery nurses or unqualified care staff in a variety of private settings including domestic settings; finding and paying for this service has until now been the responsibility of parents. Childcare is subject to the 1989 Children Act and the regulation is carried out by social services departments. *Welfare care* for vulnerable children or children in need is provided for young children aged 0–5 referred by social workers to local authority social services or voluntary run day nurseries or family centres, and also regulated under the terms of the Children Act. All these policy strands are now under review by the government.

There are a number of local authorities, voluntary organisations and private firms who have attempted to provide nurseries which combine all three strands of nursery education, childcare and welfare for vulnerable children. This article draws on case study research carried out in 1995–97 on five such innovative integrated nurseries. The findings suggest that there are very different kinds of practices with children which go on in nursery education, childcare and welfare settings, and that these practices tend to persist even when the functions of the institution are broadened. The article concludes that a more fundamental analysis of daily practice in nurseries is necessary to underpin any policy changes.

INTRODUCTION

Under the New Labour government, all education, childcare and welfare services to young children are being reviewed. These reviews are pro-

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ceeding very rapidly, based on immediate political imperatives, rather than reflecting a coherent vision of policies towards young children or on systematic analysis of need and demand for services. These reviews have maintained the divisions already in existence between the three strands of policy, that is nursery education, childcare for working parents, and welfare care for vulnerable children, although government documents refer vaguely to 'partnership' between the different providers. The reforms so far proposed are summarized as follows.

DfEE led reforms of nursery education

In order to revoke the nursery voucher scheme introduced by the previous government, the DfEE education branch required local education authorities to provide early years development plans, to show how the authority could achieve the target of 'securing an early education place for all eligible four year olds'. (DfEE: Draft Guidance 1997). Over 80 per cent of four-year-olds are now in primary schools, in a variety of arrangements including nursery classes and reception classes, but a small proportion, less than 10 per cent, attend free-standing nursery schools. Under the most recent proposals, announced as part of the comprehensive spending review, nursery education will be extended to 60 per cent of three-year-old children, presumably within the same development plan framework (DfEE press release, 14 July 1998).

The early years development plans in addition must show how other services to young children such as childminders, daycare and after-school care can be provided. In order to draw up and endorse the plans, local authorities have been required to establish 'early years development partnerships' bringing together a range of providers, with the intention of broadening understanding about early years issues: 'in its work (the partnership) should reflect the principles of co-operation, partnership and integration of services which underpin the Government's policy' (*ibid.*).

The DfEE has also launched a programme of 'centres of early excellence' which are intended to highlight 'best practice' in providing for young children and their families. 'A network of 25 early excellence centres will be established to promote innovation in integrated services, high quality training, to act as a models for cross-sectoral partnerships and the dissemination of good practice' (DfEE Draft Guidance for Consultation, July 1997). The first tranche of centres have now been chosen, and a second tranche is currently being considered.

Employment led reforms of childcare

The employment wing of the DfEE, reporting to a different junior minister

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from the above educational initiatives, has published a framework and consultation document about childcare policies *Meeting the Childcare Challenge*. This stresses the need to provide more places for working parents, although it avoids mentioning the overlap with nursery education or how children will be transferred from childcare systems to nursery education for the half day for which they are eligible. This section of the DfEE has also issued a consultation paper on the regulation of early education and daycare, but is also ambivalent about its scope with regard to nursery education.

Yet another work-related policy, the Welfare to Work programme, initiated by the Department of Social Security, puts forward proposals to offer childcare subsidies to low-income working parents, meeting up to 70 per cent of their childcare costs. This initiative assumes a private childcare market, and indeed the private market has expanded considerably over the last ten years and now provides about 90 per cent of available nursery daycare places, five times more than 1987 levels (*Children's Daycare Facilities at 31st March 1997*, Government Statistical Service).

Treasury and Health led reforms on the welfare of vulnerable children

As part of its mission to look at spending on combatting social exclusion, the Treasury has recently initiated a Sure Start early intervention programme aimed at 5 per cent of children under three from vulnerable or dysfunctional families, but separately organised from the other initiatives on young children, using a new Children's Fund.

> We will work with parents to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – to ensure they are ready to learn when they get to school ... we will build on existing services to provide a range of childcare, early education and play facilities, primary health care for children and their mothers, advice and support for parents and other services to meet local needs. (Press Release, Tessa Jowell, Department of Health, 14 July 1998)

Since 1989 local authority social services departments have been required to provide *children's services plans* on a triennial basis, which are intended to show how social services departments plan for children in need. It is not as yet clear how these new initiatives will be dovetailed with social service planning processes or how compatible definitions of need and vulnerability will be put in place across departments at local, or even national, level.

Competing priorities and differing practices

There are therefore a number of competing initiatives concerning the development of services for young children, each with a somewhat different

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emphasis and priority. Yet none of these initiatives have an explicit philosophy of childhood, in the sense that they articulate a view of what children need and what kind of daily practices are necessary in order to best provide for children.[1]

Nursery education, childcare for working parents, and welfare for children from vulnerable families are concerned with overlapping groups of children; and in the case of three and four-year-olds all of them might lay claim to the same children. Yet at present they are differently organized, regulated, staffed and funded, and as a result, the children who attend them receive different treatment. Other European countries have arrived at more coherent solutions of these issues, either through a universalistic welfare system as in the Nordic countries, or through a broader education based system as in France and Spain (European Commission 1996, 1997). There have also been sporadic attempts in the UK to address them, most notably in Strathclyde Region (Penn, 1992; Penn and Riley, 1992).

Our research addressed the following questions: Are there useful models of practice in the UK where all three policy issues are addressed in a coherent and integrated way? How does policy inform practice, and how does practice influence policy in this field?

METHODS

The research described here, which was carried out in 1995–7, looks at five case study nurseries which have attempted to provide an integrated and coherent approach to the three issues described; nursery education, childcare for working parents and welfare care for vulnerable children. Each of these nurseries belonged to a local authority, a company or a charity which has made public claims for the way it is integrating these three different strands of provision, and which has been widely quoted for its innovative way forward. They were showpieces for these policies, and were selected because of their reputation and because considerable publicly available documentation exists about them.

Two of the nurseries were originally free-standing local authority *nursery education schools* who have extended their hours of operating to cover a working day, and who also take social services referrals of vulnerable children. One was a *private childcare nursery*, part of a large chain which claims to provide a very thoughtful and accessible service which includes nursery education and welfare care for vulnerable children. One was a *children's centre* for local people run by a voluntary organisation as part of a community development programme, which also claimed to offer education, childcare and welfare care for referred families. Finally, there was

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a *local authority social services day nursery*, previously used only for welfare care for vulnerable children, which has widened its catchment to include working parents. Each nursery was open every day from around 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and catered for children aged 0–5 – and in the case of the children's centre, for older children too.

Evidence about frameworks of provision

We analysed the policy documentation which was provided, both by the umbrella organisation about its wider policies, and at the documentation produced by the nursery itself. We examined records of any inspection visits. We examined curricular documents produced by the nursery, and rated their curricular activities on a scale of 1–5, according to the range of activities provided. We investigated the pay, conditions of service and job descriptions of all the staff. We also tried to measure the cost per hour of each place.

Evidence about practice

We observed a randomly selected number of three-year-olds, eighty in total, and made a minimum of twelve separate 5 minute observations of each child in our sample throughout the course of several days, and covering different periods of the day. Where possible we repeated this after nine months. We coded our observations according to the curricular activity the child was engaged in, who the child was with when the activity was undertaken, and the intensity with which the child was engaged. We also tape-recorded discussions with some of the children, although only a minority were able to engage in such discussions. We were able to interview almost all of the parents of the children we observed. We took photos of their children engaged in various activities and used these as a basis of discussion. We asked the parents why they had chosen the nursery and how much they knew of its regime.

We also interviewed each of the staff about their perceptions of the job, and we tracked them at work. We fed back our findings to staff groups in staff meetings and to managers and asked for their comments. As background to the core case studies, we sent out a detailed questionnaire to a wider group of seventeen nursery centres, through the Nursery Centres Association, to gain a broader picture of existing practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The framework of provision

The five case study nurseries operated in different ways depending on their wider framework within the education or social services sector.

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These five nurseries, all claiming to offer a similar service, and acting as showpieces for publicly promoted policies did not have much in common, not even their costs or charges. The major difference however was in the conception of childhood and children's needs. Assumptions about what children need are encapsulated in the different sets of national rules and regulations, and in the training of those who work with young children, either in the care or the education sectors. The view of children in turn produced different practices.

The practices

Our evidence suggested that the practices varied along a number of key dimensions. These are considered in turn.

Concepts of education and learning In the nursery schools, children were seen mostly as autonomous, intellectually curious and physically capable individuals. The job of teacher was above all to encourage learning, even for the most difficult and vulnerable children, and to prepare them for future learning experiences at school. This head teacher was very clear about the learning that was required.

> I expect staff to be able to give specific information to me about a child's learning and development and what they are going to do about it. Telling me that the child is 'doing fine' is not good enough. No child is 'doing fine', they must be making progress.

The nursery schools assumed that children learn best through their freely undertaken experimentation and play in a richly provided environment, with adults providing tactful background support. In one nursery school, for example, over a hundred different kinds of construction toys were available, all of which were accessible to the children; they could take them out and were expected to tidy them away when they had finished. But children are also closely observed, and their learning strategies noted; and those who coped less well with the freedom they were offered were usually given carefully considered extra help.

The other three nurseries, although also claiming to provide education, were registered by social services departments, and operated within the framework of the 1989 Children Act. Health and safety were the paramount requirements – although health was interpreted narrowly in terms of preventing mishaps. Children were seen as dependent and in need of constant care, protection and surveillance. Staff in these nurseries had a view that children learn through their emotional contact and interactions with a meaningful adult, through 'one to one' sessions where an adult directed the activities for the benefit of the child – the

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activity being less important than the fact that the child was alone with a supportive adult.

Adults were there to watch children and make sure they were not hurt or exposing themselves to danger.

> We try to avoid all, you know, any accidents whatsoever. You know children do have accidents of course, you know but we do try to avoid, they're well protected from accident and harm here ... we're here to protect the children aren't we? (Nursery nurse)

Almost everything, from going to the toilet to sticking stars on a picture was supervised by an adult. The range of activities was very limited by comparison with the schools, and the nursery nurses themselves set up the activities for the children, and tidied them away afterwards – children were rarely allowed direct access to materials.

Perhaps the critical test for learning is how the most vulnerable children fare. These two statements both from nursery nurses, the first from a nursery school, the second from the social services day nursery, are about vulnerable children who have been referred by social workers. The quotations give an idea of the way in which staff are encouraged (or discouraged) in thinking about how children can learn how to cope with daily life in the nursery.

> It was very obvious when John came in that he didn't have a lot of experience with other children and he didn't have any strategies to get on with other children or get what he wanted or negotiate with other children ... he specifically pushed other children out the way because he wanted things; he grabbed things off other children because he wanted to play with a car.
>
> He thought that was perfectly acceptable and he is very, very impatient – a lot of children are – but he is particularly so, and he would, I wouldn't call it aggressive – but he would hit other children ... He was violent towards them, not in aggressive sort of way very often but because he didn't know how to cope with things. So what I did was give him two phrases – 'Excuse me please' and 'Can I have a shot?' Just those two things for the first month ... I think it has been reasonably successful even in the short term. He is still impatient and he's a hash-basher ... but he is learning to negotiate. Sometimes it fails but he has learnt the idea of this whole thing. That was one of my priorities for him, conversation as well. His speech isn't very clear when he is speaking. I have been listening and I've been having conversations with him and really listening.

> Well we do have one special needs little boy and when he started he was only doing three afternoons a week and I did go and speak to a previous manager because I thought he should have more sessions ... he is quite a handful, to put it that way, there is a bit of conflict between him and the other children so I try to do a bit of one to one with him but obviously it is not easy because I have the rest of my key group.

Our observations found, not surprisingly, that in general children were more pre-occupied and more involved with what they were doing in the

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nursery schools than in the other three nurseries. Children were also engaged with a wider range of activities in these places. But the picture was not clear cut. There was some overlap. We saw some children who flitted from task to task and never really concentrated at the nursery school; although we did not observe any child who showed real concentration and task absorption in the social services nursery.

Children's physical and bodily needs The most striking difference between the nurseries was in the amount of free physical movement allowed to the children. In one of the nursery schools the children were allowed almost complete physical freedom. There were extensive and well-equipped grounds, and the children could go in and out as they pleased. We tracked Suzy, who was like quicksilver, who moved continuously around the whole site, inside and outside during the entire period of our observations; another child was always laughing and doing daring things such as balancing on a high beam on a climbing frame, deliberately wearing Wellington boots which were several sizes too big. Many of the children at this nursery seemed to revel in the physical freedom they were given and exploited it to the full. The other nursery school also allowed children to go outside frequently and gave them freedom of movement – children could curl into a ball and roll down a slope for example, or take dressing-up clothes outside and parade up and down in their dramatic roles.

In the social services, voluntary and private nurseries, children could not choose to go outside when they wished; their play periods outside were limited and heavily regulated, and their movements inside and out were controlled. In the voluntary nursery the children had no challenging physical exercise. Instead of going outside, they were taken in small groups into a room with a carpet where they had to line up to take turns on very simple equipment more suitable for babies and toddlers – balancing on a thick plank 6 inches from the floor, and sliding down a 4 foot plastic slide. In the absence of physical freedom children would break out and run wild within the main play room until quelled by staff.

The rationale for this physical confinement was in terms of protecting the child and ensuring their safety at all times. Not only did any physical risk have to be prevented, but the children had to be kept under close surveillance at all times in case they might molest one another, or a member of staff might molest them. The slightest risk was seen to expose staff, already unconfident of their status and autonomy, to outside criticism. For example, I asked one worker in the voluntary nursery why the children were not allowed to use the home corner. This home corner con-

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sisted of waist high screens used to block off an area furnished with miniature domestic furniture.

> if somebody is doing something, or you know with one child to another and anything cropped up ... we couldn't see in there ... wouldn't know the actual fact of what had gone on in there and you know, the parents have the right to know any, you know, the answer to anything they ask us about their children while they're in our care.

By contrast, the nursery school staff believed their job was to encourage children's autonomy and that children would benefit from 'adult free' spaces where they could play their own games undisturbed. But these staff were also more confident of their own professional judgement and status, and justified their position in relation to children by arguing that children could and should take physical risks, since constantly testing and exploring one's physical limits was part of the process of learning.

However, the physical activity in the nursery schools was still justified as part of a *learning* process, rather than in terms of a coherent physical regime. So, for example, none of the nurseries had areas where children might rest or sleep, despite the long days. The nursery school movement in the 1930s regarded young children as being naturally full of movement and physical exuberance; and saw nutrition, exercise and rest as part of pro-active health regime which necessarily underpinned learning. This rhetoric has now largely vanished (Penn 1998).

Children as social actors Even in the nursery schools where they were seen as more autonomous, children were seen as *individuals* whose learning was being guided by adults. Nurseries did not have a concept of young children as a group with their own *raison d'etre* and their own agendas – too much competence and agency on the part of children was seen as provocatory. Strandell (1997) who carried out ethnographic – *in situ* – observations of children in daycare centres in Finland has demonstrated how, from a child's point of view, the experiences of daily life were not what the adults necessarily wanted or expected or had set out to provide.

In our study, the more adult control, the more restricted the physical space, the less children could innovate or experiment with physical and social boundaries or negotiate their friendships, and the timetabling of the day superimposed yet another set of boundaries on children. Yet despite these limitations, our findings confirmed that children's friendships flowered; by the end of the year; children had consistent companions, with whom they talked and played frequently, a finding mirrored by other studies, (Corsaro, 1985).

Parents talked about their children as having idiosyncratic personali-

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ties with decided views. Staff, on the other hand, consistently underestimated the individuality and critical capacity of the children. By the age of four the more articulate children could discuss what went on in nursery and had a surprising grasp of the concepts involved. This discussion with Dionne and Jasper, gives an idea of how much they can understand and are a critical audience of what is provided for them.

Q. Why do children come to nursery?
J. They can learn better things.
D. No, this is just for playing. At school you don't have to do pre-school, you do proper things.
J. Our mum and dad look after me but all the teachers have to go to work (his mother is a teacher).
D. The teachers have to work in the nursery.
J. The teachers have to tell you off.
Q. What do you learn at nursery?
D. They help us make a penholder for our dad.
J. They help us learn important things, like when to be careful with things.
D. But my mum and dad do that already ... sometimes I cry.
J. No, you don't.
D. Well if my mum goes away, then you have to cry, that's my job.
J. But you have to go to nursery because you learn things.
D. We get tired, there are beds. Playing outside, that's our favourite. But it makes us very tired. It's OK when our mummies come then we can go home and have a rest then.
J. (To interviewer) Are you interested in anything else. Is there anything else we can tell you about the nursery?

Children's friendships were of paramount importance to themselves. But such friendships were undermined by the daily organisation of the nursery. A pay-as-you-use or overly flexible policy on admissions tended to undermine friendships. Those children who had most difficulty in making and maintaining friendships were mostly those who attended irregularly – for example, one girl who came Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday morning one week, and Thursday and Friday afternoons another, according to her mother's shift patterns. Free or subsidised core attendance times, as at the two nursery schools, made a considerable difference to children's routines and their ability to adapt to them.

The autonomy of staff In nursery school, trained teachers are in charge, assisted by nursery nurses, and sometimes by unqualified assistants or helpers. Teachers are trained for four years post 18, to postgraduate level. In childcare and welfare arrangements, it is usually nursery nurses, sometimes with unqualified assistants, who do everything. Nursery nurses receive a two-year vocational training which they may embark on age 16. The nursery nurse course tends to attract girls and women with

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poor academic attainments. It is chosen as a non-academic route and one which builds on women's 'natural' talents in caring for children (Penn and McQuail, 1997). The training is therefore shorter and considerably less rigorous than for teachers, and as indicated above, overemphasised the personal security offered to children by close adult attention and supervision.

Only the nursery schools in our study employed qualified teachers. A teacher had been employed at the social services day nursery to introduce an American method of teaching called 'High Scope', which is claimed to have considerable long-term effects (Weikart, 1996), but her work was never fully integrated into that of the nursery. She worked conventional teaching hours, and she regarded her placement at the nursery as temporary and somewhat unsatisfactory – which indeed it turned out to be. For most of the study there was no teaching input, and without the teacher, staff carried on their usual practices.

The private nursery and the voluntary nurseries, despite their claims to offer an educational regime, had no teachers, and in both cases the nursery nurse qualified co-ordinators thought that to have teachers was unnecessary. They saw themselves offering just as much as a teacher. Four of the five nurseries, including the two nursery schools, employed some unqualified staff.

Nursery schools focused on the autonomous learning of children, and both teachers and those with whom they worked, even unqualified staff, had considerable autonomy of action. In the other three nurseries, the work was more hierarchically organised, a characteristic already noted in a previous study of day nurseries (Penn, 1997). In the social services day nursery in particular, the staff had little autonomy, and were required to gain permission from the officer in charge for any action that was not routine.

In-service training (or its absence) reinforced the views staff had about their own competencies and autonomy. Compare these two statements, both from long-serving unqualified staff, the first at the voluntary nursery, the other at a nursery school.

> As long as I've got a job really, I'm not very ambitious as such you know. As long as I've got a job that suits me you know ... I still might do some training in the future but up to now I haven't so I think I'm, well as I say I've been here ten years so it's just like I'm more experienced than qualified you know ... I'm still not very confident about doing (training) you know...

> It's really teamwork ... Like somebody's very into ideas, other people aren't but they can still aid in other ways, every individual has got good points and bad points, do you know what I mean they sort of help each other out ... There are fantastic ideas here ... most of

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the time, yeah, I do see that myself and think, Oh that was a brilliant idea or whatever, but I think everybody just ... at INSET as well, we have workshops you know where you would get ideas, maybe they would set things up and say, you know, did you think that was a good idea or a bad idea, so you get ideas from that as well and yeah, basically that's how it works, you just work as a team and it seems to work very well.'

As Tizard (1975) commented, the hierarchical organization of a nursery directly affects practice.

given staff of similar social class, education and training, and goodwill, the social framework in which they are placed has an important effect in determining their behaviour. If given a limited role to perform, they will behave in a limited way. (p.117)

The social services nursery in particular operated in a hierarchical fashion. The staff were closely controlled because they themselves, were seen as – and felt themselves to be – incapable; they in turn saw the children as in need of control, and when the children got out of control, as they often did, their sense of inadequacy was heightened, and they tried to be more controlling – or else gave up.

Basically we can't really do anything, you get someone round who could pull hair, spit, bite ... and you say, 'Come on, don't do that'... and they'll sit for ten minutes and think and they just go and do it all again and there's nothing you can do...

Taking parents into account Most of the 'parents' we spoke to were mothers, but here because of its common usage, we refer to parents rather than mothers. Many of the recent government pronouncements refer to 'parenting initiatives' and assume that parents must in some way be involved in the nursery provision they use, because they are presumed to be isolated and in need of support as mothers, and/or because they themselves need to know more about how their children learn, or because the nursery requires their endorsement for its practices.

The parents we interviewed ranged from inarticulate mothers on welfare with large families, many of whose members were in trouble, to highly articulate well-paid professional mothers with only one child. A majority of our mothers were working, but mostly in middle or low-income jobs.

The nurseries were not, as some recent government documents envisage, a source of social life for parents. Partly because of the pressures of work, and the distances some of them had to travel to use the nursery, very few of the parents said that they had made friends with, or even got to know, other mothers. Working parents' lives were hard and complex.

my wife works a 12 hour shift, she works in a surgical ward ... and when she's not working there she's got agency work as well. And I work a late shift from about half twelve

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until about half eight so it's not easy to … Like tomorrow we would have liked to come to the fireworks but my wife she's doing a night shift and I finish at half past eight, it's very difficult to fit in these things … I only get one weekend off every month … We regret it but unfortunately it's unavoidable. (Catering assistant)

For mothers of children with disabilities life was also extremely hard, a round of hospital visits and appointments with various specialists, and a continual struggle against accepting some kind of segregated provision. We had three mothers in the sample whose elder sons were excluded from school, and their lives were very pressured.

Besides working and catching up with my sleep and catching up with my housework I see Christopher's welfare worker, social worker and also a solicitor so I'm dealing with them and I just haven't got time, although you know if we get Chris sorted out maybe next year … I'll just wait and see what happens with Chris first and that and I feel sort of like you're splitting yourself into four ways…. (Night care-assistant)

On the whole parents felt they had had little choice in choosing their nursery – it was the only one that took children of the right age, or had a place at the right time, or was available for the right hours. Costs were crucial and determined the intake of the nursery. At the private nursery all the children were middle class; in principle, the nursery wished to take a wider range of children, but could not do so without local authority subsidies which were not forthcoming. At one nursery school and at the voluntary day nursery, almost all the children came from low-income homes. As the government has now recognised, without subsidies the children from these low-income families would simply not have a child-care place. As one mother put it:

Poor, poor, poor, poor, very poor. We live on £63 per week, that's me and three children and after that comes electricity and gas. It's very, very difficult to manage but I'm hoping, I'm optimistic because I think when this course finishes, I will be able to get a better job and support myself and the children. (Student)

Those parents in the south-east who could afford it had a choice between competing private nurseries, and took value for money into account – that is, not only the regime for the child, but what else they got for their money.

Initially when we looked into it, it looked really expensive and we thought ooh (groan) are we going to, it was really you looked at it and thought gosh, you couldn't afford that, but once you take it all and break it all down, they get breakfast, a snack and lunch and the amount of hours she spends here, costing it out it's not actually more expensive than the other nurseries and I think it's so much better that I think it is very good value. Unfortunately we can't afford to send her full time and that's financially, it is a bit beyond our means … you sort of think oh, I wish there was something you know, was more available to people…. (Local Government Officer)

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This mother left the nursery midway through the year when the introductory offer ran out, and placed her child in a cheaper nursery.

Only in a few cases, where parents had both the time and very definite views, in particular about race or disability, did they make a more considered choice.

> I was trying to look for somewhere that was mixed, like I didn't just want him to go to a disabled school ... I looked at ... a few other nurseries, I went off on my own and looked around this area now and a lot of them were taking children with special needs but only with learning difficulties and things like that, they weren't taking anyone as severely handicapped as Mark ... This was the one I really liked. I think it was the atmosphere up there was very relaxed and staff were very friendly and the children all seemed to be mixing really well and you know, weren't segregated, there wasn't the disabled children in one part of it and the able-bodied in another part, everyone was all mixed up with each other. (Mother at home)

The rhetoric about the importance of learning had been taken on board by almost all parents, although they were vague about what it entailed. They took their cues from the type of nursery they used; at the nursery school they struggled to understand about free play and running around outdoors and why that was important; or why there was so much colouring in and work sessions at the private nursery, or why there was so little overt educational input at the social services nursery.

All the parents – except one very confident middle-class mother in a nursery school – were timid about advancing their own views about what children should be learning. We also asked parents about their knowledge of nursery routines and procedures, the way the nursery was managed, and the way in which budgets were spent. Apart from knowing when and how to drop off and pick up their children, parents knew very little about what went on in the nursery. We asked if they knew what kind of qualifications staff had and whether it mattered. Only a handful of parents in the entire sample had an accurate perception of the staffing. 'I don't know, haven't got a clue (if they are teachers or not). They know what they're doing, so I just leave it to them. I feel he's learning and socializing, so I'm quite happy' (Secretary). 'I'm not bothered about teachers, not at pre-school. I've never thought about it (unqualified staff) I presume she's learning here' (Local government officer).

However, there was one area where almost all parents were very clear. They wanted their children to be happy and secure, and part of that was being able to socialise and get on with other children. Getting on in a group, surviving in a larger community of children, being sociable, making friends, learning to rub along with others was an important dimension of experience. 'I want her to be considerate. Socially well-adjusted,

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that is very important so that she can mix with her peers' (clerk). 'Well, I mean to mix with other children and that and to know how to be with other people' (barmaid).

This desire for the socialisation of their children is a reasonable expectation of nursery, since many children are isolated and without the company of their peers at home. But this was never as high on the agenda of the staff as it was for the parents.

When parents are unsure of what children are learning, and what the background is of those who care for and educate their children, if they are unsure about how the nursery is being run or financed, their opportunities for participation are necessarily limited. What can they do if they feel something is wrong? In the social service day nursery something was wrong. The management was very hierarchical, the staff were disaffected and the turnover was high, the activities were unplanned, and the teacher's work was ignored by the rest of the staff and not followed up. Vulnerable children were left unattended. Yet parents were reluctant to comment. 'Occasionally she has mentioned that somebody tripped her, nothing particular, somebody shouting at her, just other children pushing and shoving you know, but not anything to do with what she is doing...' (Housing manager). Even at the nursery school, parents were apprehensive about voicing concerns.

> I think our main concern was that he's such a loner ... and whenever we, I always try and whenever I pick up Ricki I'm always trying to get a peep at him you know, and sort of before the ladies see me and say there's daddy and everything, just to see what he's up to, you know, and when I leave him as well I'll hang around and watch him and he does seem to play on his own rather a lot which has always concerned us ... Whenever I've aired our concerns or whatever they all seem to be slightly, oh, no, no, no. Gloss over, he's fine you know and I don't feel as though anybody has really watched him. (Draughtsman)

However, these were all nurseries with a good reputation, showpieces, which at the very least met minimum standards. It may well be that parents would be alert to really poor standards or grosser breaches of health and safety, and the nurseries in our study were good enough. Parents had every reason to expect high standards. Even where they were uneasy, parents lacked the confidence or the flexibility of circumstance to risk engaging in discussion about the regime of the nursery. As previous studies have clearly shown, this gap between the perceptions of staff and parents is common. Yet current policies tend to treat the issue of 'partnership with parents' as if it were relatively simple and straightforward; and the gap, if any, can be rectified by offering parents more training in child development and early education so they can better understand the

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services they use (Tizard *et al.*, 1981; Hughes, 1996; Cryer and Burchinal, 1997).

Other children's centres.
As a wider point of reference we undertook a detailed questionnaire of seventeen combined care and education nursery centres who were members of the Nursery Centres Association. These centres represent established attempts, some dating back twenty years, to combine welfare care and nursery education (Makins, 1997). There are many hybrid arrangements in existence.

Rather than extend a particular model or type of provision, as our case study nurseries had done, these nursery centres had mostly attempted to juxtapose nursery education and social services welfare care on one site (but, except in one case, they did not include childcare for working mothers). They carried over existing organisational functions from the separate education and social services traditions, but without necessarily reconciling them; and as a result experienced considerable difficulties. Each tradition tended to be preserved, so that no encroachments were made on existing professional boundaries – for example, separate staffing conditions and remuneration for teachers and care workers, and separate management for different groups of workers. But the price of preserving professional boundaries is not only a financial one; it means that children must be organised so as to fit in with these professional boundaries. Children within the *same* nursery centre experienced considerably different regimes in the course of a day as they were taken from the 'nursery education' side of the building to the 'day nursery' side.

Subsequently two of these seventeen centres have been designated by the DfEE as 'centres of excellence', that is, flagships for New Labour policies, to highlight developments in policy, despite their lack of childcare provision for working parents, and their complex and expensive staffing arrangements. From the point of view of this study, however, the returns from the nursery centres confirmed the difficulties of addressing professional boundaries and the different assumptions of childhood and sets of practices such assumptions produce.

Conclusion

All the case study nurseries claimed to provide childcare for working mothers and education for their children. All of them said they also provided – or would in the case of the private nursery – daycare for vulnerable children. Yet they each offered a very different kind of experience to children and their parents, based on different assumptions about the nature of childhood.

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In general, the nurseries, despite their claims to broaden what they were offering, reflected their organisational starting point. Nursery schools emphasised learning, while the other nurseries, subject to the regulatory requirements of the Children Act, emphasised care and surveillance. Five main themes emerged concerning practice: the importance accorded to children as learners; the understandings of children's physical and bodily needs; the extent to which children were seen as autonomous social actors; the autonomy granted to individual staff; and the consideration given to parents.

Ironically, since this research was completed, it has become increasingly clear that government initiatives have meant that free part-time school based 'early education' (either a nursery class or more commonly a reception class) has become the accepted model of delivery for three and four-year-olds. Putting four-year-old children into mainstream school introduces new perspectives; it subjects young children to highly centralised curricular control and to pressures for measurable educational achievement. Early schooling is seen as a key aspect of raising educational standards, although there is considerable unease about this position within the early years community. (For instance, the professional magazine *Nursery World* has, in almost every edition over the last year, carried articles, reports and letters critical of early entry to school.)

Parents of children attending part-time early years education must find and pay for separate private or voluntary wrap-around care, most often with childminders. Young children therefore experience discontinuities between different kinds of provision in the course of a day, let alone in the course of a year.

The model of integration of care and education and continuity for children put forward in earlier Labour Party documents has now got lost in debates about raising standards. Given that there are still more than 500 nursery schools in existence, they could offer a useful focus for future developments (Moss and Penn, 1996). They can potentially offer continuity for children from age 0–5, provide childcare as well as education on a single site, and have a long tradition of viewing children as autonomous learners, and their practitioners tend to be more confident and have a more positive self-image. But, unfortunately, nursery schools have been neglected in the most recent policy discussions

The evidence presented here suggests there is a wide spectrum of views about what is necessary or appropriate practice for working with children, in turn informed by widely differing views of childhood. This situation is now exacerbated by the government pressures for early entry to school.

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This research suggested that the previous laudable aim of providing a more coherent service which provided education, childcare for working parents and welfare for vulnerable children, was already problematic. Developments under New Labour have made the situation of young children still more precarious. We need to ask very fundamental questions about who is doing what and why with young children. The situation is constantly changing, but there is so far no indication that any fundamental review is under way. The result is provision that is less than satisfactory for all concerned, for young children, for their mothers and fathers, and for the teachers and other workers in the various services.

NOTE

1 Most recently a draft national curriculum for 3–5-year-olds has been introduced, and it has been announced that OFSTED will take over all early years inspections. As yet it has not been clarified what will happen to social services inspections of early years provision.

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