

**EQUITY AND EVIDENCE IN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF EARLY  
CHILDHOOD POLICY RESEARCH**

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# **1 The origins and conceptual coherence of this thesis**

Through the research submitted here for the award of a PhD by publications at UEL, I track the significance of my research in the field of early childhood over a period of some 25 years, since I joined the Institute of Education's Thomas Coram Research Unit at London University in 1985. Alongside the research itself, this thesis takes the form of a critical appraisal of the nine peer reviewed publications (Annex A) selected from a much wider body of work produced during this quarter century (Annex B). This included international academic journal articles, edited academic books, book chapters, official research reports and evaluations commissioned by UK government departments, academic reviews, reports for NGOs and contributions to practitioner publications.

In this thesis I aim to demonstrate that the submitted body of research, some of it collaborative, is both original and methodologically rigorous. As well as illustrating its significance to the field and beyond, I argue that it is conceptually coherent in a way which over time has come to characterise my academic output as a whole. These nine publications not only address omissions in the field, but evidence a distinct contribution to the emerging sub-discipline of early childhood policy research within the wider body of early childhood research, attempting an interdisciplinary integration of perspectives.

In the present section of this thesis I discuss the origins and conceptual coherence of this body of research, setting the publications within the context of different stages of my research career (Annex C). Each stage built on the learning of the previous one and their interaction has arguably shaped my entire research output and my positioning as a researcher in distinctive ways.

## **Origins**

The nine publications submitted here, seven peer reviewed academic journal articles and two chapters in academic books, date from three distinct periods in my research career. The first period, from 1985 to 1989, covers my early years as a social scientist

working at London University's Thomas Coram Research Unit. TCRU was one of the first centres devoted to policy relevant research into children's and families' welfare, in particular children's health, development and education in relation to available services (Statham et al, 1989, p. 1; Melhuish et al, 1990a). Two academic journal articles (*Lloyd et al, 1989; Melhuish et al, 1990b*)<sup>1</sup> are included from this period; each based on a Government commissioned early childhood research project.

The literature review (*Lloyd et al, 1989*) of research on playgroups, the most widely used form of early childhood provision at that time, formed part of the second TCRU project I worked on. The study with me as second of four co-authors (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*), emanated from the first TCRU project on which I collaborated, the Daycare project (Hennessy et al, 1992). This was a longitudinal study of the developmental impact of infant daycare and of the children's mothers' experience on returning to employment.

The second phase of my social science career, a fifteen year period between 1989 and 2003, took me into the world of Non Governmental Organisations. Here I undertook and commissioned applied policy research and broadened my experience of policy influencing at national level. Three academic papers, two chapters and a journal article (*Lloyd, 1997; Lloyd, 1998; Lloyd, 2000*) are included from this period. They evidence how this experience translated itself into an enhanced and distinctive contribution to the field of early childhood policy research.

The period since 2003 when I rejoined the academy, makes up the third and current phase of my social science career. The four academic journal articles from this period submitted here, three co-authored (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*) and one single-authored (*Lloyd, 2008*), highlight the increasing significance of my contribution to policy research. They also illustrate my contribution to strengthening the evidence base for policymaking. This and my current academic work draw on my previous NGO experience and integrate this with added academic vigour.

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<sup>1</sup> References to any publications forming part of the body of research submitted for this PhD by publications which is listed in Annex A will be printed in italics throughout the text

Three themes emerged in my work, reflected in the submitted publications. These were a policy oriented focus, an equity emphasis and a foregrounding of the need for a strong evidence base to underpin early childhood policy. I have chosen to employ them as a unifying principle for this critical appraisal, alongside the submitted studies.

## **Conceptual coherence**

In this thesis I make the case for the submitted publications' conceptual coherence with reference to three recurrent themes characterising my output. The first, its policy-oriented focus, relating to the accessibility, affordability and quality of early childhood and family support services and service systems, reflects and represents the emerging field of early childhood policy studies to which I was introduced while working at TCRU. This has so far remained a minority area of interest within early childhood research as a whole, with some notable exceptions (Tisdall and Davis, 2004; Osgood, 2004; 2005; Campbell-Barr, 2009a; Campbell-Barr, 2009b).

The second, its focus on equity issues, received additional impetus from my experience of working for NGO Save the Children. This particular equity focus is on the right to equitable and quality early childhood services for young children and their families in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The children's rights perspective within the early childhood research agenda, underpinned by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, has come to be widely recognised within EU early childhood provision (Urban, 2009).

The third theme is reflected in my arguments in favour of a strong evidence base for early childhood services and policies, i.e. an underpinning by rigorous research demonstrating impacts on young children, their families and communities. My work for children's NGO Barnardo's provided a thorough introduction to these issues. Two of the submitted studies (*Lloyd, 1998; Penn and Lloyd, 2006*) reflect my contribution to this important, though still contentious (Biesta, 2007; Hedges, 2012; Vandembroeck et al, 2012), development in early childhood research.

Five of these publications focus on policy, practice and theoretical links within early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision mostly in England, but sometimes adopting an international comparative perspective (*Lloyd et al, 1989; Melhuish et al, 1990b; Lloyd, 2000; Lloyd, 2008; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*). They analyse how English early childhood policies continually fail to integrate three strands traditionally characterising ECEC provision: social welfare services for poor children, universal early education, and childcare for children with employed parents, into a conceptually coherent, equitable and sustainable service system. This key point made in these studies and elsewhere (*Lloyd, 2012a*), has equally been emphasised by leading early years policy specialists (*Jackson, 1993; Moss and Penn, 1996; Pugh, 2001; Cohen et al, 2004; Penn, 2009a*).

The issue is addressed directly in the submitted studies where I trace evidence for risks associated with this divide for children's cognitive development, equitable access to services (*Lloyd, et al, 1989; Melhuish et al, 1990b; Lloyd, 1997; Lloyd, 2008*) and to the early childhood workforce (*Lloyd and Hallet, 2010*), and where I identify state encouragement of market operations characteristic of recent decades as a major barrier to equitable early childhood systems and service quality (*Lloyd, 2000; Lloyd, 2008; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*).

## **The central argument**

In linking my output to the current state of knowledge in the field, I would argue that over the last quarter century, early childhood research has mirrored the fractured state of early childhood institutions and policy, by demonstrating path dependence as defined by Pierson (2000). The three policy strands associated with ECEC provision identified above, continue to be legislated for, funded and, at least partially, administered separately.

While it was originally employed primarily in economics (*Magnusson and Ottosson, 2009*), Pierson (2004: p. 10) uses this concept of path dependence to refer to "...the dynamics of self-reinforcing or positive feedback processes in a political system."

He demonstrated its usefulness when applied to the analysis of evolving social processes, dominant institutional arrangements and the power relations within these.

The construct of path dependence was applied more recently (Rigby et al, 2007) to an analysis of early childhood policy developments in OECD member states. Examples from the major comparative study (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006) of OECD childcare systems illustrated the 'institutional stickiness of policy designs' (Rigby et al, 2007, p. 106) which inhibited childcare policy change. Instead policy formation tended to institutionalise ethical and value-laden positions and dominant paradigms, which in turn influenced subsequent social and policy debates.

A cross-national study for UNESCO examined the adverse effects of path dependence as manifested in 'split administrative systems,' where central government responsibility for early childhood services has historically remained allocated partly to education, but shared with other departments (Kaga et al, 2010). This report also pointed out the continuing influence of different historical traditions embodied in early childhood service systems. These not only affect their organisation, but also the vision, approach and programme aims reflected in the services themselves.

Arguably, in early childhood research, path dependence has resulted in few and limited approaches to the development of a unifying and coherent theoretical and conceptual basis for this essentially multi-disciplinary field. Indeed, the field has as yet failed to establish any disciplinary boundaries, according to Penn (2008, p. 191).

In fact I consider that British early childhood policy developments mirror the situation described by Martin and Le Bihan (2009) in respect of French early childhood policy developments. These authors argued that such developments in France have been path dependent since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lacking any true policy paradigm shifts. Not even the promotion of maternal employment through increased provision of non-parental childcare during the 1990s should be interpreted as such a turning point in France "...since it has a larger frame of reference at the European level" (Martin and Le Bihan, 2008, p. 60).

In the following sections of this thesis I shall examine the extent to which both the origins and nature of my own research reflect that ongoing discontinuity within British early childhood policies and systems, and the research associated with it.

## **Theoretical and methodological underpinnings**

As part of this thesis I reflect critically on how my published work has been informed by both theory and practice. As mentioned above, this work encompasses numerous publications besides the ones submitted here. In terms of theoretical positioning, I acknowledge the impact of Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986) ecological systems theory of human development, of feminist (Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd, 1991) and social constructionist theories of early childhood, which examined the diverse beliefs, ideas and experiences affecting children and families living within complex worlds (Woodhead, 2006).

In documenting the overall importance of the body of research produced during my trajectory as a social scientist specialising in early childhood policy research, I acknowledge how my position, grounded in empirical psychology, has been influenced by other disciplinary perspectives, such as educational studies, sociology and economics.

While positivism featured prominently in my psychology training at North East London Polytechnic, now the University of East London, even as a student my attention had already been caught by alternative approaches. The much more sociologically oriented explorations of childrearing by psychologists John and Elizabeth Newson (1963), Rutter's (1972) definitive reassessment of Bowlby's (1952) conceptualisation of maternal deprivation and Donaldson's (1978) incisive critique of Piaget's (1952) learning theory had broadened my understanding of societal influences on children's development within their families and communities. They also instilled a desire for my own research to transcend disciplinary boundaries, as did the work of these scholars.

Psychology and education have traditionally played a major role among the disciplines underpinning early childhood research. Given my background in the former, my early work most closely reflects that influence in terms of paradigmatic positioning, but growing familiarity with educational studies becomes increasingly evident. My work owes a factual and interpretive debt to a number of British educationalists. They include David (1998) for her comparative work on early childhood systems in Europe, Maynard (2007) for among other things highlighting the key role of the outdoors as a site for early

learning, Moyles (1989) for her work on the role of play in early learning, Sylva (Sylva et al, 1980) for exploring the influence of programme structure on early childhood service quality and Siraj-Blatchford (1994) for her theorising of the essential link between quality and equality.

Early childhood educational studies do continue to rely heavily, though, on a body of child development studies emanating from psychology. Within early childhood research, the conceptualisation of early childhood care in opposition to early childhood education is only gradually being overcome (Brannen and Moss, 2003; Moss, 2010). For instance, arguing from a more traditional educational perspective, Bruce (2005, p. 4) asserts that practice in early childhood education may display the influence of numerous contrasting child development theories: nativist (e.g. Erikson, 1963), empiricist (e.g. Bereiter and Engemann, 1966) and interactionist views of children (e.g. Bruner, 1960), but that none provide a complete theory incorporating both biological and socio-cultural aspects.

Certain theoretical developments within education itself, on the other hand, such as Alexander's (2001) important comparative study of educational systems, do in fact examine these important interactions. This is also the case in psychology, where Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986) ecological systems theory of human development has become one of the more influential approaches within early childhood research, highly relevant to its interface with early childhood policy. Bronfenbrenner's theory goes some way in addressing the concern expressed by Bruce (2005) and by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) that early childhood research continues to be conducted without much reference to the socio-cultural context, including the wider early childhood systems, within which such services are embedded.

Although references to Bronfenbrenner's work are now mainly restricted to textbooks, concepts derived from his theory have remained useful to me in attempting to integrate the present analysis into a more conceptually coherent whole. Bronfenbrenner was one of the first to illustrate the interlinking of separate environments, the family, community and society, interacting with young children's biologically driven development and impacting on their experiences.

## **More recent theoretical influences**

Apart from the theoretical directions identified here, there are also theoretical paths, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, which I chose not to follow in my work over the last quarter century. For instance, from a socio-cultural perspective, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007, p. 119) note a lack of recognition for different perspectives and its impact on theory and practice among those engaged with early childhood and its institutions. While I am in full agreement with this assertion, the direction to which this has led in some of their theoretical work is not one that I have considered particularly useful to my own early childhood policy research.

Dahlberg is among a small but growing number of researchers (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Yelland, 2005; MacNaughton, 2006) who apply post-modern and post-structuralist concepts developed by philosophers such as Foucault (1972) and Bourdieu (1991) in their quest to develop a unified theory of early childhood policies and institutions. Though in applying these theories, their grounding in the French context barely gets taken into account by the authors. I view the fact that early childhood and its institutions continue to be studied as part of a range of separate disciplines with their associated methodologies as a major barrier to the development of a truly integrated approach.

Increasingly, the fields of social policy (Daniel and Ivatts, 1998; Williams, 1999; Lewis, 2003; Tisdall and Riddell, 2006; Tisdall and Hill, 2011) and economics (Heckman, 2000; Duncan et al, 2001; Herbst and Tekin, 2010) have added significant theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of early childhood institutions and policies. Perspectives from public health (Barlow et al, 2008), neuroscience (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) and anthropology (LeVine, 2003) have become more influential, while a social constructionist approach informs early childhood research through the 'new' sociology of childhood (Jenks, 2005). In progressing my early childhood policy research career, I developed a growing appreciation of the practical and theoretical relevance of these perspectives to the issues I was exploring, as the critical appraisal of the nine submitted studies is intended to demonstrate.

The major theoretical perspectives influencing my own research, however, remain those held by certain colleagues I worked with over the years. Prominent in developing my early thinking around influences on outcomes for children from different backgrounds in early childhood services was TCRU Director, Barbara Tizard. Tizard's (Tizard, 1986) paper on preconditions for early childhood service quality, drawing attention to the role played by practitioners' background, conditions and training, has guided my policy and research work right up to the present, as has her groundbreaking study on the restrictive impact practitioner behaviour and expectations may have on children's language use in nursery school/class settings (Tizard and Hughes, 1984).

Among other TCRU colleagues, Peter Moss's original approach to cross-national studies (Moss, 1994), his critique of the concept of 'the child in need' (Moss et al, 2000) and his philosophical position regarding the place of democratic early childhood systems and institutions within societies (Moss, 2007a; Fielding and Moss, 2010), continue to inform my work on early childhood policy. While the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) had yet to be formulated, my evolving understanding while at TCRU of the interaction of race, class and gender was profoundly influenced by feminist sociological theory as developed by Julia Brannen (Brannen and Moss, 1988) and by Ann Phoenix's black feminist psychology (Phoenix, 1991).

In the next phase of my career, Helen Roberts with whom I worked at children's NGO Barnardo's, first convinced me of the practical and ethical need for a strong evidence base for early childhood services and policies (Macdonald and Roberts, 1995). This influence was reinforced by my contacts with Helen Penn, with whom I was collaborating on research projects long before we jointly founded the International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare at UEL in 2007. I trust my research bears the hallmark of her compellingly made case for the need for equity in global early childhood policies and systems (Penn, 2005; Penn, 2008).

## **The structure of this critical appraisal**

Having located this body of research in its historical, theoretical and methodological context, I now summarise each submitted publication. Next I examine the evolution of the three characteristic themes I identified as the unifying principle for the critical appraisal that makes up this thesis, alongside the submitted studies. The fourth section of this thesis synthesises the nine publications as a coherent whole, assessing its overall rigour, originality and significance. It also briefly revisits the current state of knowledge in the field of early childhood policy research.

This critical appraisal may prompt several questions. Are the three themes that emerged as characteristic of my research still justified as research foci in the light of current developments in the world of early childhood policy and its associated research? How has the production of this body of research over time affected my current positioning as a researcher? The final section of this thesis addresses these questions, and argues that these publications made an original contribution to developing knowledge in this area, both individually and as a coherent body of research.

## 2 Critical summaries of the submitted publications

This second section of my critical appraisal provides summaries of the submitted publications. Brief descriptions and analyses are followed by an outline of my specific contribution in the case of co-authored studies and references to some of the publications citing each study.

### Critical summary 1

Lloyd, E. Melhuish, E., Moss, P. and Owen, C. (1989) 'A review of research on playgroups', *Early Child Development and Care*, 43 (1), pp. 77-99.

This academic journal article reported on a literature review of research on UK playgroups, undertaken as part of a Department of Health and Social Services commissioned study of the role of playgroups within the English system of provision for under fives (Statham et al, 1990; Brophy et al, 1992).

The review covered literature on the groups' varied geographical distribution and its inverse relationship with maintained nursery education provision, parents' socio-economic background, gender dynamics affecting parental involvement in playgroup operations, the socio-economic position, background and training of the predominantly female playgroup workers, and children's experiences, including those of children with special needs.

The article concluded that there was a striking absence of detailed information about the then dominant form of pre-school provision, attended by more than half of children before entering school and of its impact. It identified limited participation by children from minority ethnic communities, highlighted the poor employment conditions of playgroup workers, and established that evidence for the positive effect of playgroup attendance was inconclusive. In respect of early childhood policy development, it noted a long-standing failure on the part of the British government to deploy adequately

resourced, including longitudinal, studies to examine early childhood service development and impact, to improve their quality and effectiveness.

In its rigorous, cross-disciplinary approach to searching the literature, which was largely national, given the topic, qualitative and quantitative, process and outcome studies were scrutinised. Sources included academic journals, statistical databases and government reports concerning service patterns, background, attitudes, views and behaviours of 'policy stakeholders,' including parents, playgroup workers, providers, local government policymakers, the national playgroup membership organisation, PPA, (now PLA) and the short, medium and long-term benefits for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.

While I produced the review, the co-authors' diverse disciplinary backgrounds added value to searches and critique. The journal, now in its 30<sup>th</sup> year of publication, used to be one of the only journals devoted to early childhood. This article continues to be cited (Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997; Matthews et al, 2009; Manning, 2008; Gambaro, 2012).

## **Critical summary 2**

Melhuish, E., Lloyd, E., Martin, S. and Mooney, A. (1990b) 'Type of child care at 18 months - II: relations with cognitive and language development', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 31 (6), pp. 861-870.

This academic journal article related to a longitudinal study of the experiences of women returners in dual earner households in Greater London who used different forms of childcare for their firstborn infants, and its impact on the children's developmental progress. The effect of day nursery, relative or childminder care was compared to that of a matched group of children staying at home with their mothers. The article reported on the relationship between type of childcare experience and the children's cognitive and language development at 18 months. The results for cognitive development indicated a relationship with maternal education, but not with type of childcare. However, children in group care, though using single words, were less likely to produce

different word combinations at this stage. This finding appeared due to the group environment, in particular to the use of poorly staffed and resourced private day nurseries.

While the first author took the lead in applying logistic regression models to the data, I contributed significantly to the findings, linking these to wider language development research. This article in a highly respected international journal is still widely cited (Clarke-Stewart and Allhusen, 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2011; Love et al, 2002).

### **Critical summary 3**

Lloyd, E. (1997) 'The role of the centre in family support', in Cannan, C. and Warren, C. (eds.) *Social action with children and families – A community development approach to child and family welfare*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 143-16.

This book chapter set the role of NGO Save the Children UK's open access neighbourhood resource centres within the context of wider family centre research. The centres' format reflected an 'ecological model' of children and family well-being, taking account of community and wider contextual influences on family welfare. The premise that social inequality lay at the root of social problems informed SCF's centre-based family support work. Childcare provision, holiday play schemes and adult education all formed part of the centres' highly participative approach to service provision. This was found to contribute to a sense of community in some of the UK's most deprived areas, although service sustainability was an issue.

Evidence was presented that this configuration of services constituted a new paradigm in welfare states and was as likely to reach children in need of protection as centres targeting 'problem' families. The multi-functional, multi-professional centres were compared with European models, which similarly tended to avoid targeting

children's social welfare services, with its associated conceptual and practical service fragmentation.

This chapter was informed by practitioner and user views I sought for a management review of SCF's 43 UK centres which I undertook as part of my policy and research work for its UK department. My analysis appeared in an edited book from a major academic publisher, aimed at social and community work professionals. It has been widely cited (Dearlove, 1999; Cannan and Warren-Adamson, 2001; Pierson, 2010).

## **Critical summary 4**

Lloyd, E. (1998) 'Introducing evidence-based social welfare practice in a national child care agency', in Buchanan, A. and Hudson, B.L. (eds.) *Parenting, schooling and children's behaviour*. Alton: Ashford, pp. 161-177.

In this chapter I described the tools and processes employed by my colleagues and I on the Barnardo's Research and Development Team to support practitioners working for this major UK childcare NGO with the development of practice based on the best available evidence of effectiveness. This support included the 'What Works' series of publications (e.g. Lloyd, 1999).

The chapter explored links between research and practice, drawing analogies with research/policy links. Having identified both hard-line and pragmatic trends emerging within the developing debate around rigorous social welfare practice, I then examined alternative rigorous approaches to service design, delivery and evaluation. These included Smith's (1981) levels of certainty framework for evaluating intervention effectiveness. This required matching the degree of research methodology rigour to the extent to which interventions might have major implications for the lives of families involved.

The main argument pertained to more wide-ranging social welfare practice than just work with families with young children. To illustrate how to close the gap between research and practice, though, I used methodologically robust research by Gibbons

(1991) on the impact of early childhood provision as a successful child protection intervention. The chapter recommended an incremental approach to the adoption of evidence-based social welfare practice. It also emphasised the importance of user involvement, notably that of children and young people, to evidence-based practice.

Evidence that my contribution appears to have advanced the discussion about using empirically supported research to influence social welfare practice comes from continuing citations in UK and USA social work literature and elsewhere (Thyer, 2001; Thyer, 2002; Camasso, 2004; Evans et al, 2010.)

## **Critical summary 5**

Lloyd, E. (2000) 'Changing policy in early years provision and family support', in White, K. (ed.) *The changing face of childcare, NCVCCO Annual Review Journal*, Volume 2. London: NCVCCO, pp. 65-79.

Written two years after the Labour Government took office, this practitioner journal article explored whether the economic strategies and funding mechanisms that were driving new policy directions in early childhood and family support, might generate inequitable, fragmented and possibly unsustainable services. It recommended uncoupling access to early childhood provision from parental employment status and direct investment in services, i.e. supply-side subsidies, in the interests of countering rising child poverty and inequality. Evidence from academic research and a range of government reports was cited in support of the argument. This was illustrated with three case studies of children's centres, one rural and two in deprived Inner London boroughs with high minority ethnic populations.

The National Council for Voluntary Childcare Organisations, since 2008 known as Children England, is a national umbrella organisation supporting practitioners with research based advice. This article is still being cited (Cowley, 2008) and its rural case study was reproduced in a report on rural family support provision (Frost, 2001).

## Critical summary 6

Penn. H. and Lloyd, E. (2006) 'Using systematic reviews to investigate research in early childhood', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 4 (3), pp. 311-330.

This academic journal article examined the experience of employing systematic research synthesis methods developed at the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordination Centre (EPPI-Centre) to explore the evidence base for aspects of early childhood. Over a five year period three early childhood systematic reviews were carried out by the EPPI Early Years Review Group, using EPPI-Centre procedures and tools (Penn et al, 2004; Lloyd et al, 2005; Penn et al, 2006). The article discussed the principles underlying systematic research synthesis, the format of the three reviews, the processes involved in reviewing studies, and the nature and generalisability of findings.

Although such reviews addressed impact questions that mostly concern policymakers, the article acknowledged the importance of evaluating the process questions which are characteristic of qualitative research and the fact that the relationship between research and policy is rarely linear or unambiguous.

It concluded that establishing procedures for the open scrutiny of the evolving research basis for policy decisions was a necessary part of a 'knowledge economy' and that the review process had proved a useful exercise in scrutiny and clarification of early childhood research.

The writing of this article reflected a truly shared effort, building not only on my experience of taking a major role in two and leading on one of the systematic reviews, but also on my previous experience in promoting evidence-based practice (Lloyd, 1998). It has been widely cited (Dunst, 2009; Harrison et al, 2011; Hedges, 2012; Newman and Dickson, 2012).

## Critical summary 7

Lloyd, E. (2008) 'The interface between childcare, family support and child poverty strategies under New Labour: tensions and contradictions', *Social Policy & Society*, 7 (4), pp. 479-494.

This article examined the dual aims of the Labour government's national childcare and family support policies and strategies, locating these in relation to its child poverty agenda. It noted the pivotal role assumed by the Treasury in furthering such policies during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Labour administration. While acknowledging the need for redistributive policies in principle and practice, I questioned whether the achievement of child poverty objectives was being hampered by the selected policy instruments. I demonstrated how the adoption of the mixed economy of early childhood education and care and family support services promoted separate markets for poor and better off families. Employing Archard's (2003) philosophical analysis of the balance to be achieved between the interests of children, families and the state, I concluded that this remained tipped in favour of the perceived needs of the state.

The article appeared in a leading academic social policy journal and remains widely cited nationally and internationally, both in early childhood research journals (Daley, 2010; Ho et al, 2010; Campbell-Barr, 2012) and other academic publications (LaValle and Smith, 2009; Malin and Morrow, 2010; Pearce et al, 2010; Naumann, 2011; Morgan, 2012).

## Critical summary 8

Lloyd, E. and Hallet, E. (2010) 'Professionalising the early childhood workforce in England: work in progress or missed opportunity?' *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 11 (1), pp. 75-88.

This article, co-authored with an academic experienced in early childhood practitioner training, focused on a key subject in early childhood policy research. This is the relationship between early childhood workforce qualifications and employment conditions and service quality. The article considered an innovation in the professionalisation of the English early childhood workforce through improving qualifications, the introduction of Early Years Professional Status - EYPS. Graduates in any discipline could obtain this status, originally designed for the private childcare sector workforce, via several publicly funded training pathways. This development reflected the official promotion of a gradual transition to a graduate workforce.

The article argued that the concept of professionalism implied by the creation of this status failed to meet the criteria employed within sociological theories of the professions. EYPS also contrasted with that of other professionals working with young children, such as teachers or social workers. Finally, it conflicted with early years practitioners' own views on their professional identity, both as highlighted in the literature and in focus group examinations of the views of 20 EYPs in training, which informed this article empirically. Practitioners' own views led to the conclusion that this professionalisation process could be seen as work in progress, rather than a missed opportunity.

As first author, my contribution focused on the historical, contextual and theoretical framework, whereas Elaine Hallet conducted the empirical practitioner study and contributed to the analysis and conclusions. Since appearing in a respected international journal, this article has been widely cited in British and international academic publications (Kendall et al, 2012; Reed, 2012; Oberhuemer, 2011; McMillan et al, 2012) and in PhD research (Jónsdóttir, 2012; Kilderry, 2012).

## Critical summary 9

Lloyd, E. and Penn, H. (2010a) 'Why do childcare markets fail? Comparing England and the Netherlands', *Public Policy Research*, 17 (1), pp. 42-48.

This article reported on data from a 2.5 year comparative study of marketisation within the English and Dutch early education and childcare systems which I conducted with funding from UEL's Royal Docks Business School. In the middle of the last decade both countries introduced legislation explicitly promoting marketisation of early childhood provision. These two childcare markets were compared in terms of provider type, employer input, parental cost contribution, regulation and impact, having first been located within their distinct socio-economic contexts. The article traced the impact of the economic recession on service uptake. Within the English system it identified a growing risk to the sustainability of publicly funded early education, as this remained largely located within the mixed childcare market, as opposed to the Netherlands, where it is delivered in primary schools. The article concluded that the very concept of a childcare market is problematic.

While the analysis was underpinned by my research, my co-author helped shape the main argument and conclusions about the impact of childcare marketisation, informed by her earlier research (Penn, 2007; Penn, 2009b). A leading left-of-centre think tank publishes this peer-reviewed journal and the article's findings are being widely cited in publications aimed at influencing early childhood policy (Friendly, 2011; Cooke and Henehan, 2012; Daycare Trust, 2012).

### **3 Thematic analysis of this body of research**

At the outset of this critical appraisal I argued that my research is characterised by three recurrent themes, evident in the submitted studies, for which the foundation was laid at an early stage of my social science research career. These were its policy oriented focus, its equity emphasis and its foregrounding of the need for a strong evidence base to underpin early childhood policy. Here I analyse how these themes evolved and interacted in my work, starting with its policy oriented focus.

#### **A policy-oriented focus**

My first experience of social science research, collaborating on two major Government studies expressly commissioned to inform early childhood policy developments (*Lloyd et al, 1989; Melhuish et al, 1990b*), proved a defining introduction to early childhood policy research. Working closely with eminent TCRU scholars convinced me of the value of an interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, its Director's views on the tenuous links between research and policy have continued to inject realism into my assessment of what is achievable (Tizard, 1990). My participation in a comparative study of playgroup movements as part of the second TCRU project (Statham et al, 1989), prompted a lasting interest in policy comparisons, as is clear from other submitted publications (*Lloyd, 1997; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*).

In the Daycare project study (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*) the effect of private sector aegis on early childhood service quality was identified as a cause for concern in respect of early childhood policy formation. My later work would prove the lasting nature of my concerns about burgeoning marketisation (*Lloyd and Penn, 2010a; Lloyd, 2012b; Lloyd, 2012c; Lloyd, 2012d; Lloyd and Penn, 2012*), essentially since the expansion of markets in social care, in Sandel's words (2012, p. 89), "...complicates the distinction between market reasoning and moral reasoning, between explaining the world and improving it".

The three submitted publications dating from the period I worked for NGOs (*Lloyd, 1997; Lloyd, 1998; Lloyd, 2000*) reveal my increasing involvement in influencing policy and practice. The deliberate effort to do so which was required from me in this role is also apparent from contemporaneous campaigning reports (*Lloyd, 1995; Lloyd et al, 1997*) and from my collaboration on Select Committee Inquiries and input into other policy influencing activities (*Great Britain. HM Treasury, 1998; Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2000*). Another policy study I collaborated on during that period argued the case for the preservation of maintained nursery schools as a preferred site for quality early education (*Penn and Lloyd, 2001; Penn et al, 2001*).

The submitted studies produced during the third phase of my career, evidence the consolidation of my maturing policy analysis skills (*Lloyd, 2008; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*). For instance, my study analysing the main drivers of the then quite new Labour government's early childhood and family support policies and strategies (*Lloyd, 2000*), clearly predicted the service interface problems associated with the chosen policy instruments, marketisation and privatisation, which I identified in a later study on this subject (*Lloyd, 2008*). Subsequently, I explored alternative policies and policy instruments, such as greater supply side funding for early childhood systems, in order to promote equitable access and service viability, as part of a comparison of English policy with a similar policy regime in the Netherlands (*Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*).

## **A focus on equity**

The position of parents, particularly of mothers, as proxies for their children as users of early childhood services has always had a high profile in my research. The first few publications submitted here (*Lloyd et al, 1989; Melhuish, 1990b*), privileged the role of mothers, in line with prevailing attitudes informing research commissioning at that time. During the second phase of my career, in contrast, the role of fathers was given more recognition (*Lloyd, 1997*). My interdisciplinary research experiences on both TCRU research projects led me to question many of the psychological and sociological

assumptions underlying their design and implementation, notably in relation to the role and identity of mothers.

Articulating these concerns culminated in the publication of a book I co-edited, which provided a critique of dominant psychological conceptualisations of motherhood (Phoenix et al, 1992). A review described it as representing an emerging new paradigm in psychology (Parffrey, 1992), giving much greater voice to the lived experiences of women as mothers from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, through the medium of qualitative research.

The first of my submitted publications (*Lloyd et al, 1989*) revealed an emerging focus on equity issues primarily in relation to gender and class, for instance by drawing attention to the predominantly female practitioners' poor employment conditions. It also noted the unequal access to provision of children from black and minority ethnic communities and those with disabilities. From that point onwards every submitted publication was informed by the principle of equity in access to quality early childhood and family support services.

For instance, my study of the SCF neighbourhood resource centres (*Lloyd, 1997*) highlighted the unmet support needs of young children in Gypsy and Traveller families, in other black and minority ethnic communities and of children with disabilities. This analysis of the value of the SCF open access model, as opposed to the stigmatising targeting of services at families with young children considered to be in need or at risk, displayed a growing understanding of equality issues and children's rights. It also reflected an increasing appreciation of the interactions between Bronfenbrenner's (1979, p. 16 ff) micro-, meso- and macro systems of human development in influencing outcomes for individual children and families.

The three case studies in my chapter on early childhood policy development under the 1997 Labour administration (*Lloyd, 2000*) illustrated unequal access to quality early childhood services. In a 2012 publication (Lloyd, 2012a) I re-examined these issues, as well as the increasingly compelling evidence against targeting of early childhood services.

As they were not exclusively focused on equity issues affecting very young children, I chose not to submit publications for this PhD which were generated by my

work for SCF on prisoners' children rights to contact with imprisoned parents. However, my research around this issue proved particularly influential on justice and penal policy development (Lloyd, 1992a; 1992b; Lloyd, 1993; Lloyd, 1995).

Gradually my research began to focus more on the exploration of pathways towards the realisation of this equity principle in early childhood service systems (*Lloyd, 2000; Lloyd, 2008*). Hence it followed that I should again explore equity issues affecting the – mainly female - early childhood workforce (*Lloyd and Hallet, 2010*), just as I did 20 years previously (*Lloyd et al, 1989*). That this 2010 co-authored publication remains widely cited must count as evidence of its continuing relevance to debates around early childhood professionalisation, even though the qualification in focus was confined to England. In this study, as in other publications dating from the third phase of my career, equity issues were located more explicitly within a theoretical context deriving from sociology and social policy, rather than from developmental psychology.

Ultimately, this equity aspect of my research culminated in a major international book I edited with Helen Penn (Lloyd and Penn, 2012), dealing with the way childcare markets hamper equal access to quality early childhood services.

## **A strong evidence base for early childhood policy**

An emerging trend from the late nineties of the last century promoted the use of methodologically robust research, such as randomised control trials, in policy development and evaluation (Great Britain. Cabinet Office, 2000). A major role was allocated to systematic literature reviews to inform evidence-based policy making, defined by Glanville and Sowden (2001, p. 4) as:

A review of the evidence on a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically appraise relevant primary research, and to extract and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review.

At the time the first two studies submitted here (*Lloyd et al, 1989; Melhuish et al, 1990b*) were published, the use of systematic reviews in the social sciences had not yet entered researchers' consciousness, let alone become accepted practice (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006*). Neither the international Cochrane Collaboration in Healthcare (established 1993), the Campbell Collaboration (established 2000), specialising in the effectiveness of social interventions, nor the national EPPI-Centre (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre) for education and social welfare research synthesis (established 1993), existed as yet. Hence my early literature review (*Lloyd et al, 1989*) displayed breadth rather than methodological depth, betraying a lack of familiarity with more rigorous reviewing approaches.

According to Moss and Dahlberg (2008, p.9), in early childhood research, academic papers:

...frequently show no recognition of the authors' position with respect to paradigm and discourse, and its implications for defining questions in research and evaluation, the choice of methods and the interpretation of data.

While this observation may apply to the first journal article submitted here (*Lloyd et al, 1989*), the second (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*) was firmly located within the positivist paradigm of developmental psychology. As far as early childhood research and beyond was concerned, I would contend that this was entirely usual for its time. Indeed, the interrogation of methods and reported outcomes in studies transcending the merely descriptive made an early appearance in my submitted studies (*Lloyd, 1997*). I also adopted a more rigorous approach to research synthesis when it became available (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006*).

By 1998 I was immersed in the movement to strengthen the evidence base for early childhood policy as well as practice (*Lloyd, 1998*). This approach is illustrated in a practitioner-oriented publication I edited and co-authored on the evidence base for increasingly popular parenting interventions (*Lloyd, 1999*). The fact that my 1998 chapter (*Lloyd, 1998*) is still cited in major social welfare and social work handbooks mentioned in the previous section, must count as evidence for its contribution to

transforming evidence-based practice into a workable approach acceptable to practitioners.

In 2001 I joined the first systematic review group in the EPPI-Centre (the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre) set up at London University's Institute of Education to explore the evidence base for early childhood research. By 2006 we had generated three reviews, with me leading on one (Lloyd et al, 2006) and contributing to the others (Penn et al, 2004; Penn et al, 2006). The study of this process submitted here (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006*) is one of several collaborative publications based on this work (Penn and Lloyd, 2007; Lloyd and Penn, 2010b). It makes a strong case for the use of robust evidence to underpin interventions, particularly where vulnerable children are involved.

The submitted article (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006*) concluded that the process of defining relevant studies by applying separate inclusion and exclusion criteria for methodological robustness, moving from broad characterisation (mapping) to a second stage in-depth review involving the application of additional criteria and the avoidance of bias through team work, proved a useful exercise in scrutiny and clarification of early childhood research. The method's limitations were also recognised, notably the relative neglect of the process questions characteristic of qualitative studies in favour of outcome questions, the need for regular review updates and the process being labour intensive (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006, p. 326*). As co-authors Penn and I acknowledged that the systematic review method in educational research remains a contested form of reviewing evaluative research (Biesta, 2007; Moss, 2007b; Hedges, 2012; Vandebroek et al, 2012).

In an article providing an update (Lloyd and Penn, 2010b, p. 278) on the systematic review of intervention studies involving children directly affected by armed conflict (Lloyd et al, 2006), we identified this as an area of research where a rigorous methodology is especially hard to implement due to the difficult circumstances in which it is conducted. We employed Farmer's (Saussey, 2010) notion of 'pragmatic solidarity' to explain a continued commitment to using the systematic reviewing method. We argued that this should be part of a complex of alternative approaches to exploring the

best possible service provision, particularly for the most marginalised and poorest children.

It is encouraging that early childhood related outcomes research increasingly favours this approach to producing and examining evidence (Chambers et al, 2010; d'Onise et al, 2010; Nores and Barnett, 2010). Yet it has by no means ended up dominating my research approach. On the contrary, an alternative approach, which has come to be defined as policy ethnography, characterises the submitted publications. In the next section I return to this concept.

## **Conclusion**

In this section of the critical appraisal I analysed thematic developments within the submitted studies in order to position them individually in relation to the evolving state of knowledge within the field of early childhood research. I demonstrated how each one contributed to the emerging field of early childhood policy research, to the promotion of equity goals in policy development and implementation, and to a strong evidence-base for early childhood policymaking.

In respect of the third theme I argued that other publications of mine also made a distinctive contribution to strengthening the evidence base for early childhood policy, not just the submitted chapter on the promotion of evidence-based social welfare practice (*Lloyd, 1998*) and the article (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006*) reporting on systematic reviews in early childhood research.

In this discussion I also aimed to highlight originality, rigour and significance in the submitted studies, both implicitly and explicitly. My next challenge is to synthesise the submitted body of research as a coherent study and argue the case for its originality, rigour and significance.

## **4 Synthesis**

In my brief overview of 25 years of early childhood research introducing this thesis, I identified early childhood policy research as an emerging field within wider early childhood research. In section three I illustrated how the submitted publications contributed to this emerging field by interrogating current policy, government reforms and their impact on equity and quality. But do the submitted studies also add up to a coherent whole? This synthesis explores whether this quarter century of scholarship did indeed yield a coherent contribution to what remains a minority field within early childhood research. In examining this contribution, I analyse its originality, rigour and significance.

### **Originality**

I first gauge the extent to which the submitted body of research made an original contribution to knowledge. Four of its aspects can be called original: its ecological approach, the foregrounding of mixed methods, its interdisciplinary format, and the espousal of evidence-based approaches to informing early childhood policy. Arguably, most of the topics addressed had yet to be researched in any depth within British early childhood research at the time the earlier studies were published.

#### **An ecological approach**

Evidence of an ecological approach mirroring Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the importance of putting children's early childhood experience in their environmental context (1979, p. 164) is present throughout. It is part of the narrative linking the constituent parts of this body of research. For instance, in the first two publications (*Lloyd et al, 1989; Melhuish et al 1990b*), impacts of children's nonparental care

experiences were theorised to reflect interactions between their home, community, childcare setting and local and central government regulatory environments. Similarly the ninth one (*Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*) highlighted how these interactions differed for Dutch and English children, because of societal factors, such as the Dutch poverty rate being much lower.

In between, the analysis of the value of SCF's open access model of neighbourhood support centres (*Lloyd, 1997*), the two critiques of New Labour's early childhood policy regimes (*Lloyd, 2000; Lloyd, 2008*) and my study of the contextual factors impinging on the professionalisation of the English early childhood workforce (*Lloyd and Hallet, 2010*), all represented this approach.

My TCRU research differed in its ecological approach from the only other major study of British early childhood provision at that time, the Oxford Pre-school Research Project (*Sylva et al, 1980*). This had focused on children's experiences and progress within settings, rather than within a wider societal context. This early research perspective, further developed in my later publications, can be viewed as part of an original and distinctive trend within early childhood research.

Nowadays this is favoured by major policy-oriented early childhood outcome studies, such as the National Evaluation of Sure Start (*Belsky et al, 2007*) and the impact study of practitioner graduate status on early childhood service quality in the private sector (*Mathers et al, 2011*).

### **Mixed methods**

Another consistent strand adding coherence to this body of research has been its use of and reference to mixed methods research. This was also innovative for emerging interdisciplinary early childhood policy research. It was predicated on realist and interpretivist, both philosophical and pragmatic, assumptions informing research questions typically underpinning complex projects (*Brannen, 1995; Brannen and Moss, 2012*).

For instance, although the second submitted study (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*) stayed within disciplinary boundaries, it differed from similar, US, studies (*McCartney,*

1984; Desai et al, 1989) in the way it explored causality by adding sociological and social policy perspectives to the analysis of psychological data.

My experience of collaborative interdisciplinary research projects employing mixed methods influenced both the submitted and other studies. Such collaborations have continued to feature as part of my research (Hughes and Lloyd, 1996; Kazimirski et al, 2008; Smith et al, 2009; Speight et al, 2010a; Speight et al, 2010b; Clarke et al, 2011).

### **Interdisciplinarity**

Whereas my main contribution at first was as a psychological researcher specialising in the empirical investigation of children's development, by the time of my second research project (*Lloyd et al, 1989*) a role repositioning became apparent. It already veered more towards that of an applied social policy specialist, moving towards a more flexible culture of enquiry, which became a major characteristic of the body of research discussed here.

Byrne (2011, p.186) has defined such applied work as 'intrinsically post-disciplinary,' since the actual way in which the research is done is dissimilar to the disciplinary background of the individual researchers or members of research teams. Post-disciplinary research employs the full range of social science techniques and methodological programmes.

Viewed as a coherent entity, the body of research submitted here embodies what has come to be defined as policy ethnography. Bagley (2011, p.100) describes it as applying the inductive ethnographic methods of:

...observation, interviews and documentary analysis to qualitatively and critically engage with the complex interrelated process of policy context (the socio-economic, historical and political frames in which a policy is situated), content (the key details of a policy) and consequence (the impact of a policy on individuals and communities).

This characteristic perspective within the submitted research is well illustrated in my article with case studies on the impact of Labour's early childhood policies (*Lloyd, 2000*) and the analysis of the marketisation of the English and Dutch childcare systems, based on documentary analyses and stakeholder interviews (*Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*).

### **An evidence-based approach**

The privileging of evaluative studies employing robust methods, such as the inclusion of comparison groups, as scientific evidence to inform early childhood policy and practice, gradually became accepted (Smith et al, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2011). It has yet to become a significant trend within early childhood research as a whole, though.

Core to the body of research submitted here has been its original, innovative and consistent promotion of such approaches, including systematic reviewing methods. It embodies a rigorous and coherent argument in favour of such strong evidence as part of a complex of alternative approaches to exploring the best possible policy design and service provision, particularly for the most marginalised and poorest children.

This whole body of research questioned assumptions prevalent in the early childhood research community, for instance the assumption that the evidence base for early childhood policy and practice was routinely underpinned by the best possible evidence. Such questioning was not confined to the two publications which explored methods to strengthen this evidence base. Indeed it has questioned the nature of early childhood research itself, particularly some of the 'received wisdom' (*Penn and Lloyd, 2006: p.325*) it promotes.

### **Rigour**

I now explore how this body of research differs from other work in other distinctive respects, having made the case for my research as a form of – rigorous - policy ethnography. These other aspects are interpreted here as additional evidence for its

scientific rigour. Because I recognised the importance of the interaction and interdependence between different mediating influences affecting young children's experiences, my publications paid significant attention to influences at the level of what Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) called macrosystem phenomena. These include political systems and prevailing cultural attitudes.

### **Macrosystem phenomena**

In social science a distinction is frequently made between distal - indirect – factors affecting children's environment as they grow up and so-called proximal – direct – factors. Distal factors include parental education, family composition and local deprivation; proximal factors refer to influences such as children's and parental physical and mental health, type and intensity of childcare experiences and the home learning environment. These have all been fitted into valuable predictive models of socio-emotional, cognitive and socio-economic outcomes for children (Feinstein et al, 2008; Gregg et al, 2008; Sylva et al, 2008; Sabates and Dex, 2012). Frequently, though, the macro determinants of children's outcomes and wellbeing, even in policy oriented research, are merely superficially explored.

In contrast, within the body of research presented here, there is a consistent and rigorous focus on the pervasive effects of higher level structural processes, such as the neo-liberal pursuit of marketisation and privatisation of childcare and other social welfare services, on the interactions between distal and proximal factors affecting children's outcomes. My research continually emphasises how negative policy outcomes are intensified for those children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances, even though, paradoxically, they have more often been the population targeted by such policies.

My original training in psychology continues to inform the multi-level ecological model of development I employ as an underlying theoretical framework for my research. In respect of the post-disciplinary nature of this body of research, I would go as far as claiming that it evidences a considered and responsible incorporation of findings and principles from other disciplines, informed by my extensive experience of collaborative

working. This was a corollary of my attempt throughout to produce a coherent approach to the analysis of early childhood policy developments and their impact. Corroborating evidence for my claim is provided by my work's citation in national and international publications representing disciplines such as public health, economics, social work and social policy.

Just as in the case of health inequalities research (Graham, 2002), early childhood policy research emerged from a narrow disciplinary base, in this case developmental psychology and education. Within these disciplines publications regarding aspects of early childhood services, such as curricula and other structure and process factors affecting early childhood provision and children's development, still outnumber publications on the impact of early childhood policies, strategies and systems on services and children. Fortunately, the current state of knowledge within published early childhood policy research reveals a growing emphasis on macrosystem structural factors (Dickins et al, 2005; Mathers et al, 2007; Moss, 2009).

### **Multiple viewpoints**

Evidence reflecting multiple viewpoints and perspectives is considered crucial to rigorous policy research. However, incorporating the views of children and young people presents particular challenges (Christensen and James, 2008). Practitioner, policy maker, parent and wider family experiences and insights have been pivotal to this body of publications. In contrast, it lacks the voice of very young children as service users and commentators on their own wellbeing and environments, although I did report on older children's experiences of poverty and social exclusion elsewhere (Lloyd, 2006). This applies to most early childhood policy research, though very young children's views on early childhood provision (Clark, 2003; Clark et al, 2005; Lancaster and Kirby, 2010), as well as older children's participation in policy-making (Tisdall and Davis, 2004), have been explored in depth elsewhere.

Mindful of the importance of children's voices to social policy formation and early childhood policy in particular (Hallett and Prout, 2003), what my work does instead is to

present a broader perspective on the interests related to early childhood and family support provision of the very youngest children, in their own right.

In one of the submitted papers (*Lloyd, 2008: p.489*), I cited Archard's (2003) argument that in addressing the position of children within its policies and reforms, any Government is faced with the need to balance the interests and views of parents, children and the state itself. In my view this body of work has made a rigorous and distinctive contribution to the research evidence informing this balance in relation to the interests of very young children.

## **Significance**

Next I examine evidence for direct influence of this body of research on other early childhood policy research, before exploring evidence for indirect influence on policy developments themselves.

### **Direct impact**

Viewed over time, this body of research does appear to have made some significant and lasting contributions to the field of early childhood policy research. During the mid eighties, policy-oriented cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of the kind I collaborated on at TCRU were still rare, although Britain had already built up an enviable reputation for well-resourced cohort studies (Blaxter, 1986).

The first two submitted publications offered trenchant conclusions concerning access and quality failures in early childhood provision and their attendant risks to children's wellbeing and development. The first paper highlighted the absence of both statistical and research information about an important, but neglected, sector of the early childhood service system (*Lloyd et al, 1989*), while the assessment of language development as a function of early daycare experience (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*), highlighted the negative effect of poorly resourced private nurseries within the mixed economy of childcare.

This TCRU research bolstered the case being made at that time for a major British study of the impact of early childhood provision. This was realised as the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project 1997 – 2003 (Sylva et al, 2004; Sylva et al, 2008), a longitudinal study of the progress and development of 3000 children using early childhood provision from age three onwards. It profoundly influenced policy-oriented early childhood research nationally and internationally.

After an early identification (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*), the role of provider aegis, notably of for-profits, within an accessible and quality early childhood system became a leitmotif within this body of research. It has promoted the principle of universal access to quality early childhood services throughout. My later papers built on these foundations (*Lloyd, 2000; Lloyd, 2008; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*). The analysis of the transformative experience of children and families using SCF's open access children's centres (*Lloyd, 1997*) added to the critical mass of research informing the shape of the original Sure Start Initiative (*Lloyd, 2012a*), while the case for rigour as a key factor in research used to inform responsible early childhood policymaking was widely heard (*Lloyd, 1998; Penn and Lloyd, 2006*). Taken together I consider that this adds up to evidence for considerable direct impact.

### **Indirect impact**

The question arises whether by influencing other early childhood policy research my work indirectly affected policy change. I am well aware of the uncertainties around pathways to policy impact among multiple competing influences. This makes policy impact of any research as hard to demonstrate as Tizard once claimed (Tizard, 1990), despite advances in policy analysis (Hudson and Lowe, 2004). In a discussion of early childhood theory, research and policy, Woodhead (2006, p.5) usefully described this relationship as resembling that between parallel and occasionally interconnected communities of interest, sometimes at loggerheads about research implications or policy justifications and both subject to the international and indeed global political, economic and cultural context of early childhood work and changes within these areas.

Hall (1993, p.280) ranked policy impact according to the resulting degree of change as first, second and third order change, where only third order change reflected a wholesale policy, or paradigm, shift. Whereas Hall's discussion did not single out the impact of research on policy, more recently Morton *et al.* (2012) reviewed current evidence for enhancing this particular relationship. One conduit for gaining insight into facilitators of and barriers to early childhood policy research utilisation could be through a better understanding of the means by which civil servants absorb research knowledge (Ouimet *et al.*, 2009). During my research career I gained extensive experience of this particular pathway.

Since working on the two TCRU projects (*Lloyd et al., 1989; Melhuish et al., 1990b*), I participated extensively in government commissioned research. Numerous invitations from external research teams to contribute to publicly funded policy research projects (*Levitas et al., 2007; Kazimirski et al., 2008; Clarke et al., 2011; Naumann et al., in press; Penn and Lloyd, in press*) and policy evaluations (*Smith et al., 2009; Speight et al., 2010a; Speight et al., 2010b*) may be interpreted as evidence for the significance of my published work. Apart from collaborative research on such projects, I also fulfilled a variety of advisory roles in respect of early childhood policy making.

### **Interdisciplinarity and impact**

Earlier I argued for interdisciplinarity being an original aspect characterising the body of research submitted here for a PhD by publications. I also see this as one of its significant characteristics. The need for an interdisciplinary approach in relation to studying the impact of macro level factors alongside other scientific evidence was strongly argued by Graham (2002, p. 2005) in an article on the challenges facing health inequalities research:

Grounded in social epidemiology, health inequality research has illuminated the pathways which run from individual socio-economic position to health, but has left in shadow the factors which influence socio-economic position. Broadening the evidence base to include these structural processes requires a new science

of health inequalities, resourced both by epidemiological research and by research on social inequalities and social exclusion.

Just as Graham claims for health inequalities research, value is also added to early childhood policy research by the incorporation of findings and perspectives from different disciplinary areas. Throughout, this body of research emphasised the need for early childhood policy research to become such a 'new science' by incorporating, both on a theoretical and a pragmatic level, the wide range of political, social and economic factors influencing early childhood policy.

## 5 Conclusions

The body of research discussed in this thesis both reflects and addresses the ongoing discontinuity within British early childhood policies, systems and services, and the research associated with it. I referred to this discontinuity as a form of path dependence as defined by Pierson (2000; 2004). In this respect this body of research is representative of the wider body of publications I produced over a 25 year period.

Several of the earlier studies submitted here dealt with a single policy and service strand: early education (*Lloyd et al, 1989*), childcare (*Melhuish et al, 1990b*), or social welfare provision (*Lloyd, 1997*). Later studies attempted the conceptual and actual integration of these strands (*Lloyd, 2000; Lloyd, 2008; Lloyd and Penn, 2010a*), as discussed in earlier sections of this thesis. Arguably, these later papers met Pierson's (2004, p.49) criterion for appropriate application of the concept of path dependence, namely the provision of explanations of the mechanisms at work, recognising that merely descriptive accounts are insufficient.

I have argued that originality, rigour and significance characterised the submitted publications and interacted in generating a coherent body of work. This made, I claimed, a distinct contribution to the evolution, indeed the reconceptualisation, of early childhood policy research as an interdisciplinary field, as well as to the current state of knowledge within this field. In so doing I addressed Penn's (2008, p.49) contention that the field of early childhood research as a whole had as yet failed to establish any disciplinary boundaries.

According to Woodhead (2006, p.21), such an interdisciplinary approach "...offers a meeting place for diverse perspectives on early childhood and is more consistent with the trend towards more coordinated policies..." Encouragingly, this view held by a major academic in the field appears to support my own position as to the role interdisciplinary early childhood policy research may play with regard to policy formation.

I was primarily guided by evidence for this type of policy impact in selecting the nine publications making up this body of work from my complete output since 1985

(Annex B). Additional evidence in support of my claims in this respect was derived from publicly funded research projects I was invited to collaborate on in the course of the period in focus. This second type of evidence was also construed as indicative of indirect impact on policy and sometimes on practice.

In my analysis I have traced the evolution of three characteristic themes, a policy oriented focus, an emphasis on equity and the foregrounding of the need for a strong evidence base to underpin early childhood policy. I demonstrated how my work made an increasingly strong theoretical, methodological and empirical case for these factors as essential to early childhood policy research, and ultimately to equitable early childhood service systems. This thesis argues the continuing relevance of these research foci to early childhood policy research. It also explains how they continue to determine my positioning as a researcher.

By placing, as I did here, this body of early childhood policy research 'in time', to use Pierson's (2004) description, the small contribution this research may have made towards achieving truly equitable and high quality early childhood services and service systems may become apparent. Finally, I want to acknowledge my debt to the community of scholars whose work this thesis builds on. As Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. xi) said: "We stand on the shoulders of giants, and mistake the broadened vision for our own."

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## ANNEX A

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## ANNEX C

### Three career stages in which submitted research was published

<b>Career stage</b>	<b>Employment dates</b>	<b>Employer</b>	<b>Submitted study/studies in this period</b>
<b>Academic</b>	1985 – 1989	Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London	Paper 1 Paper 2
<b>NGO</b>	1989 – 1995	Save the Children UK	Paper 3
	1995 – 1998	Barnardo's	Paper 4
	1998 – 2002	National Early Years Network	Paper 5
<b>Academic</b>	2003 – 2006	School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol	Paper 6
	2007 – to date	Cass School of Education and Communities, University of East London	Paper 7 Paper 8 Paper 9

## **The nine submitted publications**

## A review of research on playgroups

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*(Received 25 August 1988)*

This paper reviews research on playgroups in the United Kingdom. Subjects covered include the geographical distribution of playgroups; the backgrounds of families who use them; the concept and practice of parental involvement; the position of playgroup workers; and the experience of children in playgroups. The review finds that the majority of children attend playgroup at some stage, mostly for 2 or 3 half-day sessions per week. Parental involvement is higher in playgroups than in other pre-school services, although there is much variation. Attendance at preschool appears to have benefits to the child, although the evidence is not such as to show whether playgroups are better or worse than other forms of provision in this respect. The review concludes that more research needs to be carried out into the provision and effectiveness of services for under-5s.

**KEY WORDS:** Research, playgroups, parental involvement

### INTRODUCTION

Playgroups are a major form of pre-school provision. The Pre-school Playgroups Association (PPA) has estimated that more than half the children entering school have had experience of playgroups. The label "playgroup", however, covers a very mixed group of services. There is no definition of a playgroup which would cover all bodies which would call themselves such. However there are a number of characteristics which are frequently found. Nearly all playgroups are independently run, either by voluntary groups or by individuals. They offer care on a sessional basis, largely to children aged 3 and 4, and charge a fee per session. Although most have one or more paid workers, they also rely on volunteers, especially parents. Volunteers spend time working in the playgroup, often on a rota basis, as well as helping in other areas, such as management. Most playgroups belong to the Pre-school Playgroups Association, a national voluntary organization, and almost all are required to register with the local Social Services Department. (For fuller details, see PPA 1981).

The PPA reserves the term "playgroup" for sessional groups organised by parents, to provide opportunities for social play to children aged 3 and 4. Among its members (and PPA estimates that almost three quarters of registered playgroups are members), 30 per cent are privately run and 3 per cent are run by local authorities: of the 62 per cent which are "non-profit making community or church groups", most involve parents in management (PPA *Facts and Figures*, 1986). Some playgroups however are in effect

private, part-time day nurseries, nursery schools or creches, and a few playgroups now offer full-day care. In considering the research done on playgroups, it is important to remember that we are dealing with this diverse set of services, so that generalization is difficult.

The origin of the playgroup movement in Britain is often linked to Belle Tutaev's letter to the *Guardian* newspaper in 1961, although a few playgroups were already in existence before then. The Pre-school Playgroups Association (PPA) was formed in 1962, as a self-help organization. Although playgroups were originally intended to fill a gap in provision in the absence of sufficient nursery education, the playgroup movement and its supporters have increasingly emphasized that playgroups should be considered a genuine alternative to nursery education. (See for example PPA, 1980b). Some have argued that playgroups are a superior option, particularly because of the benefits that are claimed to come from parental involvement in playgroups: this point of view was put forcefully by Lady Plowden in her Presidential address to PPA in 1982 (see Plowden, 1982).

### *The Position of Playgroups*

The number of playgroups increased rapidly in the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1976, there were over 14,000 playgroups in England, with nearly 360,000 places. The rate of growth has subsequently slowed, with places increasing by 14 per cent between 1976 and 1986 (DHSS, 1987). During this period, the number of children in nursery education rose by 72 per cent, in response to the expansion of this form of provision initiated by the 1972 White Paper on Education (DES, 1987). Almost all of this increase was in part-time places. By 1986, there were 17,453 playgroups registered with local authorities in England, providing 412,400 places (DHSS 1987).

Most children attend playgroups for between six and nine hours a week. Our reanalysis of the 1979 General Household Survey (GHS) shows that over 80 per cent of all children at playgroup went for no more than three half day sessions per week (See Table 1), and the PPA (*Facts and Figures*, 1986) estimated that average attendance in 1985 was for 2 or 3 sessions a week. For every 20 places in registered playgroups belonging to PPA, there are some 35 children attending. Taking this into account, the PPA (Mastel & Dykins, 1987) has estimated that there were places for 35 per cent of 3 and 4 year olds in England in registered playgroups in 1986, and that 53 per cent of the age group actually attended, compared to 23 per cent in nursery education. This may be an overestimate of playgroup attendance as some children at playgroup are under 3: according to the 1979 GHS, 17 per cent of playgroup attenders were aged 0-2.

## RESEARCH TO DATE

In relation to their extent and significance as a form of pre-school provision, little research has been done on playgroups in the UK. For this review, we located some 60 references providing research findings or statistical information. Most of the research was carried out during the 1970s, and is largely local or regional in scope.

At a national level, there are 4 main sources which provide some information about playgroups:

- (1) The *Child Health and Education Study* (CHES), carried out at Bristol University, consists of a cohort of all children born in the UK in one week in April, 1970. It provides detailed information about the pre-school experience of 12,945 of these children in the period 1973 to 1975 (Osborn, Butler & Morris, 1984; Osborn & Milbank, 1987; van der Eyken, Osborn & Butler, 1984).
- (2) The *General Household Survey* (GHS) is a national survey conducted annually by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys. On a number of occasions respondents have been asked about use of pre-school services, although this was not done between 1980–1985. The data for 1986 are not yet available, so that 1979 is the last year for GHS data on the use of pre-school services. 1979 was also the first year for which playgroups were coded separately from other types of services, although the published tables for 1979 (OPCS, 1981) combined playgroups with day nurseries, creches and mother and toddler groups. For this review we have re-analyzed the raw data for 1979 to produce separate data on playgroups (the data were supplied by the ESRC Data Archive: Gilbert, Dale, Arber & O'Byrne, 1983). The 1979 GHS consists of 11,490 households, incorporating 1,545 families with a child under 5. Table 1 shows the usual weekly attendance pattern of under-5s using playgroups and other forms of daycare: this is the same as the table on p.106 of the 1979 GHS, but with playgroups disaggregated. The published table shows 5 per cent of children aged 0–2 years attending “playgroup or day nursery” for five full days per week: from table 1 it can be seen that none of these are in playgroups. Seventy per cent of under-3s using playgroups attended no more than two half days per week, as did 51 per cent of 3 and 4 year olds who used playgroups. In contrast, of the 3 and 4 year olds attending day nurseries or creches, the majority were attending five days a week, either five half days (56 per cent) or five full days (20 per cent).
- (3) Each year, the PPA collects information from its members groups and publishes these as *PPA Facts and Figures*. This provides information on a large number of playgroups, but its value is limited because playgroups not affiliated to PPA are excluded and because the postal questionnaires are not returned by a substantial proportion of playgroups (over 20 per cent). Nevertheless these reports constitute an important source of statistics on playgroups, and they are quoted throughout this review.
- (4) Finally, the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) provides annual statistics on services that are the responsibility of local authority Social Services Departments in England, including details of the number of playgroups registered in each local authority area. Not all playgroups, however, are required to register: these include “creches organised by local health centres or within military establishments” (DHSS, 1987: 3). Some non-registered playgroups are notified to the DHSS by Local Authorities and appear in the annual statistics: the 1986 statistics include 290 non-registered playgroups with 6526 places.

**Table 1:** Usual weekly attendance pattern at daycare of children under 5: Great Britain, 1979.

Usual Weekly Attendance Pattern	Age 0-2 years			Age 3-4 years			
	Playgroup	Mother-Toddler Group	Day Nursery  Creche	Playgroup	Mother-Toddler Group	Day Nursery  Group	School
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1 Half Day	34	70	19	7	35	2	1
2 Half Days	36	20	19	44	12	7	3
3 Half Days	13	5	14	30	39	10	4
4 Half Days	4	2	Nil	6	8	2	< 1 >
5 Half Days	13	1	6	11	8	56	44
1-4 Full Days	Nil	1	1	1	Nil	2	3
5 Full Days	Nil	Nil	11	1	Nil	20	44
Other	Nil	2	Nil	1	Nil	2	1
Base = 100%	53	110	36	250	26	59	231
% of Age Group	8	16	5	36	3	8	33

< 1 > indicates less than 0.5%

Source: General Household Survey, 1979.

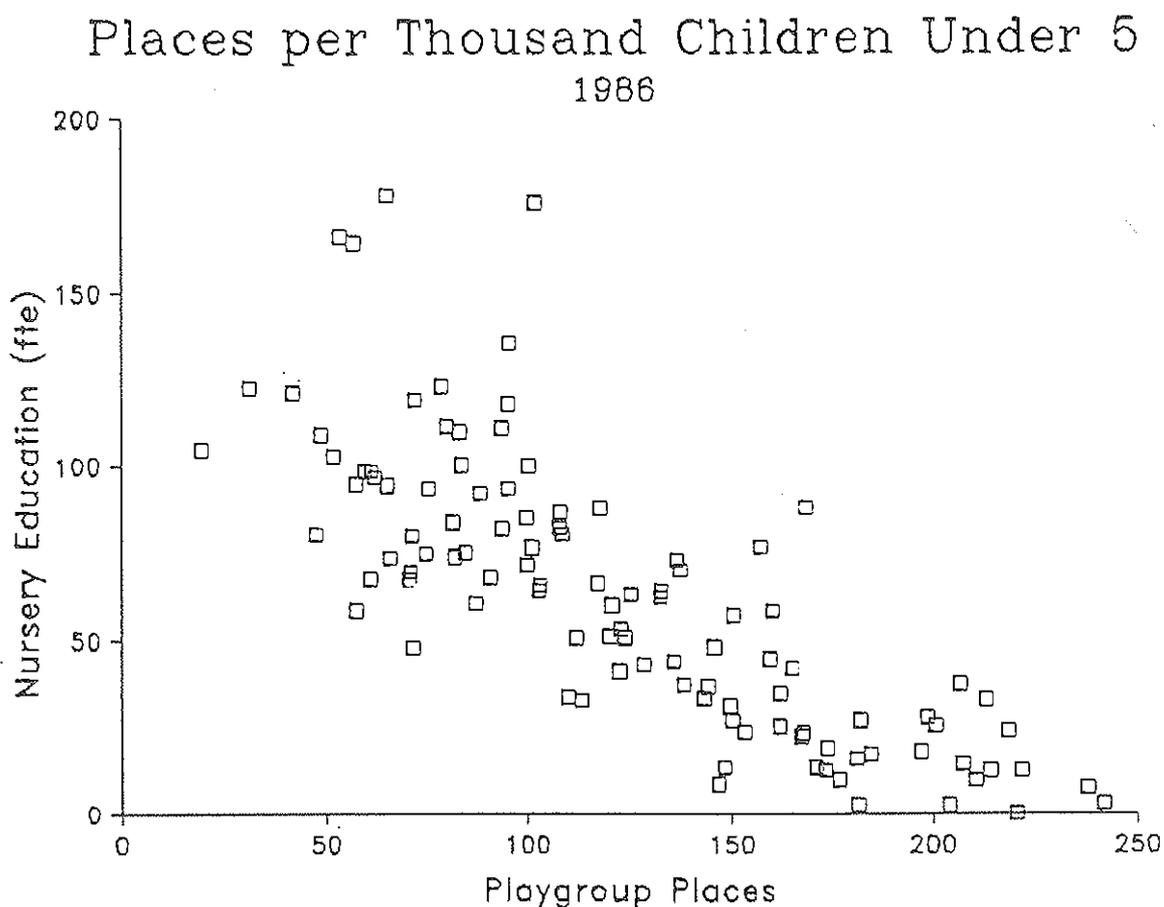
In Europe only two other countries—Ireland and The Netherlands—have significant playgroup movements (see Statham & Lloyd, forthcoming). There are playgroups in Australia and New Zealand, but North America does not have a large body of organizations which closely resemble British playgroups. Hence there is little research from other countries. In particular, the US, whose research contribution is so large for other types of pre-school services, has nothing to offer specifically on playgroups. The present review deals almost exclusively with research from the UK. It is divided into four sections, covering use of playgroups; parents and playgroups; playgroup workers; and children at playgroups.

## 1. USE OF PLAYGROUPS

### *a. Geographical distribution of playgroups*

DHSS annual statistics show great variation in playgroup provision between areas (Pugh, 1988; Owen & Moss, in preparation). Provision increases from North to South (with the exception of London), and is higher in County Councils and Outer London Boroughs, than in Metropolitan Districts and Inner London. Local authority differences are even greater, varying from 20 registered places per 1,000 0-4 year olds (in South Tyneside) to 240 (in West Sussex). Figure 1, however, shows that there is a clear and inverse relationship between playgroup and nursery education provision: relative to their numbers of under-5s, local authorities with many playgroup places usually have little nursery education and vice versa. The correlation between the two forms of provision, relative to the number of under-5s, is -0.79. These local authority variations reflect other geographical aspects of playgroup distribution. Playgroups are more common in rural and suburban areas, less common in cities, certainly in inner cities,

except in Inner London. In the CHES playgroups were twice as common in well-to-do neighbourhoods as in poor districts.



**Figure 1:** Scattergram of Full-Time Equivalent Nursery Education Places Against Number of Playgroup Places, per Thousand Children Under 5, for All Local Authority Areas in England, 1986.

Source: DHSS (1987) and DES (1987).

*b) The socio-economic status of parents who use playgroups.*

Playgroups are used more by parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In the CHES only 19 per cent of children classified as most socially disadvantaged had attended playgroup, compared to 50 per cent of the most advantaged. A few years later, the 1979 GHS showed the same pattern: our reanalysis shows that playgroups were used by 23 per cent of under-5s whose fathers were in professional and managerial occupations, as compared to 12 per cent of those whose fathers did semi- or un-skilled manual jobs. In 1980 the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) conducted a survey on the use of preschool provision by children in the year prior to their entry to reception class. The figures for playgroup attendance for children with fathers in these two occupational groups were 30 per cent and 21 per cent respectively (ILEA, 1982). An earlier study compared the uptake of preschool places among the entire population of 3 year olds in one London borough over eighteen months, and found again that children from non-manual social class homes were over-represented (Stevenson & Ellis, 1975).

This national and local disparity is related to the geographical distribution of services already described. In general, playgroups are less common in areas with higher

concentrations of lower social class families. Nursery education is more common in these areas, the children with fathers in manual jobs are more likely to be in this form of provision (1979 GHS).

Several studies have suggested other factors which may contribute to the social class imbalance in playgroup use. Apparent social class differences in uptake of pre-school provision were linked by Wadsworth (1981) to factors such as the parents' attitudes to education and their own educational experience. Wadsworth studied the pre-school experience of a UK cohort born in 1946 of over 5,000 people, and compared it with the pre-school experience of their first born child. This data came from the National Survey of Health and Development's (NSHD) "second generation" study which has been going on since 1969 and involves over 1,500 children. Wadsworth found that the better-educated first generation parents were more likely to use playgroups and nursery schools or classes for their child. They had also received more educational encouragement from their own parents, a finding which held even when social class was controlled for. Wadsworth (1981) concluded that socio-economic differences between children in different kinds of pre-school provision in the Seventies had increased compared to the early Fifties.

Finch (1983, 1984a & b) sought to study playgroups in inner city areas or on less popular council estates, which were as far as possible self-help working class groups run by local women, who had minimal educational qualifications. In the whole of Lancashire she found only four such groups, and added a fifth "middle class" group to the study for comparative purposes. After three years this comparison group was still running, but only one of the four working class groups survived. Finch records the difficulties these groups had in attracting children and handling funds, and the conflicts between those involved. None of the working class groups were in practice self-help groups, but were run by older women for younger mothers in their area.

Finch argues that the type of involvement required for self-help provision to be successful proved incompatible with the experience, attitudes and beliefs of these working class women. In particular, competence in running a playgroup and the authority to do so were required, but the women in the working class areas studied were unlikely to possess these qualities, "since both their class and their gender militate against it" (1984a:13). It was, however, also the case that the working class groups did not have access to suitable premises and equipment.

Hanton (1985) disagreed with Finch's conclusions and attempted to demonstrate the value of visiting playgroup advisers in helping women in a group of inner City playgroups cope with such pressures. A study in Cheshire (Palfreeman and Smith, 1982) of PPA playgroups set up in an area of need also established that continuing outside support was needed to help groups cope with the pressure of changes and to remain viable.

The uptake of playgroup provision within a working class area has been examined by Shinman (1981, 1987). She studied the attitude of all mothers of 3 and 4 year olds living on a comparatively well-to-do West London Council housing estate, where a new local authority playgroup was about to open. The women "whose quality of life in terms of family and social relationships tended to be poor" (1987:141), were over-represented in the group not taking up a playgroup place for their child. If these women did so, they

were more likely to drop out soon. Shinman argued that more provision of playgroup places and other forms of pre-school provision in an area where a need apparently existed would not increase the uptake among certain groups of mothers. She believed that they would require more individualised intervention to make them want to use community facilities for themselves and their children, although this form of provision had not been tested.

Several research projects in the 1970s were concerned with the more specific issues of reaching "high need" children in the most disadvantaged areas. In a study carried out over 20 months in a deprived Inner London Borough, Joseph and Parfitt (1972) monitored the role of 22 new playgroups set up under the Urban Aid Scheme. Among children attending these playgroups, "high need" children were under-represented. The authors identified the requirement of mothers' participation as one factor that might be incompatible with reaching socially deprived children. This conclusion was echoed by Ferri and Niblett (1977) in their study of disadvantaged families and playgroups. They argued that providing for the mothers' own needs, as well as for those of their children, might go some way towards resolving this problem.

Ferri and Niblett (1977) studied 896 children in 30 playgroups in deprived areas. They concluded that playgroups could be successful in attracting children from disadvantaged families, but doubted whether playgroups were equipped to deal adequately with the range and extent of problems encountered: "Children suffering from the disadvantages encountered in this study are likely to be below average developmentally, socially, and linguistically . . . to provide meaningful help for children with such problems would require skilled, intensive, one-to-one contact which most playgroups are not equipped to provide . . . Few leaders are trained to work with disturbed or deprived children, even if they had the time to give such children the attention they may require." (p.72)

### *c) Maternal employment*

Employment rates among women with children aged 3-4 were 40 per cent in 1985. Most of those had part-time jobs: employed mothers with pre-school children most commonly work less than twenty hours a week (Moss, 1988). Playgroups contribute to the childcare arrangements of only a small proportion of employed mothers. In the 1980 Women and Employment Survey (Martin & Roberts, 1984), 3 per cent of women with a pre-school child and a full-time job used playgroups for part of their childcare arrangements and 4 per cent of women with part-time jobs. In a more recent study in London of mothers in full-time jobs with children aged 3, 42 per cent of those cared for by relatives or childminders also went to some form of part-time group care, mostly playgroups (Moss & Melhuish, forthcoming).

This illustrates one way in which children with mothers in employment may use playgroups, the children being taken by caregivers. Fawcett (1979) has argued that playgroups deal more effectively with these situations than nursery schools or classes, as childminders can bring their charges there and pass on the parenting skills learned in the group to the mothers. There is no evidence, however, that this actually takes place.

The CHES found that fewer than average children of employed mothers, whether working part-time or full-time, attended playgroups, whereas maternal employment

rates did not affect attendance at nursery schools or classes. Mothers who had been employed for at least 2 years before their child was five years old were least likely to have used a playgroup for their child (Osborn *et al.*, 1984). The CHES researchers concluded that the mother's employment only determined the type of pre-school placement for her child if she was working full-time.

The 1979 GHS data show a rather different picture. As with CHES, children with mothers in full-time employment were least likely to be at playgroup (9 per cent)—but children with mothers in part-time jobs were more likely than children with non-employed mothers to be at playgroup (26 per cent *v.* 15 per cent). This may reflect an increasing use of playgroups as a component in childcare arrangements, but also the fact that children with fathers in professional and managerial jobs are more likely to attend playgroup and to have mothers in employment.

#### *d) Ethnic minorities*

Nearly 20 years ago, the Association of Multiracial Playgroups, a working party bringing together representatives from voluntary organizations concerned with the problems of Educational Priority Areas, formulated several policy proposals in a number of publications (Jackson & Ray, 1970). However there is no evidence to suggest that ethnic minority children have been successfully attracted to playgroups.<sup>1</sup> In the CHES study only 15 per cent of "West Indian" children and 19 per cent of "Asian" children had been to playgroups, compared to 44 per cent of "European (UK)" children. This was a reverse of the situation for nursery education, where "West Indian" (42 per cent) and "Asian" (31 per cent) children were more likely to have attended than "European (UK)" (19 per cent) children (Clark, 1988). Over two-thirds of playgroups did not have any such children on their register. Among the small number of "non-white" households with pre-school children in the 1979 GHS, 9 per cent used playgroups, as opposed to 16 per cent of the "white" sample.

In 1985 64 per cent of groups affiliated to PPA had no children "of Afro-Caribbean or Asian descent" on the register. In part this reflects the distribution of playgroups, which are less likely to be in urban areas with large ethnic minority populations (Owen & Moss, in preparation). The highest attendance was in Inner London, with only 11 per cent having no children "of Afro-Caribbean or Asian descent" (PPA *Facts and Figures*, 1985). Even in Inner London, however, ethnic minority children are less likely to go to playgroups. The 1980 ILEA survey reported 26 per cent of "Indigenous" children had attended playgroup in the year before entering reception class, compared to 17 per cent of "West Indian" and 16 per cent of "Asian" children, although all groups had used nursery schools and classes to the same extent ("Indigenous": 64 per cent; "West Indian": 64 per cent; "Asian": 59 per cent) (ILEA, 1982).

The PPA regularly discusses issues of multi-culturalism and bilingualism in playgroups in the pages of its magazine, "Contact" (e.g. Antonouris, 1987; Krishna, 1987) and publishes "fact sheets" about these issues. Bilingualism as an issue connected with ethnic minorities has been the subject of some research. In over two thirds of PPA

<sup>1</sup>As the studies reviewed used slightly different names for ethnic groups, rather than impose a single set of names, we have shown the originals in quotes.

affiliated groups with children speaking languages other than English, English was nevertheless the only language used in the playgroup (PPA *Facts and Figures*, 1984).

## 2. PARENTS AND PLAYGROUPS

### *a) The concept of parental involvement*

The playgroup movement's philosophy stresses the importance of involving parents in all aspects of playgroup work, for their own benefit and for that of their children (e.g. Crowe, 1983; PPA, 1980b). Parental involvement has been seen as a characteristic distinguishing playgroups from nursery education by the PPA.

Maxwell (1985) has analyzed the successive styles of parental involvement seen in the playgroup movement. She characterised as "parasitical" the parent's role in the early playgroups. Here teachers who were mothers themselves were given a chance to keep their hand in, by providing children for whom no nursery education was available with an equivalent form of pre-school experience. The PPA then took a different direction, with mothers developing "professional skills" as playgroup leaders through PPA courses in particular; Maxwell detected a danger of the training becoming "a parody of what the nursery teacher was trained to do" (p.12). This led to a "potentially dangerous" situation in which too much emphasis would be placed on preparing children for school and the expertise of the playgroup leader would give her some spurious authority. The true "partnership" model, according to Maxwell, involves a delicate balance between "effective leadership during the play session and informed management by the committee" (p.13).

In the Oxford Preschool Project, Smith (1980) distinguished the "partnership" and the "professional" model of parental involvement which she encountered both in the playgroups and in the nursery schools and classes alike. According to Smith these models mirror those developed by other researchers into pre-school provision in the U.K., notably Watt (1977), Ferri and Niblett (1977) and Van der Eyken, Michell and Grubb (1979).

Smith categorised five broad types of parental involvement. In the first type, parents acted as teachers of their children alongside the professionals. The second and third type Smith described as "servicing the group", inside or outside the sessions respectively, for example doing chores or fundraising. The fourth type of involvement concerns parental access to the group, for example, to settle in a child or to help out on a casual basis. This form of access depended on the "openness" of the group and while playgroups might be open in some ways, they were not necessarily open in other ways. Smith's final category concerned involvement in group management.

Gray and McMahon (1982), in their PPA survey, employed four similar categories to describe the types of parent participation that were possible. Most of the parent-run playgroups (15 out of 21) could be categorised as having "open access" according to Smith's terminology. In her resumé of this survey's findings Sally Maxwell, national PPA advisor, noted that this model did not necessarily always lead to the "best" results in terms of parental involvement. For this to be successful some structure needed to be developed to integrate new mothers into both sessions and committee work, otherwise

the situation could develop "that the friendly help-and-welcome groups . . . quickly become the most cliquey" (1985:66).

### *b) Parental involvement in practice*

Most "parental" involvement is actually "maternal" involvement: certainly in the literature reviewed below, where the authors used the term "parental", it was the mother's involvement mainly which was meant. While we continue to use the term "parental" throughout this section, it should be remembered that this disguises gender-based differences in "voluntary" input to playgroups.

Such evidence as exists on parental involvement suggests that while there is more in playgroups than in other types of provision, it is far from universal even among mothers. In the 1974 OPCS study of the need for daycare (Bone, 1977), for example, "more of the children said to attend playgroups than others had mothers who sometimes spent time at the facility . . . (and) mothers of playgroup children were most likely to feel their participation was welcomed." Even so only 46 per cent of playgroup mothers had "ever spent time at the facility" and 26 per cent felt they were "not welcome."

On a larger scale, the 1984 PPA *Facts and Figures* looked in more detail at types and levels of involvement in affiliated groups. Table 2 summarises the results. The most common involvement was attending social and fundraising events, where half of the playgroups reported involvement by a majority of families. In nearly two-thirds of the playgroups, half or less of the families helped at playgroup sessions, and families were not involved in management at all in over a third of playgroups. Overall, levels of involvement were highest in playgroups described as in "isolated" or "village" areas, and lowest in urban areas, though not necessarily in "inner city" areas. These results are based on a 78 per cent response rate from PPA groups. As not all playgroups are members of PPA, this probably means that the results are based on about 60 per cent of all registered playgroups.

**Table 2:** Type and levels of parental involvement in PPA affiliated playgroups.

<i>Type of Involvement</i>	<i>Playgroups where involvement by (%):</i>			<i>Type of area where Involvement is:</i>	
	<i>No Families</i>	<i>Half or Less of Families</i>	<i>More than Half of Families</i>	<i>Highest</i>	<i>Lowest</i>
Activities during sessions	17	45	38	Isolated	Suburb/ Large Town
Help Fund Raising/ Social Events	19	67	14	Isolated	Country Town
Attend Fund Raising/ Social Events	6	45	49	Isolated	Suburb/ Large Town
Help Cleaning/ Repairs/Insurance	43	53	4	Isolated	Country Town
Help with Administration	41	57	2	Isolated	Country Town
Serve on Committee	35*	59	6	Isolated	Suburb/ Large Town

\*Includes 29% with 'No Committee'

Source: PPA *Facts and Figures*, 1984.

There has been little work on the factors which may affect the nature and extent of parental involvement in playgroups. Evidence for the effect of social class on involvement is rather contradictory and not conclusive. Finch (1984a) concluded that although the mothers in her working class playgroups tended to stay, their actual involvement was minimal: their presence arose from lack of confidence in playgroup workers' supervision of their children. The CHES study reported that it was the more socially advantaged mothers who were more likely to help in playgroups, but this was due to a higher proportion of them helping only occasionally (Osborn *et al.*, 1984:128). On the other hand, Haystead, Howarth and Strachan (1980), in the East of Scotland found that mothers from working class families were both more likely to stay during playgroup sessions and to help with all respects of the running of the group.

### *c) The effects of parental involvement on parents*

Within the playgroup movement, it has been claimed that a major benefit of parental involvement is the mutual support derived by mothers. The evidence for this, and other beneficial effects for parents is largely anecdotal (eg. Crowe, 1983; Keeley, 1980; Mastel & Dykins, 1987; Palfreeman & Smith, 1982). The actual research literature is very limited and not all positive. Elsie (1969) found in a number of urban playgroups that they tended to reinforce existing patterns of social relationships; mothers interacted with other mothers they already knew, rather than forming new relationships. Maxwell noted evidence of such a danger in the results from the Gray and McMahon study (1982).

Keeley (1980) traced patterns of involvement and responsibility among 62 mothers in 33 pre-school groups, including day nurseries, statutory and private nursery schools and classes and private and community playgroups. Each mother had a four year old child in the group. Involvement coupled with "real responsibility" for the group's existence was only found in six of the 33 groups, all of which were community playgroups. Keeley argued that the beneficial effects of such involvement became apparent from the mothers' relatively high attendance rates at PPA courses and from other evidence of interest in learning about child development.

In practice, it is hard to establish cause and effect. Within the playgroup movement, it has been recognised by several authors (Hanton, 1985; Smith, 1980; Crowe, 1983) that there may be major differences between parents' initial views on involvement and other relevant matters which may determine which type of pre-school provision they choose and the outcome of their involvement in that provision.

### *d) Parents views about Playgroups*

The reasons why parents choose playgroups for their children, and their views as consumers of the service, are important in evaluating playgroup experience and planning pre-school provision. Yet there has been little research on playgroups viewed from a parental perspective. Work in the 1970s on usage and non-usage of playgroups, especially by disadvantaged children and their families, either did not include parental input (e.g. Ferri & Niblett, 1977; Joseph & Parfitt, 1972) or did not deal with parents' experience of using playgroups (Shinman, 1981).

An exception is Turner's (1974, 1977; Turner & Green, 1977) research on 42 playgroups in deprived areas of Belfast. However, all but 3 of these groups were organised by large voluntary organizations, were attended by the project children for 4

or 5 sessions weekly and stuck closely to a traditional nursery school curriculum, making them unrepresentative of playgroups. The 180 mothers taking part in the study were asked their expectations about the possible benefits for their children of attendance at playgroup. They anticipated beneficial effects on their children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, which were confirmed by developmental assessments six months after the start of the research project.

A number of other studies have found mothers who use playgroups emphasising the social benefits for their children. A PPA study (Gray & McMahon, 1982) of 500 mothers using 32 playgroups, found that while 41 per cent expressed reservations about the type of learning through play taking place in playgroups, almost all were agreed about the useful socialising functions of playgroups. In the NSHD "second generation" study, mothers with children in playgroups considered increased social experience for their children a first priority, and in Shinman's study (1981), those mothers who opted for playgroup primarily valued its socialising function. An NFER study of the transition from home to pre-school (Blatchford, Battle & Mays, 1982) interviewed parents before their children went to a pre-school service. More than half of the parents hoped that attendance at pre-school would contribute to their child's social development. Those parents whose children went to nursery education more often mentioned educational reasons for attending pre-school than did parents whose children went to playgroup. Both groups however saw pre-school experience as an important form of preparation for school, as did mothers in Finch's study (1984a and b) and in a small scale Isle of Wight study (Gamble 1983).

The PPA has been able to add a few questions to national surveys conducted in 1983 and 1985 by a market research firm, covering use and preference for different pre-school services (Mastel & Dykins, 1987). These questions replicate some from the 1974 OPCS study of day care (Bone, 1977). All 3 studies show similar responses in parental preferences for playgroups. Only half of current users chose them as a preferred type of care: users of nursery education were more likely to prefer their current type of provision. Playgroup users were more favourably inclined to playgroups in the Gray and McMahon sample: two-thirds preferred playgroups to nursery education, though this still leaves a sizeable minority who would prefer to move.

In the NFER study (Blatchford *et al.*, 1982), 86 parents were interviewed on their knowledge and beliefs about pre-school provision and their reasons for choosing a particular place. Two interesting points on preference emerged. First, the majority of parents wanted their children to start playgroup well before 3. Second, parents felt that at a playgroup they were able to choose the number of sessions a child attended each week, whereas nursery class expected attendance every day. This gave flexibility and allowed them to introduce the child gradually. Some parents (15 per cent) wanted their children to go first to playgroup, then move on to nursery education. This probably happens quite frequently, at least in some areas; many of the children in the study reported by Hutt, Tyler, Hutt and Foy (1984) had attended playgroup before entering nursery school. Watt and Flett (1985) also report that many children had attended two or more pre-school groups. For some parents, therefore, the issue is not playgroups or nursery education, but mixing the two.

There is very little research on parents' views and preferences regarding parental

involvement and its potential effects. The most recent figures on parental preferences for involvement come from the 1983 and 1985 PPA surveys. Just under half of all respondents said that they would be more likely to choose a pre-school service which involved parents. This response was more common in the South of England and among higher socio-economic groups. As "involvement" was not defined these data are difficult to interpret. In Smith's (1980) study parents expressed a need for fairly clear guidance on the form their involvement in the sessions should take. Parents saw their role least frequently in terms of learning about their children's development or about parenting, but much more as a form of practical support. They did value the aspect of shared experience with their children, however.

The study which dealt most extensively with parental views on involvement in playgroups assessed demand for pre-school provision in the East of Scotland over two years and monitored the operation of existing pre-school facilities (Haystead *et al.*, 1980). In the 13 playgroups in the study, mothers felt that they could help more frequently with the organization of the group than with fundraising or with the playgroup rota. When their actual involvement in playgroup organization was measured, this amounted to only half of what they had claimed was feasible. Parents who would rather not be involved outnumbered those who wanted to be, even though there was more involvement in playgroups than statutory provision overall.

### 3. PLAYGROUP WORKERS

#### *a) Pay, conditions and background of workers.*

In 1987, according to PPA *Facts and Figures*, 97 per cent of all member groups had a paid playleader, while many groups also employed a second paid worker. Cohen (1988) estimates that in the UK at least 40,000 workers were employed in playgroups in 1985. In addition to parent volunteers assisting on a rota basis, many groups also use teenaged volunteers, on YTS (Youth Training Scheme) or CP (Community Programme) placements or secondary school pupils taking child development courses (Bass, 1984; Fawcett, 1984).

Almost all playgroup workers are women, although the PPA notes an increase in the number of men attending training courses, particularly in areas of high unemployment. Pay and conditions for workers are generally poor. In 1987 the average pay for a session (2-3 hours) was £4.64. (By comparison, the median hourly pay for women employed part-time in 1987 was £2.40: Department of Employment, 1987: Table 180). In the great majority of cases, workers do not get paid holidays, sick leave or superannuation (Cohen, 1988), although there are some opportunities for training.

Payment to playgroup workers is limited by what the groups can afford. In 1986 only 30 per cent of playgroups received a grant, mostly from local authorities. Grants, where they were received, averaged £669 per group, but the position was very varied across the country: in the Eastern region only 18 per cent of PPA member playgroups received a grant, and the grants averaged £262, whereas in Inner London 88 per cent of playgroups were receiving grants, with an average of £3529. (PPA *Facts and Figures*, 1986).

There is little information about the background or characteristics of playgroup workers. Few workers are men, and ethnic minority workers are under-represented. Only 4 per cent of PPA affiliated groups had any workers "of Afro-Caribbean or Asian descent" in 1985. Among the 36 per cent of PPA affiliated groups with children of Afro-Caribbean or Asian descent on the register, only 12 per cent also had workers of a similar ethnic background in 1985 (PPA *Facts and Figures*).

Some local authorities have a formal requirement for playgroup leaders to have received training, and PPA's own training courses are generally recognised as adequate for this purpose. Unfortunately, there is no information about the actual training or relevant past experience of workers in playgroups.

Reasons for working in playgroups have been discussed within the playgroup movement (e.g. Keely, 1980; Crowe, 1983), but have not been systematically investigated.

#### *b) Training for playgroup workers*

Originally it was assumed trained nursery teachers would be playgroup leaders. For a while this was indeed the case. The attitude towards the training needs of playgroup leaders changed after the PPA came into being, in particular when the concept of parental involvement was developed (Maxwell, 1985).

The PPA believes that, "imposing rigid standards and assessing performance is . . . inappropriate and open to misinterpretation" (PPA, 1986, p.5). PPA has also been anxious to guard against "spurious professionalism" (Fazackerley, 1975) as this might discourage parents from taking on leadership responsibilities and reduce their chances to do so by a lower turnover in leadership. Courses range from one-day conferences and workshops, through short courses to the more formal, year-long foundation course. Currently PPA would like to see a bridge between their own and other training courses for work with under fives, with the aim of more widespread recognition for their Foundation Course (Miller & Blake, 1987).

After some initial problems about the degree of "openness" of PPA courses run on Adult and Further Education premises (Fanner, 1970; Brown, 1975), PPA has developed a successful co-operation with statutory agencies in training matters regarding both general courses (Tuppenny, 1985) and its Foundation Course, which was attended by 3,911 students in 1984/85. The Foundation Course covers playgroup administration and management, the young child's development and especially the role of play in this development, the needs of young families and the role of playgroups in the wider community. The course has been subject to some experimental manipulation (Blamire, Crowther, Durkin & Quine, 1982) to determine its optimum length to achieve short-term learning goals and possibly long-term attitude changes towards playgroup work.

#### *c) Attitudes, views and behaviour of playgroup workers.*

There has been no work on the attitudes of playgroup workers to such issues as childrearing and motherhood. Attitudes towards parents have also received little attention, though in her Scottish study Watt (1977) found that playgroup workers' attitudes towards parents were more open than those of other pre-school workers as

regards the parents' role in management. Most work has been done on playgroup workers' views about their work with children.

Blatchford *et al.* (1982) compared the views of parents on the benefits of pre-school attendance with those of playgroup and nursery staff. Playgroup parents rated most reasons for playgroup attendance as significantly less important than did playgroup staff. These reasons included "enabling a child to learn through play", "to become part of a group" or "to become more independent". Whereas playgroup attendance appeared to be seen as an end in itself by staff, parents saw it as a preparation for school. Hutt *et al.* (1984) also found some divergence between playgroup parents and workers, with parents emphasising the importance of academic activities, while the playgroup workers most valued the activities fostering social-emotional development.

The aims of playgroup workers were explored by Turner and Green (1977: 35) in their study of Belfast Playgroups. Workers attached more importance to fostering socio-emotional development than to fostering intellectual development. In this they agreed with the mothers. The stated objectives of the playleaders were also compared with their everyday practice. Activities aimed at fostering intellectual development took up eight times more curriculum space than those aimed at fostering socio-emotional development. Playgroup practice therefore did not correspond to the preferences of the mothers, even though the stated aims of the playleaders did.

The Oxford Preschool Project (Wood, McMahon & Cranstoun, 1980) found similar discrepancies between stated intentions and actual behaviour among workers. Their sample consisted of 24 playgroup leaders and nursery teachers. Though the stated aims of these two groups of workers differed, in practice up to one third of contacts between children and workers were instructional in nature for both groups. Smith (1980) did however find more consistency between workers' views and behaviour with respect to relationships with parents. She compared the behaviour of staff and parents in 8 playgroups and 7 nursery schools and classes with the workers' views about the groups' objectives and the parents' role. A child-centered view of the group matched an "educational" style which largely excluded parents. A more open view of the group as a parent and child group meant parents were included as partners.

#### 4. CHILDREN AND PLAYGROUPS

##### *a) Children's experience in playgroup.*

There is evidence of considerable diversity among playgroups in terms of management, parental involvement and other organizational matters, and there is probably great diversity between playgroups in many other respects. Children's experience in different playgroups could therefore vary considerably, making any generalizations about "playgroup experience" difficult.

There has been no systematic attempt to document the extent and nature of differences between playgroups nor to consider the implications of these differences for the children's experience. A few studies have looked at some aspects of playgroup differences for a small number of playgroups in a particular area. Finch found that the one middle class playgroup in her sample displayed a more structured curriculum and

tighter organization than the four working class ones. The impact of accommodation was the focus of a study by Neill (1982). Adult involvement with children's activities was greater in playgroups which occupied several small rooms than in open plan or incompletely separate accommodation. The open plan setting led to greater contact between staff and less adult-child contact. Therefore making staff more available to small groups of children seems a good arrangement for fostering adult-child interaction. This in turn may lead to more intellectually demanding play and more sustained conversations, as Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) found in their study, done as part of the Oxford Preschool Project.

Smith and Connolly (1980, 1986) also found that environment affected behaviour. They established a playgroup used by two groups of children, and studied the effects of environmental variation. The amount of space did not affect levels of social play or aggression significantly, but levels of equipment did: where there was more equipment, children were more likely to play alone or in smaller subgroups, and were less physically aggressive. Overall group size was also influential: children in smaller groups were more likely to be in subgroups of four or more and to take part in fantasy play.

Neill (1984) has done further work on the "curriculum" of playgroups, which indicates the importance of the roles adopted by adults. The staff in playgroups spent two thirds of their time either in basic caretaking activities with children or being non-involved with children. "Educational talk", potentially a valuable source of interaction, occurred mostly in structured goal-oriented activities such as puzzles, or looking at books. In such activities the adults' role is obvious and necessary for the child to achieve the goal. With less structured activities such as art and social play there was less adult involvement and less educational talk. Neill also noted that the children were attracted to activities which involved adults.

Despite its apparent policy relevance there has been little work comparing children's experience in playgroups and nursery education. The main exception was a study conducted as part of the Oxford Preschool Project. The differences between the activities, conversation and social settings for 120 children in 7 playgroups, 6 nursery schools and 6 nursery classes formed the focus of the study (Sylva *et al.*, 1980). Forty children in each type of pre-school were observed for two twenty minute periods scattered throughout the day. The research team found that children in the playgroups studied spent more time with an adult than children in the nursery classes or schools. This was due to the larger proportion of time children were supervised in large groups, and the amount of actual adult-child interaction was less in playgroups than in nursery schools or classes. The quality of play differed in that there was more cognitively complex play in nursery schools and classes than in playgroups. This difference in play related to the lower level of adult-child interaction, since adult involvement raised the level of play. There was greater structuring of children's time in the nursery schools and classes and this seemed to facilitate more focussed and complex play and to encourage adult-child interaction around a shared activity. The variation between playgroups, as already noted, means that these conclusions, based on just seven playgroups in one area, must be tentative.

The study by Hutt *et al.* (1984) compared children's activities in playgroups, nursery schools and classes, and day nurseries. They made two 30 minute observations of 24

children from each of the three types of provision. The focus was narrower than the Oxford Preschool Project's, being concerned with the time the children spent in different types of play (fantasy, physical, and with materials). There was more physical play in playgroups, and boys were more likely to be engaged in this type of play.

*b) The Consequences of playgroup experience.*

One benefit of pre-school experience, especially from the parents' point of view is to ease the transition into the school environment. Cleave, Jowett and Bate (1982) used a similar observational approach to Sylva *et al.* (1980) to compare children's experiences at pre-school and at the start of infant school. They found that the transition involved changes, particularly in terms of individual adult-child attention. These changes were most marked for children without any pre-school experience. For children at infant school, the social groups were larger, the degree of parallel social activity greater, and the concentration on verbal and symbolic activity greater. Children from nursery class, nursery schools and playgroups had similar transitions to make, but not as great as that of children with no pre-school experience. Playgroup experience made no significant difference to this adaptation compared to the other forms of pre-school experience.

Several studies have examined possible *short term* benefits to children from attendance at playgroup. Stevenson and Ellis (1975) examined the attainments of pre-school children before the transition to primary school. They found that 3 year olds who attended nursery school, nursery class or playgroup had better language development than children who had not attended any pre-school provision. In studies such as this, however, there is the problem of whether there are differences such as home background, between attenders and non-attenders which affect the results, quite apart from pre-school attendance. Turner (1977) compared 72 children who attended playgroups with 72 children who did not attend a pre-school establishment. The non attenders were drawn from the same deprived neighbourhoods as the attenders; they were children whose parents would have liked them to attend playgroup, but for whom no places existed. There was evidence of better social, language, intellectual and physical development amongst the playgroup children when progress over a six month period was compared. A sub-study of activities which might affect children's language revealed that storytelling was associated with increased utterance length. Other activities did not affect language. With such studies it is impossible to know if the matching of the groups allowed for all relevant variables, but in this study the matching would appear to be very good on home background.

Evidence for *medium-term* developmental effects of playgroup attendance, measured after the transition to infant school had taken place, comes from studies by Rogers, Wheeler and McLaughlin (1977) and Jowett and Sylva (1986). Rogers *et al.* interviewed first year infant school teachers in different kinds of neighbourhoods in different parts of the U.K. about possible effects of playgroup attendance on the infants they taught. Negative effects were rarely mentioned, positive effects frequently. Among these were improvements in emotional development, intellectual ability and reading skills. No reference is made to the baseline against which these reported improvements were measured, however, nor of control groups of children who had received no, or a different form of, pre-school experience.

Jowett and Sylva (1986) used matched groups with different pre-school experience to compare both short-term and medium-term consequences for the children's adaptation to infant school. They looked at 45 children who had attended a nursery class, and 45 children who had attended a playgroup. All the children came from working class areas. The groups were matched on father's occupation, family structure, age, gender and position in the family. The children's activities in the infant school were observed at the start of infant school and 6 months later, the observations being adapted from the methodology used earlier by Sylva *et al.* (1980). They found little difference between the groups in social participation. However, the children who had attended a nursery class had more extended conversation, initiated more conversations, engaged more often in cognitively complex activities and in verbal and symbolic activities. Also, when they encountered problems the nursery class group showed more persistence than the playgroups group. These differences were marked at the beginning of infant school, and although reduced, were still present 6 months later: they were such that the nursery class group would be expected to adjust better to and make better use of the school experience.

Studies of *long-term* beneficial consequences of pre-school experience have all included children who have attended different types of provision, although data have not always been reported for the pre-school groups separately. Wadsworth's (1986) "second generation cohort" study found that 8 year olds who had attended pre-school had better vocabulary, reading and sentence completion abilities than children without such experience. Osborn and Milbank (1987) found similar results and reported better cognitive development at 5 and also at 10 as well as better educational achievements at 10 for children with pre-school experience. A comparison of the relative effects of different forms of pre-school experience revealed that attendance at "home" playgroups was associated with better cognitive development and educational achievement than attendance at other types of pre-school. Children attending "hall" playgroups had scores which were about average for pre-school provision, although significantly above those for children without institutional pre-school experience.

The conclusion "that the children with the best scores were those who had attended 'home' playgroups must be treated with caution" (Clark, 1988: 251). These types of playgroups differed from other playgroups in several ways—they were smaller on average, were more likely to have staff with teaching qualifications, over 60 per cent had no parental help and few had any parents involved in management. Interpreting the CHES results on "home" playgroups, and indeed for other types of preschool provision, is further complicated because of the marked differences in home background of children using different types of provision. The researchers attempted to control for these differences statistically. However some doubt has been cast on the validity of the statistical adjustments that were made. Owen (1985) has argued that in a situation where background factors strongly determine both the use of pre-school services and the test scores, it is not possible statistically to separate out the effect of the background factors from the effects of pre-school. At the moment, this debate about the appropriateness of particular methods of statistical analysis to control for background difference is unresolved.

The CHES also permitted some exploration of the possible relationship between parental involvement in pre-school services and children's development. The results

from the study showed no difference in educational attainment at ages 5 and 10, between children attending pre-school institutions with or without parental helpers. However, children whose own mothers had been involved in their pre-school provision did score more highly at both ages. Test scores were more strongly associated with parental *interest* in the child's education than with parental help in the pre-school setting (Osborn & Milbank, 1987: 197).

### *c) Children with special needs*

Both the Court Report (Committee on Child Health Services, 1976) and Warnock (1978) Report recommended the integration of children with special needs into ordinary schools and pre-school services. Grantham (1982) and Clark, Robson and Browning (1982) found that in general parents were favourable to this view. The PPA has also supported the integration of children with special needs into ordinary playgroups (PPA, 1980a). In 1983 the PPA's Special Needs Committee estimated it had approximately 11,000 physically and mentally handicapped children attending its playgroups, plus a similar number having other kinds of special need (*Focus Sheet 1*, 1986). Estimates of the proportion of the playgroup population with special needs in different areas vary considerably.

These variations may in part reflect area differences in the provision of alternative services. In large urban areas, special nursery units recommended in the Warnock Report should be within easier travelling distance and this was the facility used most frequently by children with special needs in Birmingham and Coventry (Clark *et al.*, 1982). In an earlier study of new inner city pre-school provision (Joseph & Parfitt, 1972), the number of handicapped children in playgroups was found to be proportionally lower than in the ordinary nursery schools and classes in the same area.

For the PPA, Ryhmer (1986) discussed how to set up and run playgroups which integrate children with special needs and other children. Wyatt and Langmead (1987) described both the operation of integrated playgroups and of opportunity groups which take special needs children from birth and of which there were about 200 in 1986. They also accept other children and offer support and specialist advice for parents. A number of case studies have illustrated the difficulties of implementing an integration policy. Clark *et al.* (1982) found that the interactions within the playgroup of a partially sighted boy were rather limited and he became a loner there, and later at school. Sinson and Wetherick (1981) observed Down's Syndrome children in ordinary playgroups. Initial attempts by other children to make contact failed, after which the Down's Syndrome children then became isolates within the playgroup.

## CONCLUSIONS

From this review of research findings and statistical information on playgroups, a number of conclusions can be drawn:

1. Playgroups provide for more children than any other form of pre-school service: most children who use playgroups attend for 2 or 3 half-day sessions a week.

2. Registered playgroups are varied in many respects. A majority involve parents in management, although many do not conform to the model of a "parent run" service.
3. There are large variations in the geographical distribution of playgroups. Provision is highest in the South and in rural and suburban areas. There is however a strong inverse relationship between levels of playgroups and nursery education provision.
4. Certainly up to the end of the 1970s, playgroups were more likely to be used by middle class and white families, than working class or ethnic minority families. It is unclear how far this is due to the differential availability of services between areas; differential group preferences; and factors which may make playgroups less suited to participation by certain groups of families.
5. Parental involvement in practice is largely maternal involvement. While parental involvement is probably higher in playgroups than in other pre-school services, it is far from being universal and varies considerably between playgroups.
6. Parents attach particular importance to the role of playgroups in socialising children. Preparation for school is also valued. Almost half of parents using playgroups say they would prefer to use an alternative type of provision.
7. Playgroups have developed from an almost complete dependence on voluntary workers to becoming a major employer of women workers. Training of these workers has developed over the years, but pay and conditions are very poor.
8. On balance, the available literature suggests that attendance at pre-school provision has benefits for children's development and educational attainment. The effect of attending different types of provision is still unclear, with conflicting results. It is not clear how far it has been possible to allow statistically for differences in home background between users and non-users of preschool services, and between users of different types of provision.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion is how little we know about playgroups. Given the number of playgroups and the number of children attending them, and the many issues that this type of provision raises, the quantity of research and statistical material gathered over 25 years is small. Most studies are local and small-scale, and many date back to the 1970s, since when much has changed in British society and in the pre-school world. This is not unique to playgroups: a similar situation has been noted with respect to research on childminding (Moss, 1987). This is not a criticism of researchers in this area, but reflects a longstanding failure to deploy adequate resources to support long-term and systematic research and development programmes to monitor the development of services and to systematically improve their quality and effectiveness.

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# Type of Childcare at 18 Months—II. Relations with Cognitive and Language Development

E. C. Melhuish, E. Lloyd, S. Martin and A. Mooney

*Abstract*—In a longitudinal study of women and their first-born children the relationship between type of day care experience and cognitive and language development at 18 mths of age was considered. There was a strong association between socio-economic characteristics and type of day care and analyses allowed for this. The results for cognitive development indicate a relationship with mother's education but not with type of day care. For language development the results indicate that children who experience group care were less likely to show much production of different word combinations, but that this was related to the children's language environments.

*Keywords:* Day care, cognitive development, language development, language environment

## Introduction

A general conclusion reached by reviews of the day care literature is that there is not consistent evidence of deleterious effects of day care on cognitive and language development (Ricciuti, 1976; Hoffman, 1979; Belsky & Steinberg, 1978). The inconsistency in the existing research can be illustrated by considering some relevant studies. Cochran (1977) compared children from high quality centres, family day care and home care in Sweden. There was evidence of differences in language development at 12 mths for the different day care groups but not at 15 and 18 mths of age. Schachter (1981) found evidence of decrements in cognitive development for toddlers receiving non-parental day care. Conversely, Clarke-Stewart (1984) found more advanced cognitive development for children who attended centre day care than children who were at home or in family day care. Also Rubenstein, Howes and Boyle (1981) found some evidence of better language development for children who had received centre day care as compared with a home-reared group.

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One finding which does emerge with reasonable consistency from the literature is that for children from disadvantaged families good quality day care may well improve cognitive development (Golden *et al.*, 1978; Ramey & Mills, 1977). Similar effects have been reported for language development by O'Connell and Farran (1982). However, the nature of day care is critical. Schwarz *et al.* (1981) found that children from impoverished homes who received low quality day care showed deficits of cognitive development as compared to children from similar backgrounds reared at home. Bradley and Caldwell (1976) and studies by others have shown that differential home environments, particularly where there is variation in responsive stimulation, may produce effects on language and cognitive development. Differences in day care environments may have similar effects.

McCartney (1984) and McCartney, Scarr, Phillips and Grajek (1985) report on a study of children attending various day centres in Bermuda. One of the centres provided more language stimulation from caregivers to children than the others. The children at this centre had better language development than children at the other centres. These differences could not be explained by differences in the home background of the children. Day care is not uniform. Hence different day care environments may produce different effects. Considering the effects of different types of care forms the basis of this report. Cognitive and language development at 18 mths of age were investigated for groups of children who had consistently experienced a particular type of day care. Those types were nurseries (day care centres), childminders (family day care), relatives and home care. Does experience in these different types of care have implications for cognitive or language development at 18 mths of age?

## Method

### *Sample*

A description of the study and the initial recruitment of the sample and sample characteristics is given in the preceding paper.

### *Procedure*

Data on the women and children in the study were collected at four contacts. These occurred when the child was 5, 11, 18 and 36 mths of age. The first contact was used to establish the characteristics of the women and children in the four groups prior to the return to employment and the start of day care.

This report concerns data collected when the children were 5 and 18 mths old, enabling the comparison of children prior to day care and after at least 9 mths of full-time day care experience. The 5 mth contact included interviews with the mothers, Bayley Scale psychomotor (PDI) and mental development indices (MDI). The 18 mths contact included an interview with the mother, Bayley Scales MDI, and mothers kept a diary of the child's week and language utterances.

The record of language utterances involved the mother keeping a record of all the separate language utterances that the child made during the course of that week. Repetitions of utterances were not recorded. Hence the record was of the different words and word combinations produced in 1 week. A validity study was carried out on a subsample of 23 who were administered the Reynell Developmental Language Scale (Reynell, 1969). The researcher who administered this scale was blind to the language record data. The scores on the language record data and the Reynell expressive language scale produced a Spearman rank-order correlation of 0.86. At 18 mths of age most children are producing a limited range of language utterances and it was relatively easy for mothers to keep an accurate record of those utterances produced by their child. The only mothers who had difficulty keeping complete records were those whose

children had very large vocabularies (100+ words and combinations). In these cases the records were ample to assign a level of productive language ability in terms of number of single words and number of word combinations, as the difficulty only occurred when the child was clearly above the criterion for the highest category of productive language used in the analyses for this study.

## Results

As the study progressed there was considerable change in the day care arrangements of the sample. Such change is a complicating factor when trying to differentiate the effects of various types of day care. For the analyses reported here, four day care groups were selected, home, relative, childminder (family day care) and nursery (day care centre). For these groups the child was in the same type of day care for at least 25 hrs per week for the period from 9 to 18 mths of age. Periods totalling up to 1 mth in other types of day care were allowed. Fifty-three families in the study at the third contact had patterns of day care which did not fit these criteria. This was sometimes due to the mother ceasing employment, or changing from full-time to part-time employment and day care use, or sometimes changing types of day care. There were 193 women and children in the four study groups used in subsequent analyses of cognitive and language development. (These study groups include additional subjects to those included in the analyses of the previous paper as staff resources limited the number of caregiver observation visits.) These study groups differed markedly in socio-economic characteristics as shown in Table 1. The social classes referred to were as defined by the Office of Population and Censuses (1980).

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of the study groups prior to child's birth

	Home	Relative	Childminder	Nursery
Number in group	57	30	74	32
Income, £/mth mean (S.D.)	1009 (349)	971 (330)	1033 (266)	1119 (331)
Occupational status				
Both parents higher status	32%	20%	50%	60%
One higher, one lower	17%	13%	18%	34%
Both parents lower status	51%	67%	32%	6%
Mother's education				
No qualifications	28%	23%	5%	0%
School level qualifications	37%	57%	38%	22%
Higher education qualifications	35%	20%	53%	78%

Note: higher status = social class I or II (e.g. professional, managerial); lower status = social classes III, IV or V (e.g. clerical, sales, manual).

The nursery group was markedly the most advantaged group in terms of income, occupational status, and mother's education. The relative group was the least advantaged. The numbers in the groups and gross characteristics of non-parental day care used by the study groups are shown in Table 2.

The three dual-earner groups had used day care for similar periods of time. The hrs per week are similar for the childminder and nursery groups but slightly less than the relative group. The groups differ most markedly on the child:adult ratios with the nursery group having much the least advantageous child:adult ratio.

Table 2. Characteristics of non-parental day care

Characteristic	Home	Relative	Childminder	Nursery
No. of boys in group	25	11	46	15
No. of girls in group	32	19	28	17
Mean No. of weeks npdc (S.D.)	0	44 (10)	41 (8)	43 (6)
Mean hrs/week npdc (S.D.)	6 (2)	30 (19)	36 (9)	35 (6)
Mean child/adult ratio (S.D.)	—	1.3 (0.5)	2.5 (1.2)	4.6 (1.9)
Range of child/adult ratio	—	1-3	1-5	2.4-8.5

Note: npdc = non-parental day care.

### Cognitive development

The measure of cognitive development used was the Bayley mental development index (MDI). The scores at 5 and 18 mths of age for the four day care groups can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Bayley mental development index

Age of child	Home mean (S.D.)	Relative mean (S.D.)	Childminder mean (S.D.)	Nursery mean (S.D.)
5 mths	111 (13)	115 (19)	108 (13)	111 (14)
18 mths	114 (20)	107 (16)	114 (16)	117 (12)

The groups differ in socio-economic status, and there are slight differences in developmental status at 5 mths of age prior to day care starting. Do the children who experience different types of day care differ in their progress in cognitive development? This question involves consideration of change in MDI scores from 5 to 18 mths of age. The Pearson product-moment correlation between MDI scores at 5 and 18 mths of age was 0.27. In order to analyse the data for change in MDI scores the form of regression analysis described by Plewis (1985) was used. For fixed MDI scores there was a statistically significant relationship between MDI scores at 18 mths and day care group [ $F = 2.66$  (3,185),  $p < 0.05$ ]. The nursery group showed most improvement and the relative group least. However, as Table 1 shows, parental occupation, parental income and mother's education are also associated with day care group. Parental occupation, parental income and mother's education are strongly associated with each other. Of these measures of socio-economic status mother's education is most strongly associated with progress in MDI scores. There was approximately 1 S.D. difference in mean MDI scores between children with highly qualified mothers and children with mothers having no educational qualifications. When MDI at 18 mths is regressed against MDI at 5 mths, child gender, mother's education and day care group, neither child gender, nor day care group are statistically significant. However, mother's education does have a statistically significant relationship with MDI at 18 mths ( $t = 3.56$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and hence the association between cognitive development and day care group is not a causal one but arises merely because both variables are associated with mother's education. The decline in MDI scores from 5 to 18 mths for the relative group reflects the lower levels of maternal education for this group.

*Language record data*

These data were scored as the total number of separate single words and the total number of separate word combinations. For an utterance to count as a word combination the words in the combination had to appear in the language record as part of other utterances as well as in the utterance being scored. For example, the utterance 'give drink' would only be scored as a word combination if 'give' and 'drink' occurred separately in other utterances.

The distribution of single word scores for the day care groups is shown in Table 4. There were 24 cases where the language record data was not completed adequately by the mothers while the child was between 18 and 19 mths of age, and these cases were excluded from the analyses of language data. As the distribution of the language data did not approximate to normal distributions, non-parametric statistics were used. The number of single words was categorized into five levels as in Table 4. The single word variable was entered into a logistic regression against child gender, mother's education and dummy variables representing the day care groups. Only mother's education showed a significant association with number of single words ( $\chi^2 = 3.97$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ); adding further variables into the regression did not have any significant effect.

Table 4. Number of single words at 18 mths of age

No. of words	Home		Relative		Childminder		Nursery	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
0-19	18	33	8	36	18	29	10	33
20-39	8	15	6	27	15	24	6	20
40-59	6	11	1	5	16	25	7	23
60-79	9	17	3	14	2	3	4	13
80+	13	24	4	18	12	19	3	10

The distribution for word combination scores for the day care groups is shown in Table 5, which also shows the categories used in analyses. The word combinations variable was entered into a logistic regression model against child gender, mother's education, and dummy variables representing the day care groups. The logistic regression model producing the best fit with the data was word combinations regressed against gender, mother's education and the dummy variable representing the

Table 5. Number of word combinations at 18 mths of age

Combinations	Home		Relative		Childminder		Nursery	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
0	32	59	14	64	38	60	22	73
1-4	5	9	1	5	10	16	6	20
5-9	8	15	2	9	9	14	1	3
10+	9	17	5	23	6	10	1	3

presence/absence of nursery care. This model was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 10.81$ , d.f. = 3,  $p < 0.02$ ); child gender had a significant effect ( $\chi^2 = 4.43$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ), girls scoring higher than boys; the nursery care variable was significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.65$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ); and mother's education approached significance ( $\chi^2 = 3.33$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.10$ ). The effect of the nursery care variable reflected the lower proportion of children in the nursery group showing high levels of word combinations.

In the previous paper, it was found that there were marked differences in observations of children's experiences and behaviour, particularly between those children in the nursery group and others. Two aspects of these observed differences which might be expected on theoretical grounds to affect language development are the responsiveness of others to a child's communications and the amount of language that is addressed to a child. Clarke-Stewart (1973) found that the responsiveness of adults in the home was related to the language development of children and Wachs and Gruen (1982) have discussed the potential importance of such experience for several aspects of development. Also, the greater children's experience of others talking to them, the greater their opportunities for learning language. Therefore the differences found in the total word combinations shown by the nursery group may reflect differences in language experience which this group experienced.

To test this proposition, further variables reflecting responsiveness (the proportion of a child's communications which were responded to) and total language addressed to the child (number of language utterances per hr) were entered into the logistic regression model. If responsiveness was added to the model then there was no longer any effect for nursery care. The model was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 15.29$ , d.f. = 4,  $p < 0.005$ ); responsiveness had a significant effect ( $\chi^2 = 4.05$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ); child gender was also significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.65$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.06$ ); mother's education approached significance ( $\chi^2 = 2.84$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.10$ ); and the nursery care variable was not significant.

If the total language addressed to the child was added to the model, again the effect of nursery care was no longer significant. The model was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 17.69$ , d.f. = 4,  $p < 0.002$ ); total language had a significant effect ( $\chi^2 = 6.92$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.01$ ); child gender was significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.46$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ); mother's education was almost significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.59$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.06$ ); and nursery care was not significant.

If both responsiveness and total language were simultaneously added to the model, then the effects of nursery care and responsiveness were not significant. The model was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 18.59$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.005$ ); total language produced a significant effect ( $\chi^2 = 5.30$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ); child gender was significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.59$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ); mother's education was almost significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.62$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.06$ ); and neither nursery care nor responsiveness were significant.

The model which produced the best fit with the data was total word combinations regressed against child gender, mother's education, and total language addressed to the child. Within this model ( $\chi^2 = 17.50$ , d.f. = 3,  $p < 0.001$ ), the total language variable had a very significant effect ( $\chi^2 = 12.53$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.0005$ ) and the child gender ( $\chi^2 = 2.88$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.10$ ) and mother's education ( $\chi^2 = 3.39$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.10$ ) approached significance.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that type of day care did not influence cognitive development at 18 mths of age. With regard to language development, there were no differences for day care groups in the number of single words produced; however, the nursery group children were less likely to have high numbers of different word combinations. Mother's education affected cognitive and language development and girls produced more word combinations than boys. It was not the case that the nursery group could be said to be showing a deficient level of language development in the sense of being below normal. The nursery group showed a similar distribution of number of single words as the other groups. The language scores of all groups were within the normal range; however, the nursery group was less likely to have language records indicative of advanced language development, in that a significantly smaller proportion showed high numbers of word combinations. Some caution would be in order in interpreting these results as the nursery group comprised only 32 children. However, the home backgrounds of these children were fairly homogeneous in that they were all in relatively advantaged households. The results are particularly striking when the socio-economic advantages of the nursery group over the other day care groups, as shown in Table 1, are considered, as more advantaged groups would be expected to show better language development. A similar result has recently been reported for a U.S. sample by Desai, Chase-Lansdale and Michael (1989), where language development scores were depressed for children who attended day care only when they were from middle class homes.

The relationship between the quality of care provided at home and out-of-home is likely to be a decisive factor concerning day care influence. Where the quality of out-of-home care is superior to that at home then beneficial effects are to be expected as reported for studies of children from disadvantaged families (e.g. Golden *et al.*, 1978; Ramey & Mills, 1977; O'Connell & Farran, 1982). However, where the quality of out-home-care is inferior to that at home detrimental effects may occur as shown in this study and that of Desai *et al.* (1989). Hence, both positive and negative effects are to be expected as a function of the relationship between the quality of home and out-of-home care, with no effects with equivalence of care. A corollary of this point is that the same day care may have different effects for different groups of children depending on the relative quality of home care available.

At 18 mths of age, children are at that stage of language development where word combinations are starting to be acquired (Brown, 1973). Hence this aspect of language development might be particularly susceptible to environmental influence at this age. Different aspects of development are likely to be differentially sensitive to environmental influence at different ages and to be most sensitive when at their most rapid rate of development. At another age an aspect of development other than language may become susceptible to an environmental influence such as day care.

Differences in interactional experience provided by the four childcare settings are described in the preceding paper. Children in nurseries experienced less verbal communication, and less responsiveness from others. These are aspects of interactional experience which might be expected to affect language development, and produce the differences in language scores seen in this study for the nursery group. The analyses

reported which consider the effect of responsiveness and total language addressed to the child support this interpretation. When either responsiveness or total language addressed to the child were added to the logistic regression model the effect of nursery care disappeared. Therefore the differences in language scores observed for the nursery sample in this study would appear to be best explained by aspects of the language environment provided within that type of care, with total language addressed to the child being the most potent variable. Hence the results reflect a difference in the quality of care rather than an inevitable aspect of nursery care. In this regard the findings of this study parallel those of McCartney (1984) on the effects of quality of day care on language development.

It could be argued that those women who are in full-time employment have less opportunity for noting the words used by their child. However, at 18 mths of age, the language used by the child is such that a parent with only evening and weekend experience of being with the child can keep an accurate record. Also, the same point would apply equally to all the employed women, yet it is only for the nursery group that the effect on number of word combinations appears. The hrs of non-parental day care are shown in Table 2 and they were higher for the childminder group than for the nursery group, so that differences in time with mother cannot account for the differences in the language scores between day care groups.

Hoffman (1979) makes the point that families where mothers are employed will differ depending upon the social milieu in which they live. In particular, in societies where dual-earner families are the norm, they will have different characteristics than in societies where they are the exception. A similar point is valid in considering the differences between families who use different forms of day care. The study reported here concerned two-parent families in London, and the nursery sample was more advantaged on socio-economic characteristics than the other groups, particularly on occupational and educational characteristics. Somewhat paradoxically, the private sector nurseries that they used were largely poorly resourced and may differ markedly from nurseries in other societies where a different tradition of nursery care exists and where different results may well be found (e.g. Cochran, 1977). The interpretation of results needs to consider these aspects of the population and the types of care studied. Day care is homogeneous; not all nurseries are homogeneous.

While the nurseries in this study were a stable type of day care, in that the children stayed in the same nursery, the number of separate caregivers within the nursery and staff turnover would mean that children were more likely to experience a wider range of caregivers than at home, with relatives or childminders. With a stable caregiver, the caregiver has greater experience with the child and hence greater opportunity for understanding the idiosyncracies of a child. Children in the early years have very idiosyncratic ways of communicating, including how they use and pronounce words (Brown, 1973). Where these idiosyncracies are known and understood the likelihood of an adult responding at all and responding appropriately will be enhanced. Hence stability of caregiver is likely to improve the child's experience of response language and may be an important differentiating factor between day care environments.

The results reported here apparently reflect the effects of quality of childcare rather than the effects of type of care. The quality of childcare resides essentially in the

experience provided for children which may affect development and well-being. These experiences would include adult and peer interaction, interpersonal relationships, learning activities, health and safety, and emotional climate (Melhuish & Moss, 1990). Other factors, such as child: adult ratio, group size, curriculum and training, stability, working conditions, status and salary of caregivers, are associated with and can facilitate good quality care, but they do not guarantee it. Research in the study of day care needs to take further the issues of differences between environments and how these may affect children's experience and development. The impact of differential environments will change depending upon the age of children being studied, as different aspects of development will be more susceptible to environmental influence at different ages, and there is also a need to study the alternative environments that a society makes available for children.

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## The role of the centre in family support

*Eva Lloyd*

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### VALUES AND OBJECTIVES OF SAVE THE CHILDREN'S CENTRE-BASED FAMILY SUPPORT

Save the Children's centre-based family support offers part-time and full-time day care, holiday playschemes, out-of-school, and community health services for children, and welfare rights advice, education and training for other members of their families, as well as self-help opportunities to develop a variety of groups, credit unions and food co-ops, and some youth work. It operates in this way from fifteen multi-functional centres located in some of the most deprived communities in the UK. These are staffed primarily by workers with a background in child care, youth and community work, and community development, run, if not managed, in partnership with centre users and funded through partnerships with a range of statutory agencies, including health, social services and education.

While Warren (1993: 5) has claimed that 'The bedeviling feature of family centres has been a lack of definition', Save the Children centres have been well defined by Long (1995) as follows, in a discussion of their role in ameliorating family poverty:

Save the Children centres are not to be viewed within the 'crisis oriented' model of interventions which offer 'therapeutic' help to families and children in need, but are firmly based within the community development framework. They provide practical responses to locally defined need. The principles of open access, self referral and user participation are fundamental to this approach. The anti-poverty strategy which underpins this work has two themes. The services seek to provide 'better beginnings' for children and 'new opportunities' for adults.

(Long 1995: 64)

This chapter focuses on 'better beginnings' for children and on the implications of the current UK social policy context for Save the Children's centre-based family support, as seen from a management perspective. It is based on a 1993 review of this work conducted by the author.

The term family support is used here with reference to the Children Act 1989 and its associated Guidance, where family centres are identified 'as having a part to play in a continuum of family support services' (Warren 1993: 10). It has been defined by the Audit Commission (1994) as an activity or facility aimed at providing advice and support to parents to help them in bringing up their children. While the term 'family centre' will also be employed, centre-based family support is used in preference to denote the particular emphasis within Save the Children's work in this area.

Using Hardiker *et al.*'s (1995) framework for analysing services of this kind, Save the Children's model of provision reflects a welfare approach which combats social disadvantage by targeting a first level of prevention for populations and vulnerable communities. In this approach social inequality is perceived to lie at the root of social problems, including child abuse.

In these centres the strong influence of community development methods of working identified by Cannan (1992) on the type of family support provided, results from a commitment to

enabling people living in poor communities to participate in projects, and to increasing the strengths of such communities by enhancing the capabilities of individuals to enter into reciprocal exchanges – the basis of a social network.

(Cannan 1992: 105)

This commitment has its roots in the rights based approach taken by Save the Children from the start in all its work with children and their families in communities around the world.

A charter of Rights of the Child was developed by its founder Eglantyne Jebb in 1923 and adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. It can still be recognised in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK government in 1991, which now guides the agency's work.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR FAMILY SUPPORT

In the middle of the 1990s Save the Children centres find themselves at a crossroads. On the one hand a clear message is coming through from

the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health 1991; Gibbons 1992), from recent research (Gibbons 1990; Smith 1993) and from central government's public services watchdog the Audit Commission (1994), that the open access and non-stigmatising model of family support delivered by Save the Children is preferable to services geared more exclusively to children at risk of significant harm.

On the other hand the rapidly changing policy context in which children's services are being delivered mitigates against this approach. The current local authority emphasis is on targeting children as dictated by the 'in need' definition employed in the Children Act 1989, for what are essentially child protection services. These are delivered mainly on the basis of service-level contracts agreed with voluntary-sector or independent agencies.

The Community Care Act 1990 introduced the market place to the delivery of services that traditionally had been the responsibility of local government. This model of service delivery has since been extended from health to personal social services, and children's services plans have been made mandatory. That the contract culture represents an appropriate model for the organisation of children's services remains in doubt, however (Jones and Bilton 1994).

As far as the impact of these developments on centre-based family support provision is concerned, 'There is little evidence of research, or even discussion of the role of family centres within the new context of the welfare market place' (Warren 1993: 10).

At the same time local government has been going through one of the most far-reaching reorganisations ever of both its format and its function. While these changes are taking place, developments in education, such as the introduction of local management for schools, the move towards grant-maintained schools, and currently the nursery-vouchers initiative, cut right across policy and practice supported by social services and health and contribute to growing inequality (Smith and Noble 1995).

These developments cannot easily be reconciled with the creation of a more integrated system of support for families with young children, bringing together health, education and social services. This kind of integrated support (which can be found in a number of Save the Children centres working in partnership with local health and other agencies) is recommended by policy analysts (Pugh 1992; Pugh and McQuail 1995; Cohen and Fraser 1991; Holtermann 1995a) and by the Children Act 1989 itself.

Although voluntary sector, or not-for-profit agencies obviously have

an important role to play in the new services set-up, another role they traditionally fulfilled is being jeopardised. This is the opportunity their dual-funding base of voluntary income, coupled with block grants from statutory sources, gave them to innovate, to experiment, and to produce new models of service delivery. Such models were often 'mainstreamed', i.e. were taken over by the statutory agencies, or their characteristics were widely copied as good practice.

This freedom to manoeuvre is being curtailed not only by the contract culture, but also by a steady fall in their voluntary income, which is due to a number of factors, the introduction of the National Lottery in 1994 being one.

Service-level contracts for the delivery of services that arise from local government duties under the Children Act may not match the aspirations of or reflect need as perceived by the voluntary child care sector. This applies to the intake and management of family support centres as much as to other services for children and families.

The third major challenge of the 1990s facing agencies such as Save the Children in the UK is a spectacular rise in levels of unemployment, and of child and family poverty (Bradshaw 1992; Kumar 1993; Oppenheim 1994; Barclay 1995).

Against this background, the major issues for Save the Children's centre-based family support work highlighted by the 1993 review (Lloyd 1993) were: issues around sustaining a universalist model of family support, around protecting its non-stigmatising character by retaining a balance between protection and support in favour of the latter, around determining the optimal balance between service delivery and advocacy in this area, and around attracting both public and private finance to fund these developments.

The resolution of these issues has become particularly acute for Save the Children as the result of a funding crisis in 1996. This has some of its origins in an inability to increase current levels of voluntary income and in the fact that the models of provision it operates with both in the UK and abroad do not easily attract the type of statutory funding now available. This is ironic in the light of the evidence, summarised below, that its approach to centre-based family support addresses all the factors recently identified by policy analysts, including the government's own, as important and relevant. If the current crisis is not speedily resolved, this chapter could become an epitaph for provision increasingly seen to be needed by young children and their families.

## THE ORIGINS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN'S CENTRE MODEL

The origins of Save the Children's model of centre-based family support were different from those of other child care agencies, which may explain its nature and the direction it took. The majority of centres emerged from single or amalgamated playgroups run in poor urban areas in the 1970s and 1980s. Their development was paralleled by the emergence of different species of family centre in other parts of the county (Walker 1991).

As a result of the Save the Children groups providing for some of the mothers' own needs as well as for those of their children, they successfully attracted the more disadvantaged families. Playgroups requiring more intensive mother participation were failing to reach them, according to research by Joseph and Parfitt (1972), Ferri and Niblett (1977) and Finch (1983), reviewed by Lloyd *et al.* (1989).

By responding to the range and extent of the needs identified in these communities, Save the Children transformed the playgroups into multi-functional resource centres, providing a kind of help to children and parents that 'most playgroups are not equipped to provide' (Ferri and Niblett 1977: 72). Quite early on, these centres had already come to be associated with the goals of prevention in the widest sense (Jackson 1986).

Centre staff perceived a relationship between community characteristics and families' childrearing and other practical problems and developed methods to tackle these in partnership with centre users. Recently, this approach has received increasing attention, especially in the United States (Earls *et al.* 1994; Garbarino and Kostelny 1992).

In an analysis of the role of family centres, Smith (1993) identified four different debates which can serve as a route towards understanding their development:

The current interest in family centres is most clearly rooted in the third and fourth of these debates – that is, in debates about 'prevention', 'at risk', 'need' and 'disadvantage', intervention and effectiveness. But the first and second debates, about education and care, and social networks and participation, are also important. The question is not only how such projects can help directly with children already in difficulties, but also how they can influence the 'educational climate' of the home and the neighbourhood and the social networks which are the supportive fabric of the community.

(Smith 1993: 16)

Save the Children centres combine all these approaches in various permutations. Arguably this is both their strength and their weakness in the current policy and funding climate.

### DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

By the early 1990s Save the Children centres were not only operating outreach work with, for instance, West African and Vietnamese families and 'satellite' services such as support for child minders, but were often effectively at the disposal of communities for seven days a week, offering opportunities for autonomous activities organised by local groups, such as community playgroups, women's and girls' groups, credit unions and language classes.

The centres encourage and support parents to set up new ventures out in the community, as well as within the centre itself. . . . In this sense, the centres are not just buildings where services are provided, but projects where workers enable other groups to make provision for themselves.

(Statham 1994: 27)

This role for users in deciding what sort of provision best meets their needs is identified by Statham as a particular form of community development which strengthens the community base of these centres and fosters the local community perception of them as a community resource.

The Save the Children model of centre-based family support combines features characteristic of family centres studied by Holman (1988) and by De'Ath (1988). The client-focused, neighbourhood and community development models they described developed during the same period as the Save the Children models, which also share features of the seven types Warren (1991) distinguished between in his family centre typology.

While partnerships with users in the running and sometimes in the management of the centres characterise all centre-based family support, the 1993 management review highlighted that it displays certain paradoxical features. Sometimes Save the Children support is conceived of by managers as aiming towards community ownership of the facility, while at other times the security of long-term funding, which may only be available if voluntary or statutory agencies are involved, may be seen as the determinant of successful user participation.

It is a fact that long-term funding for community projects constitutes a problem for all centres of this kind as well as for other types of provision (Williams 1993), irrespective of the handover policy operated by senior

management. It is also a fact that centres such as these are unlikely to be taken over by the community while this remains without its own resources.

The centres' open-access community-based approach is based on the key principles of the offer of a variety of provision, flexibility and responsiveness, lack of stigma, participation of users, and the provision of high-quality and affordable day care, while taking into account the social, gender and cultural factors affecting its users. Open access in this context means that the provision is in principle open to all, although demand entails that in practice all centres have had to develop priority admission policies.

Many do cater for children recognised as 'in need' under the Children Act, such as children with disabilities or on the 'at risk' register. Their broad range of users are predominantly united by poverty, and include a substantial proportion of female-headed single-parent families. The centres operate mostly integrated but occasionally specialist facilities, combining 'a remedial and preventive approach' (Statham 1994: 13).

Rarely, though, does this involve the therapeutic interventions encountered in some other statutory or voluntary family centres. Some centres reserve places for referrals from social services. Referred children may be those with disabilities, or with other special needs, but are primarily those on the local authority 'at risk' register.

The Save the Children model is grounded in a children's rights perspective on child care policy but remains a minority model among the different types of centre-based family support facilities operated by the voluntary and statutory sector across the country (Hawthorne Kirk 1995). A more in-depth analysis of the different approaches to the development of social welfare services for children and points of convergence between them is provided by Fox Harding (1991).

## COMMUNITY ACCESS

The appropriateness of the centres' role can only be judged in the light of the centres' success in making contact with those sections of the community they aim to reach. Save the Children's commitment to equal opportunities entails that community access takes account of child and adult users' and potential users' racial background and ethnic and religious affiliation, their gender and sexual orientation, and differing abilities.

The issues surrounding community access to these centres were analysed by Statham (1994) in terms of who is able to use them, who is

allowed to, and who wants to use them. The 1993 review confirmed that staffing ratios and space limitations imposed practical constraints on community access, with waiting lists operating for most of the early-years services and priority being given to certain categories of users, including referrals from social services or health visitors.

Services catered primarily for young children and women, while young people had special facilities provided for them in only about half of the centres. The difficulty in providing opportunities for adolescents was generally deplored by managers. A few projects identified needs among gay and lesbian parents in their area, which were being met to some extent.

Project managers were aware of groups within the community who did not feel comfortable using the centres, such as adult men or certain ethnic groups. Overall, managers felt that their users adequately reflected the ethnic composition of the areas in which the centres were located.

Some centres, like the Hopscotch Asian Women's Centre in the London Borough of Camden, were set up to work with one ethnic group, Bengali women, many of them homeless. But this project was nevertheless concerned that it failed to meet needs, in particular those of other Bengali groups within this community, such as older women and young men.

Centres were also aware of groups they were failing to reach, such as Travellers, and the need to devise strategies to draw such groups into the centres' orbit. In the case of Travellers, Save the Children has a history of operating a variety of non-centre-based family support services for them, or has been working with the Traveller community from bases smaller than the centres that were reviewed.

Management was united in the view that access for children and adults with disabilities was unsatisfactory, although the majority of centres integrated children and young people with disabilities into centre services or provided advice to them. However, even those centres catering for these groups regarded services as insufficient and felt that these groups were not yet properly represented among users.

Architectural features hampered access for users with mobility problems to some centres, while in others it appeared that more outreach work was needed to alert families to the opportunities on offer for children and young people with disabilities. The Strabane family centre in Northern Ireland not only offered disabled access, but also provided transport to bring in users from across a wide area.

Since the review was conducted, practice guidelines on disability have

been adopted in the UK, which go some way to countering these problems, while some centres were adapted or moved to new premises.

The disability access problem is not unique to Save the Children centres. The Audit Commission (1994: 26) noted that in the centres they visited, children with disabilities 'were not present unless disabilities appeared specifically among the criteria for admission', even in centres which were both equipped and willing to integrate them.

None of the centres catered for families living in a rural area, so this aspect of equal opportunities in access did not get adequately explored in the review. Rural child care needs, though, were the subject of an earlier Save the Children research initiative (Esslemont and Harrison 1991) in Wales.

Empowerment of the community lies at the root of anti-racist and other anti-discriminatory practice as found in Save the Children centres, but will not be explored further in this chapter. However, this concept in community development is discussed extensively by Warren in Chapter 5.

## **FAMILY SUPPORT AND THE NOTION OF PREVENTION**

Centre-based family support has been explicitly recognised in the Children Act as a service to be encouraged and supported by local authorities, not only in relation to children 'in need', but also to 'a wide range of families' and 'children of all ages' (Smith 1992: 9). This recognition of family centres as a necessary and important component of a children's services system is of crucial importance in the sustainability of Save the Children centres.

Cannan is among those who acknowledge that, while family support centres should form part of a universalist service, there should actually be room in them for families referred for problems of a more personal nature such as serious parenting problems. That this may not be easy because of tensions between different types of users, is brought out in studies by Stones (1989, 1994) and Gill (1988). They looked at a multi-purpose family centre run by Barnardo's, to examine the effect on parents and children of providing a mixture of therapeutic and more general social support. Similar observations were made by Ferri and Saunders (1993) who studied some other Barnardo's centres.

There is support from research for the effectiveness of the approach to prevention adopted by Save the Children. Comparing the needs of families using six family centres operated by The Children's Society, Smith (1993) found the differences between 'open access' for families using the centres in her study and those referred to them to be much less

than expected, while all had considerable needs, in particular the one-parent families among them.

This finding was in line with earlier research based on the National Child Development Study by Wedge (1983), research on preventive social work in practice by Gardner (1992) and studies by Tunstill (1992). This led Smith to conclude that

no preventive strategy can limit itself to reacting to those at any particular time already 'in the net', so to speak, but must be more broadly proactive with respect to those likely to be at risk at some time in the future.

(Smith 1993: 18)

Gibbons (1990) reviewed the literature on the aims and effectiveness of family support pre-dating the implementation of the Children Act. She found that outcome studies of family support programmes were mostly inconclusive. But the scarcity of controlled evaluations of the effectiveness of measures aimed at preventing serious childrearing problems and the removal of children from home was particularly striking.

Holman (1992) acknowledges that open-access centres operate with a different kind of preventive agenda from the more narrowly focused ones aimed only at children 'at risk', but with potentially equal impact. Gibbons argued for measuring the effectiveness of such centres using different and relevant criteria such as 'their contribution to decreasing social isolation among families and increasing social integration' (Gibbons 1990: 32). Social isolation has been identified widely in research, according to Hearn, as a factor which 'often underpins the deterioration into physical abuse and neglect' (Hearn 1995: 19).

An indirect case for the likelihood of such centres reaching the intended population at least as well as targeted services was made by Little and Gibbons (1993). They demonstrated that the outcomes of traditional approaches to child protection meant that, in England and Wales, only a small proportion of ill-treated children were registered as at risk, as a result of the adoption of different registration criteria and the different styles of investigation by different levels of staff.

Even the Audit Commission sanctioned a broad-based approach to the delivery of community-based family support, concluding that family centres could provide a 'one stop shop' for local communities if based in appropriate locations (1994: 39). However, it did not pay specific attention to the role of sessional and full day care in such facilities, although several of the facilities examined did in fact offer this.

Yet, of all the different services forming part of such a preventative family support package, the case for day care as an essential component has been most strongly supported by research. But the short- and long-term effectiveness of the provision of day care in improving the quality of life for young children and their families, has not been widely researched (Macdonald and Roberts 1995).

### DAY CARE AS PART OF CENTRE-BASED FAMILY SUPPORT

Day care, both sessional in crèches and playgroup sessions, as well as full-time in day-nursery facilities, has been the cornerstone of centre-based family support provided by Save the Children. Its effect on young children's development, their quality of life as well as on their parents' skills and well-being was evaluated by Thomas (1995) in the Cynon Valley project in Wales.

This project, offering sessional day care for children from the age of 30 months and drop-ins for parents with children under 3 was studied by Thomas over the first five years of its existence. It is used by residents of two deprived estates high up the valley in one of the former mining areas of Mid Glamorgan. The project was shown to help reduce isolation for parents and children and to offer them an opportunity to meet other families and support each other.

How important this is to parents in helping them cope better with the demands of parenting also emerged from Smith's (1993) study of six family centres. The parents interviewed by Smith overwhelmingly wanted the centres to provide play opportunities and day care as well as the chance for them to meet with other parents for support and socialisation. Parents regretted the fact that day care was offered in few of these centres.

In Gibbons's study of the effectiveness of two different styles of delivering social services in two neighbourhoods, 'The evidence suggested that the support of family, friends and neighbours, and the use of day care provision, might have been as or more important in reducing personal stress caused by high levels of family problems' (Gibbons 1990: 149) than other interventions on offer.

Gibbons (1991) also researched the outcome of referrals to social services over a four month period. She found that the provision of day care was the only intervention with a significant positive effect on outcomes for both parents and children, in particular for lone parents.

Finally, in devising their day care programmes for children, Save the

Children operates on the premise that 'for young children, care and education are interdependent and inseparable: they need both' (Sylva and Moss 1992: 1). Projects try to ensure that provision meets the curriculum quality criteria now being set for early-years services, including integrated care and education facilities for young children, with a special emphasis on equal opportunities practice.

### THE ROLE OF THE CENTRE IN FAMILY SUPPORT

Regardless of the accumulating evidence for the effectiveness of centre-based family support, there are economic, practical and ideological reasons which may lead policy makers and practitioners to question the necessity of delivering family support from a centre base. Can such support not be delivered equally effectively from a number of different, smaller and more specialised bases within communities? Or from one small base?

Strong arguments are available to support the position that the sum of centre-based family support services is greater than its parts, that the centre lends strength and acts as a resource to other family support activities in the community and that its impact derives to a large extent from this particular method of delivery.

The different forms of outreach work undertaken from Save the Children centres depend on services and facilities provided at 'base' to sustain them. Also, families contacted in the community are put in touch in this way with people and provisions at the centre. However, the size of the base may vary in relation to a particular community's needs.

For instance, the Langley Children's project, a partnership initiative on the boundary between Rochdale and Manchester, operates from a relatively small centre base, and a number of even smaller bases around the community, providing sessional day care and out-of-school services.

In the case of 'satellite' services like the support for child minders in the community provided by Trinity House in Manchester, the project team and its users can again tap into resources that would not normally be available if the child-minding support scheme within the project were completely independent in terms of location and management. A focus on community-health needs at the Cowgate Children's Centre in Newcastle and the Pennywell Neighbourhood Centre in Sunderland, means that difficult to reach services find a firm base within the community they serve.

Carr (1995) contrasted a non-centre-based community development

approach to family support provision run by one worker, with a centre-based 'therapeutic' family centre in Newcastle. Although both projects were supported by Save the Children, neither took part in the 1993 review, due to a local management decision. Carr concluded that

The ideal family support provision would probably exhibit aspects of both projects: a base and trained staff to deal with particular families, offering a wide programme and access to other services, with an outreach element which attempted to develop community development approaches to meeting those general needs experienced by local families.

(Carr 1995: 29)

As far as the needs and wishes of users themselves are concerned, one centre catering for children of different ages as well as for adults can be preferable to different services for different age groups located in various places, especially for families with very young children, for obvious logistical reasons.

Scott (1989), referred to in Pugh (1992), noted that when Scottish parents had been given the option of new and extended early-years provision, they had expressed a preference for multi-functional centres combining early education and day care. While in another Scottish study, parents thought that 'family support should be an integral part of all early years services' (Hawthorne Kirk 1995: 115).

There would appear to be economies of scale in providing services from one centre base, using a centre and community-network model, and indeed it may otherwise be impossible to sustain the full range of outreach, satellite and centre-based services on offer. In practice, such a centre could also itself be attached to a school (Pugh and McQuail 1995), or it could cater for wider needs in the community, such as those of the elderly population (Cannan 1992).

However, experience and policy analysis combined demonstrate that scaling up from existing provision will prove impossible in the absence of a secure funding base grounded in a national early-childhood policy and strategy (Statham 1994; Pugh and McQuail 1995). That such a system could have clear pay-offs for the economy has been demonstrated by Cohen and Fraser (1991), Schweiwe (1994) and Holtermann (1995a).

## **MULTI-FUNCTIONAL CENTRES IN EUROPE**

In a European context, Moss (1992) described the diversification of existing but separate services into multi-functional services as the way

forward, if the needs of a broader range of children and their carers were to be met. In practice, this would mean extending day nurseries or family centres

to become multi-functional centres in their area. This approach breaks down not only the care–education divide, but the tendency to fragment services, conceptually and in practice.

(Moss 1992: 43)

In Europe, the trend towards targeting of this particular type of children's service has been successfully resisted so far, and they form part of a wider children's services system. In Denmark and Sweden (Hwang 1991), a choice of both multi-functional child care centres and separate pre- and out-of-school centres meet community demand, including that for places for children 'in need'. The former type of provision outnumbers the latter, however.

The viability of financial and practical partnerships with the private sector in such ventures elsewhere in Europe has also been demonstrated, particularly where they are based in the community and underpinned by public funding (Cohen 1993). Yet even there reductions in public funding are having an effect, particularly on services for the very youngest children (Combe 1992).

Do rural child care needs contradict the usefulness of the centre-based model of delivering family support? Research in Scotland (Palmer 1991) concluded that evidence from Scottish as well as Danish and French rural provision confirmed that multi-functional centres could even here provide the most promising policy option for the future. Palmer observed that the flexibility offered by age-integrated centres made them more likely to be financially viable in rural areas.

The Save the Children type of multi-functional and multi-professional centre can be said to reflect a European model, where it is seen as an essential component of a system of early-childhood services. Such centres may embrace a wide range of services and facilities, including some for sections of the community other than families with young children.

As far as Save the Children's centres are concerned, the flexibility that allows the centres to interpret the broad principles on which they operate

to suit their local situation, seems to be a key factor in making them responsive to local need. Just as there is no one model of a disadvantaged area, there is unlikely to be one way of providing services that is appropriate in all situations.

(Statham 1994: 38)

Recent policy research confirms that Save the Children's approach to centre-based family support does address all factors identified as important in planning and delivering such services. For instance, in their study of the co-ordination of children's services in eleven local authorities with different organisational structures, Pugh and McQuail (1995) conclude that the boundaries between day care services, child protection and family support must be bridged, irrespective of the model adopted.

The Save the Children centres do all these things and thereby lead the way in the trend towards multi-functional centres of the kind noted in continental Europe.

### FACING THE FUTURE

Secure long-term funding would be needed for planing around existing voluntary, statutory and private provision and stimulating the development of new forms that would generate an effectively organised system of complementary and integrated child care services for communities. It therefore ultimately depends on a national child care policy and strategic planning on the part of local and central government (Ball 1994; Holtermann 1995b; Pugh and McQuail 1995).

The Save the Children centres try and reconcile ways of delivering family support that can only be truly effective if delivered within a system of universal early-years services based on sustained public funding. Its centre-based family support finds itself in the same position as local authority provision in Scotland described by Hawthorne Kirk:

The continuing absence of central government funding, direction and mandate to provide pre-school services, allows the conflicting perspectives embodied by local authority services to be perpetuated, i.e. rationing and targeting on the one hand and universalism and equal opportunities on the other. Many of them are in an impossible position, trying as they do, to satisfy the challenges made from both directions.

(Hawthorne Kirk 1995: 115)

She argues that an even more comprehensive approach is needed to address the multiple types of deprivation communities suffer, as do Cannan (1992), and Deccio *et al.* (1994). Statutory and non-statutory agencies should not only encourage participation in community groups and activities, but also create employment opportunities for adults in low-income families.

In their provision of educational, training and employment opportunities, such as in the Rosemount and Patmore centres in Glasgow and

London (Laws 1995), Save the Children centres have taken one important step further in a direction identified by these authors as going beyond the interpersonal dimension of social support, and addressing structural elements such as poverty and unemployment. However, it would seem that by doing so, centre-based family support in Save the Children has made itself even more vulnerable to the vagaries of politics, funding policies and the economic climate.

The different strands of evidence produced in this chapter support the case for the effectiveness and appropriateness of Save the Children's model of centre-based family support, although it is acknowledged that there is a need for research into its longer term outcomes for children and their families.

A number of urgent challenges present themselves to its sustainability. The onus is now on central and local government to work together with the voluntary and private sectors in securing the future of what is increasingly being seen as an essential component in a system of services responsive to the needs of young children and their families.

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# 9 Introducing Evidence-based Social Welfare Practice in a National Child Care Agency

EVA LLOYD

## *Summary*

- *This chapter describes the contribution of the Barnardo's research and development team to the introduction of evidence-based social welfare practice in the UK's largest voluntary child care agency.*
- *Barnardo's has made an explicit commitment to evidence-based services, and is the first child welfare organisation to do so.*
- *Current approaches to evidence-based social welfare practice are illustrated and their relationship to the model provided by evidence-based medicine is discussed.*
- *To clarify the links between research and practice, analogies are drawn with the processes by which research is thought to influence policy.*
- *Examples are provided of promising strategies for supporting developments in services for children and families on the basis of the best possible evidence for their effectiveness.*

## **Introduction: The Role of Research and Development (R&D)**

Barnardo's works with some of the most disadvantaged children and their families and with young people, in all four countries that make up the UK. Forty per cent of its work involves children under eight and their families and in 1997 this work attracted some £30 million of Barnardo's total expenditure. Day care and family support, community development and educational initiatives, structured therapeutic interventions for children who have suffered or are at risk of abuse, adoption and fostering services, as well as community-based parenting education groups, they all form a part of the range of services provided by Barnardo's for children and their parents. Additionally, Barnardo's provides a raft of services and advocacy for young people, including those leaving care or in contact with the youth justice system.

The Research and Development function in Barnardo's Children's Services

Department is located in the Policy, Planning and Research Unit based at its head office in Barkingside, Essex. This resides with the R&D team, comprising a coordinator, four principal officers research and development (three of these outposted) and a senior research officer.

While each team member holds a specialist national brief for particular subject areas of Barnardo's work, they also have specific support responsibilities for two geographical areas.

The R&D team is matched with a team of principal officers Policy and Practice; these two teams are further complemented by a development officer HIV/Aids and health education, an education advisor, an information officer, parliamentary and policy officer, an administrator and a sizeable library team; all supported by a range of administrative staff. Together, they make up one of the largest policy, planning and research units in the voluntary child care sector.

Members of the R&D team fulfil a number of different roles within the Unit, mainly working with senior and Children's Services field managers, as well as with a range of colleagues in the Marketing and Communications Department.

In order to further their own professional development and keep their skills up-to-date, each team member has an honorary attachment to a university in each of their designated geographical areas. The author of this chapter for example, in addition to holding the research and development brief for Barnardo's family support work in the widest sense, including child protection activities, has honorary research fellow attachments to Cambridge University's Centre for Family Research and the Queen's University's Centre for Child Care Research in Belfast.

The broad remit of the Barnardo's R&D team can be summarised in four points:

- to train practitioners in monitoring, research and self-evaluation methodologies and to enable them to engage in reflective practice;
- to commission evaluative research intended to assess service effectiveness; (e.g. Buist and Fuller, 1997; Sachdev et al., 1996);
- to support practitioners with the development of practice based on the best available evidence of effectiveness; and
- to commission and contribute to publications on *What Works* in each area

of Barnardo's work (e.g. Stein, 1997; Beresford et al., 1995) and to write or commission reports used for Barnardo's lobbying, campaigning and advocacy work in relation to children's welfare policy (e.g. Roberts and Sachdev, 1996; Policy Development Unit, 1996; Lloyd et al., 1997).

In addition, the team work closely with colleagues to develop the voice of children and young people as users of Barnardo's service, or recipients of public and social policies as they affect children.

How the team attempts to realise the four objectives listed above in the work with practitioners will be described below, once the question of why it is important to do so has been addressed. To this end links between research and practice need exploring in some depth.

### **The Links Between Research and Practice: The 'Why' of Evidence-based Social Welfare Practice**

In common with many other social welfare practitioners, Barnardo's believes that the use of the best possible evidence of effectiveness is as important for the work of a child care agency as it is for medical practice. Evidence-based medicine has been defined as an approach which attempts the integration of individual clinical expertise and the best external evidence (Sackett et al., 1996; Barnes-McGuire et al., 1997).

Research units such as the NHS Centre for Review and Dissemination at York University, as well as the Centre for Clinical Outcomes, Research and Effectiveness established by the British Psychological Society at University College, London, bear witness to the importance being attached to the development of clinical audit and related activities within the medical profession and that of clinical psychology respectively.

Experience with evidence-based medicine, in particular that achieved via the Cochrane Collaboration, has demonstrated that the common assumption both among lay people and professionals that current medical practice is routinely based on the best possible evidence of effectiveness, may be misplaced (Chalmers, 1996).

If this is true for a discipline like medicine which aims to be scientifically based, then how much more likely is this to be true of social work practice, which employs methodologies from a variety of disciplines, not all with a foundation in scientific methods (Macdonald and Sheldon, 1992).

The definition of evidence-based medicine used above, can equally well

be applied to social welfare practice, provided that the term clinical is replaced with a term like 'practitioner'.

Evidence-based social work focuses on the use of methodologically sound research both in selecting and in evaluating social welfare interventions. Its adherents demand more rigorous evidence of social work effectiveness than that preferred by narrative reviews of current research, even when those are described as meta-analyses (Gorey, 1996).

Within the developing debate around evidence-based social work practice, two trends can be distinguished. One could be described as being towards a more strict or hard-line approach, the other veers towards eclecticism, or pragmatism.

As far as the more hard-line approach is concerned, the case for the use of methodologically sound research, in particular randomised controlled trials, in striving to create evidence-based social work practice, has been strongly made by Macdonald and Roberts (1995), Macdonald (1996), McNeish and Newman (1996) and Newman and Roberts (1997).

Fuller (1996) is more pragmatic in his approach. A relatively pragmatic approach to evaluation research is represented by Cheetham's (1997) work. Similar to the approach adopted by Barnes-McGuire (1997) towards children's mental health, these papers suggest minimum standards for any research that makes use of less robust research methods than the randomised controlled trial. For a discussion of the place of evidence-based social work research among other types of social work research see Trinder (1996) and Little (1998).

It is worth noting at this point a different line of argument which has been proposed by some researchers, to bring about a reconciliation between the demands for accountability and a realistic appraisal of the complexity of evaluating the impact of human services.

Simeonsson and Bailey's (1991) work represents this perspective, building on a model proposed by Smith (1981). These authors employ the framework of law as a model for evaluating the levels of certainty of evidence for the impact of early intervention programmes with young children and their parents, an area bedevilled by long-term impact uncertainties. In this model, three levels of evidence are considered: suggestive, preponderant and conclusive evidence.

With suggestive evidence, several explanations remain possible for the observed impact; in the case of preponderant evidence competing explanations for change are reduced, while conclusive evidence rules out competing explanations for change and defines the final level of certainty.

In the context of measuring the impact of early intervention programmes,

three important implications of viewing evidence within a levels of certainty framework present themselves, according to Simeonsson and Bailey.

First of all, such a perspective enables programme evaluations to be expanded beyond experimental designs; secondly events and outcomes may vary in precision and certainty and finally the qualifications of findings can be formalised.

This approach may have some use in evaluating the evidence of effectiveness of different types of interventions, especially if resources to fund rigorous and independent outcome evaluations are limited. We will return to it in the final section of this chapter.

The fact remains that, while all the studies discussed here indicate that progress is beginning to be made with the rigorous evaluation of outcomes for children and families who use social welfare services, a considerable gap remains between research and practice.

### **The Links Between Research and Practice: The Role of Dissemination**

The familiar contribution academics have traditionally made to the adoption of evidence-based or other approaches by social work practitioners has been via the production of research findings. More recently, a greater awareness has emerged among the research community and the large research funding agencies of the need to find more accessible formats for the dissemination of such findings.

The publication of research in academic and practitioner orientated journals is now often complemented by the production of brief 'findings' of individual research initiatives, and brief overviews of a raft of current research in particular areas.

The Rowntree Foundation's series of 'findings' and 'social policy summaries' are a shining example of the former, as is a recent ALBSU publication (Bynner and Steedman, 1995). The HighLight series produced by the National Children's Bureau in association with Barnardo's represents the latter.

A study of the use of research in local authorities commissioned by the Department of Health (Sinclair and Jacobs, 1994) indicated not only a heavy reliance on findings or summaries, but also that three quarters of those interviewed had used findings from any piece of research they had read. Respondents considered research central to effective policy making; this issue will be explored further in a separate section below.

Researchers may be increasingly aware of their responsibility for giving practitioners information in a form that can be translated into effective intervention strategies. But by which process are such findings assimilated into practice? Is merely publishing them in accessible formats sufficient?

This would appear not to be the case. The dissemination of research findings to practitioners by the research community is a different process from the processes required for the incorporation of the lessons from research into service development by practitioners themselves.

Dissemination of research findings in accessible formats, then, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the introduction of evidence-based social work practice. Dissemination by itself will not ensure that the gap between research and practice is closed, as the next section illustrates.

### **Closing the Gap between Research and Practice: The Case of Family Support**

Concern that the results of research are not used to inform decision making regarding social welfare services is still widespread (Department of Health, 1994). A case in point is formed by the lessons that can be learned about the effectiveness of family support services in relation to the protection of children from abuse. What we know about the long-term effect of day care in particular (Gibbons, 1991) is not yet reflected in changes in family support practice.

Admittedly, there is the general problem that the effectiveness of general preventative services is hard to prove, since there is no easily identified target population to measure, nor any obvious measurable outcome (Jeffrey, 1996).

The important 1991 study by Gibbons aimed at filling this void. She followed families for four months after they had been referred to social services. She found that of a range of different family support services provided, day care alone had a significant positive effect on these children and their parents.

There is real evidence, too, that in terms of longer-term outcomes for children and families, open access family centres, which provide day care as part of their programmes, may be at least as effective, if not more so, than the client centred ones, which provide more 'therapeutic' interventions (Smith, 1996; Statham, 1994).

Gibbons (1990) reviewed the literature on the effectiveness of family support services predating the Children Act's implementation. What she found particularly striking was the absence of controlled evaluations of measures aimed at preventing serious child-rearing problems and the removal of children

from home, i.e. child protection interventions. However, Macdonald and Roberts (1995) identified good evidence for the effectiveness of some forms of systemic family therapy, which is practised in some of Barnardo's family centres.

Little and Gibbons (1993) also found that the results of traditional approaches to child protection in England and Wales meant that only a small proportion of abused children were registered as at risk, as a result of different registration criteria and different styles of investigation by different levels of staff.

Add this fact about the investigation process to the finding about the absence of sound intervention studies and surely the conclusion is warranted that in principle open access family support provision offering day care among its services is no less likely to reach children in need of protection than the client-focused centres are.

In fact, of all the different components of the family support packages offered by family centres, the evidence for the effectiveness of day care for children in need is actually the strongest.

This state of affairs highlights some of the problems surrounding the adoption of evidence-based social work in the area of so-called preventive services, as described by, for instance, Sinclair, Hearn and Pugh (1997).

### **Analogies with the Process Linking Research and Policy**

While there should there be clear links between research and practice, the same is true for research and policy. The routes by which social research may influence policy would appear to have been explored more thoroughly than those between social research and practice. What lessons can be applied from that particular relationship to achieve the successful incorporation of research findings into social welfare practice? What has been learned about any barriers to such a process?

In the course of a discussion of the influence that qualitative research may have on the policy process, Rist (1994, p. 456) observed that:

Policy making is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. Research is but one (and often minor at that) among the number of frequently contradictory and competing sources that seek to influence what is an ongoing and constantly evolving process.

This observation echoes a similar one by Tizard (1990, p. 438), who said:

... it can plausibly be argued that research findings on their own have never played a crucial role in any major policy decision.

It has even been suggested that mental health policy for instance has been influenced more by political values than by evidence (Ham et al., 1995), and it certainly is not unique in this respect.

It would seem appropriate then to view practice as similarly subject to competing influences, one of which is research. Indeed, even in a historical case of the documented influence of research on practice – the closure of Barnardo's residential homes in favour of work with families and of fostering and adoption – doubt was cast by the principal researcher on the degree of impact the research itself had on this decision.

Tizard (1990), the principal researcher in question, postulated not only that the agency in question was 'ready' for this decision, but also that the research in the agency's own residential homes provided them with a justification for it (1996, p. 13).

Are there further parallels that can be drawn between the process by which research is likely to influence policy and the process by which it may influence practice? Rist (1994, p. 547) analysed the different phases of the policy cycle and identified three points where research ought to inform decisions. This was: 1) at the point of policy formulation; 2) at the point of policy implementation; and 3) in respect of policy accountability, i.e. concerning its intended and unintended consequences.

In respect of the influence of research on practice, a similar analysis can be applied to the three phases of service development where research and development input is required to inform Barnardo's practice and strengthen its evidence base. At the point of service formulation, of service implementation and of service accountability, an evidence-based approach has much to offer.

### **Encouraging Evidence-based Practice at the Point of Service Formulation**

How can new service developments be supported with the best available research evidence for effectiveness? At the point of service formulation?

The R&D team's input at the point of service formulation consists of a number of different strands. One of these is training in monitoring and self-evaluation methodologies and impact assessment, delivered by team members to managers in the different geographical regions where Barnardo's operations

are located. A training pack is available which was produced in support of this training (Ware, McNeish and Parish, 1994).

Another one of these strands is the provision of detailed comments on different stage of individual service proposals by team members with expertise in a particular subject. Particular attention is paid to the formulation of aims and objectives which lend themselves to impact assessment and to ensuring that practitioners are in a position to use internal and external evidence critically. This work may be done in partnership with the relevant principal officers policy and practice in the Policy, Planning and Research Unit.

Part of the research and development team's remit is to encourage greater correspondence between service planning and the findings of research and evaluation, so that models of intervention are selected which are known for their effectiveness. At the early stages practitioners may refer to Barnardo's own *What Works* series of research reviews to inform the choice of the appropriate intervention methodologies.

The *What Works* series of publications from Barnardo's aim to be compendia of methodologically sound research pertinent to the different areas of Barnardo's work. While they do not constitute a systematic review in the strict sense of the term, they nevertheless could be said to be a 'hybrid' form of such reviews, amply illustrated with practice examples informed by sound research.

Written in an accessible style, they are aimed at an audience of practitioners and policy makers. They are being used by managers in designing new services, and in negotiations with local authority partners.

The authors of the first title in the series (Macdonald and Roberts, 1995, p. 5) acknowledge that good work on the effectiveness of interventions can only be achieved with the enthusiastic participation of those at the sharp end, the practitioners themselves. They set out the series' main objective as follows:

Until we are able to assemble good evidence on the effectiveness or otherwise of our current interventions with children, it is all too likely that they will be as informed by the same mixture of passionate conviction, ideology and good and poor research, as has been the case in the past.

Other titles so far have dealt with children with disabilities (Beresford et al., 1995), family placement (Sellick and Thoburn, 1996), leaving care (Stein, 1997), and inclusive education (Sebba with Sachdev, 1997). In the pipeline are publications dealing with parents with learning difficulties (McGraw, forthcoming); child protection (Macdonald, forthcoming); and parenting

education (Lloyd et al., forthcoming).

Two volumes in this series are intended to spread the message about evidence-based social work practice as widely as possible. Both are collections of seminar papers, edited by the coordinator of the Barnardo's research and development team, in partnership with the director of the University of London's Social Science Research Unit (Oakley and Roberts, 1996; Roberts and Oakley, 1996). They address an audience of both academics and practitioners. The ESRC funded Barnardo's and the Social Science Research Unit to organise these seminars to explore the use of reliable methodologies, including randomised controlled trials.

The establishment of a new service may be preceded by a development period in which mapping, survey or other research and development activities are undertaken in the area where the new service is to be located. Reports based on such activities, together with literature reviews and the use of the *What Works* evidence, aim to ensure the optimal application of the available evidence in service design.

Finally, needs assessments are an essential requirement for evidence-based practice. It is no good initiating apparently effective interventions which users do not want.

### **Encouraging Evidence-based Practice at the Point of Service Implementation**

How can the findings from methodologically sound research best be used to inform ongoing developments in practice? At the point of service implementation and beyond?

A current initiative concerning family support is directly relevant to the question of how to make *What Works* work. Members of the team are working on a collaborative proposal, with colleagues in a social services department in central England and with The Centre for Research into Parenting and Children at Oxford. It is concerned with developing an evidence-based programme of family support services in this county.

By evidence-based is meant implementing policies, procedures and interventions that the best available evidence suggests will be most successful in achieving the intended objectives. Two studies should result from this initiative, one concerning what works in promoting evidence-based practice in child welfare services, another reviewing what works in family support.

On a modest scale, the Policy, Planning and Research Unit newsletter is

used by the R&D team to update colleagues in the field on developments in research. Recently a series of short items on Cunningham and Bremner's (1995) work in Ontario, Canada, attracted a lot of attention from colleagues. These researchers employed a randomised controlled trial to measure the effectiveness of community-based parenting education group training versus clinic based interventions with children and their parents. Experiments with a research bulletin board using the Barnardo's wide-area computer network are in progress. The research team have also provided updates for the different areas of work as part of several organisational strategic reviews.

Another potential resource for evidence-based practice in Barnardo's is the introduction of a computerised client records monitoring system. This is gradually being implemented to facilitate a range of relevant monitoring activities to enable evaluation to take place at different stages of service development and to facilitate the production of annual and other management reports.

### **Encouraging Evidence-based Practice in Service Accountability**

How can the outcomes of Barnardo's work with children and families best be evaluated by means of methodologically sound evaluative research? At the point of service accountability?

It is to be expected that the conditions for methodologically sound research apply to evaluation studies carried out on Barnardo's own interventions. Their success or otherwise ought to be measured against the findings from other sound evaluation research into similar interventions.

Barnardo's research and development practice in this area can be compared to Jacobs's (1988) five-tiered approach to a service or system evaluation, which is employed at various stages of service development. Jacobs recommends a formative evaluation at the pre-implementation stage and moves to an outcome or summative evaluation to measure the service or system impact, via accountability, clarification and progress to objectives stages which each require detailed and different kinds of monitoring activities.

Examples of evaluation at some or all of these service levels can be identified for most of Barnardo's services. The use of formative evaluations at the pre-implementation stage has already been mentioned in the context of service formulation. However, outcome evaluations are relatively infrequently encountered, yet these are potentially the most important contribution that a learning organisation can make to evidence-based practice.

Two Scottish examples of outcome evaluations of Barnardo's services are an externally commissioned study of a service for young people who sexually abused others (Buist and Fuller, 1997) and an internal evaluation, largely indebted to the high quality monitoring data collected by the head teacher, of a residential school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Sachdev et al., 1996).

There is also a need to build on initial developments in cross-organisational evaluation of programmes, so that findings can be fed into service development on an ongoing basis. Ensuring that a focus is kept on realistically achievable service outcomes which are, moreover, comparable across the organisation, is a major challenge.

Currently it remains problematic for practitioners to take on board the lessons from existing research and evaluation findings from their own services in developing evidence-based services.

### **Evidence-based Social Welfare Practice and the Barnardo's Research and Development Agenda**

The points raised so far concern the practical utility of research in child welfare services. Despite any inherent contradictions between problem-oriented research, basic research and applied research, all three types of research must contribute to the knowledge base that is required for social welfare and allied professionals if they are to provide the most effective services.

The integration of research findings into social welfare practice, according to Cheetham (1997), is a subtle, often lengthy process subject to both organisational influences and professional judgements.

Changes in training are also needed as a way forward. Cheetham (1997, p. 305) argues that social work education at all levels needs to encourage research-minded practice. In her view evaluative research has a specific role to play in relation to practice:

... most evaluative research does not – and should not, given its focus and methods – present unequivocal prescriptions for action. More often it presents a basis for critical review and reflection, perhaps including a comparison of different ways of providing similar services, an analysis of factors that influence quality and a pointer to unintended or unexpected outcomes.

Combining multidisciplinary education and research is another strategy

Cheetham promotes. Different types of action research are identified as a promising way of fostering evidence-based social welfare practice. An example of this is an experiment carried out at the National Institute of Social Work in the early 1990s.

NISW, sponsored by the Department of Health and the Rowntree Foundation, experimented with a programme in which researchers helped policy makers and practitioners to translate research findings into action plans first and then to evaluate their implementation (Neill and Williams, 1992).

The adoption of evidence-based social welfare practice is bound to benefit from the recent establishment of the Centre for Evidence-based Social Services at the University of Exeter, with Professor Brian Sheldon as director.

This partnership project has been jointly funded by the Department of Health and 15 social services departments in the south and south west of England. Apart from initiating studies of the evidence base for a range of social welfare services, the centre also hopes to develop optimal formats for the training of social workers in critical appraisal skills – the kind of skills Cheetham has identified as indispensable to the profession.

Another useful development is the impending registration, within the Cochrane Collaboration, of a review group dedicated to children's developmental, psychosocial and learning problems which will complement other groups where issues are represented across the age groups.

Research and development activities in Barnardo's will profit from these developments. For the time being, and in the absence of sufficient resources, an incremental approach will continue to be employed towards the evaluation of programme impact, along the lines suggested by Smith (1981).

On their own, R&D teams like the Barnardo's one, cannot hope to provide sufficient support to secure evidence-based practice across the board throughout a social welfare organization as large as Barnardo's. However, they are not entirely alone. They are supported by a strong training structure across the children's services department, as well as a corporate one.

They are also fortunate to be supported by contributions from a number of Barnardo's managers and senior practitioners with established reputations in action research and with publications to their name (Stones, 1994; Gill, 1994; Fratter, 1996).

## **Conclusion**

Another important trend in research is also recognised by those responsible

for research and development in Barnardo's. This is that at the same time as evidence-based social welfare practice is gaining ground, a trend can be detected in other disciplines, like social and developmental psychology (Richardson, 1996; Phoenix et al., 1992), towards the incorporation of more qualitative and mixed research methodologies, including grounded theory (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1996). Although this is a departure from the rigorous experimental methods previously employed, such developments should be viewed as complementary research strategies.

While the arguments for the adoption of the most robust methodologies for defining effectiveness which are put forward by proponents (Macdonald and Macdonald, 1995) of evidence-based social welfare practice are accepted in principle, the Barnardo's team acknowledges that there is, again, a need for an incremental approach to the adoption of such practice. Greater levels of certainty are particularly needed when interventions may have major implications for the future lives of children and their families.

For the purposes of research and development in Barnardo's, effectiveness continues to be defined in terms of robust evidence that the services provided by Barnardo's are achieving their stated aims in supporting children, young people, and their families.

Finally, evidence-based social welfare services are not an academic exercise. Children and their parents, the subject of this book, have a right to know about the likely impact of child welfare services and about the evidence for their effectiveness.

It is crucial to the quality of all such evidence that it reflects the views of those who are at the receiving end of Barnardo's interventions – and that includes children – on the impact achieved. Users of services are an expert source of knowledge on effectiveness who are too often ignored in research.

In listening to user views, Barnardo's strives to incorporate those of visible and invisible minorities. There can be neither effective research nor practice without doing so. For instance, Black perspectives on Barnardo's services for children in need were explored by a research team from the National Children's Bureau (Caesar, Parchment and Berridge, 1994).

The views of students in colleges of further education on the inclusion of students with disabilities were explored by a research team including three further education students who themselves had a disability (Ash, Bellew, Davies, Newman and Richardson, 1995).

Barnardo's also actively promotes the involvement of children in service design, implementation and evaluation, as well as high standards in research with children (Alderson, 1995). To do justice to a discussion of these issues is

however beyond the scope of this chapter.

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## Changing Policy in Early Years Provision and Family Support

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### Introduction

It is easy to see that radical policy change has taken place in respect of children's entitlement to early years services if we compare current Government policies driving the provision of care, education and family support services for young children (both universal and area-based initiatives such as Sure Start and the Early Excellence Centre Programme and childcare provision promoted by Healthy Living Centres, Education and Health Action Zones and New Deal for Communities) with the provision governed by Part III, Section 17 and Part X of the Children Act 1989.

For a start, the national childcare strategy and the early education strategy are underpinned by educational legislation, namely Sections 117-124 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998. These complement local authority duties under the Children Act to arrange for the provision of family support and daycare services to children in need, and the power given to them to support a more universal service system in which children in need could be included. While the introduction of new strategies in these areas take statutory support for a universal early years service system a great deal further than the Children Act, the principles of a universal entitlement to free early years education in particular would appear to build on the rights-based approach embodied in the Children Act.

As originally suggested in the Children Act, many education or children's services departments have taken the lead in the implementation of provision governed by Part III. Since 1997 most Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs), responsible for planning and implementing early years provision in all local authority areas, have had their closest ties with local education departments, with some exceptions (Simm, 1999).

Until recently both the Children Act and education legislation accepted and reinforced the split between service provision for children - those for under-threes being covered exclusively by the welfare system, while both social services and education departments covered those for children over three (Moss, 1996). However, as Glass's (1999) description of the cross-cutting nature of the development of the Sure Start family support initiative shows, the role of such legislation in respect of early years provision has changed dramatically since

1989. Moreover, whereas in the early nineties it could be argued that the 1989 Children Act was still used as a driver of policy change in early years provision and family support, new legislation is being increasingly used to confirm or enable policy change rather than drive it.

This paper focuses on whether current policies succeed in promoting the inclusion of children in need, and more specifically children at risk of social exclusion as a result of poverty, in these more universal services. Do the new policy developments actually complement Children Act provisions, or do they reflect a more radical departure from the Children Act approach, in particular to young children in need? The evidence suggests that current policies bypass it in extending the scope and reach of early years services.

Right from the start, the relevant parts of the Children Act did come in for serious criticism from a range of agencies in terms of what they could and did deliver to young children in need. For instance, two Audit Commission reports (1994; 1995) dealing with community-based health, social services and early education provision for young children, suggested that greater support for a universal service system would encourage a broader approach to meeting the needs of children in need and discourage an over-reliance on assessment and specialised targeted services. Two studies from the Thomas Coram Research Unit critically examined the Act's impact on daycare services for children under eight (Bull et al, 1994; Candappa, 1996), while the Government's own annual Children Act reports have also highlighted lack of progress with improving and extending early years services to be provided under the Act.

### **Early years policies and children in need: beyond the Children Act**

As Daly (1999) points out, difficulties continue in countering children's social exclusion and realising their rights under the 1991 UN Convention, despite policy approaches such as the Department of Health's plans for the modernisation of health and social services (1998) and the new framework for assessing children in need (Department of Health, 2000). These initiatives would appear to display a similarly narrow focus to the concept of need for which the Children Act has been criticised. It is debatable whether these plans do form a substantial improvement on Children Act provisions to support and encourage the provision of early years services to children in need as part of a universalist system in which they are to be included with appropriate support.

Until recently the option of amending Parts III and X of the Children Act had not been used. The first serious amendments to the Children Act are currently being made by means of the Care Standards Bill. Part V and Schedule 2 of this Bill

which refer to early years insert a new Part XA and Schedule 9A into the 1989 Children Act. While this affects the regulation and inspection of daycare provision, it does not substantially affect the way early care and education and family support services will be encouraged to reach to children in need.

Recent surveys of the operations of EYDCPs confirm that there may still be a long way to go in reaching and including children in need (Randall and Fisher, 1999; Simm, 1999; SWA Consulting Ltd, 1999) in all recent initiatives. Baseline data from a Social and Community Planning Research survey of the uptake of early years services, commissioned prior to the implementation of the Government's national childcare and early education strategies (Prior, Courtenay and Charkin, 1999), confirm that children in need were not yet being reached to the intended extent. Research by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of DfEE (La Valle et al, 1999) confirms the extent of unmet demand for childcare. Closing the gap identified in this kind of survey must be this Government's priority if, by the end of this Parliament, or indeed later on, it wants to be in a position to claim that its early years policies have succeeded.

The discourse about children in need has become increasingly dominated by the growing recognition of child poverty. A child in Britain is now more likely to be poor than in any other OECD country (Micklewright and Stewart, 2000), primarily as a result of family employment patterns (Gregg, Harkness and Machin, 1999a & 1999b). In response, the present administration has introduced a wide range of policy measures explicitly aimed at tackling poverty (Department of Social Security, 1999; HM Treasury, 1999): "*in particular the commitment to abolish child poverty within a generation*" (HM Treasury, 2000). In this context the national childcare and early education strategies, and other initiatives mentioned at the top of this article, are intended to enable more parents to take up employment and cease their reliance on benefits while generating a better-qualified future workforce thanks to the anticipated impact of early education on later educational achievement.

There are a number of reasons why this may be an oversimplified and over optimistic approach to the depth and of scale Britain's child poverty problems, according to social policy analysts such as Evans (2000), Howarth et al (1999), Piachaud and Sutherland (2000), and Webber (2000). Brannen (1999: 24) argues that present policies promote patterns of inequalities as a result of "*...creating social divides in children's experience of childhood*". Taking a child-centred perspective, she develops the arguments put forward in an earlier book (Brannen and Moss, 1998), that

*the free provision of institutional care for children in 'work poor' family*

*settings is underpinned by assumptions concerning the protection of children 'in need' and deficiencies in their parents' parenting skills and hence the need to compensate children for these deficits. By contrast, assumptions underlying the provision of care for children in 'work rich' families rest on values of the market and on parents' ability to purchase the type of care they prefer and can afford. (Brannen, 1999)*

Even if we accept Brannen's thesis that public policy should reconsider its assumptions about children and childhood, in order to create more egalitarian provision for young children, there is still a strong case for publicly funded early years services to be an essential component in a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy (Daycare Trust, 2000; Franklin, 1999; Lloyd et al, 1997; Lloyd, 1998; Pugh, 1998). In respect of Brannen's claims about the stigmatising use of family support provision for poor children, there are welcome signs that the Early Excellence Centre programme is informed by evidence of the impact of non-stigmatising open access early care and education and family support provision in community-based resource centres (Lloyd, 1997; Mental Health Foundation, 1999; Smith, 1996) and of the use of community development methods of working in achieving this impact. Preliminary evaluation findings (Bertram and Pascal, 2000) suggest that Early Excellence Centres are indeed well placed to provide a streamlined, non-stigmatising and high-quality early care, education and family support service to young children and their families.

Franklin (1999) provides a lively description of how two Early Excellence Centres in Sheffield provide early care and education which is uniquely placed to break the cycle of educational disadvantage and thereby tackle social exclusion and poverty, contributing to community regeneration. The very same description also discloses the threat to the sustainability of such provision under current policies. And while the Government intends there to be such a centre in every local authority area, real impact would appear more feasible if their development was accelerated in every community. However, this would almost certainly require more direct funding, both capital and revenue. In her review of the impact of Save the Children's open access family resource centres in the UK in the early nineties, Lloyd (1997) observed that these were trying to reconcile ways of delivering family support *that can only be truly effective if delivered within a system of universal early years services based on sustained public funding.*

### **The economic policies driving support for early years provision**

The present administration is intervening to equalise life chances and eliminate poverty by reducing differences in starting positions for children, but it also accepts that this can largely be achieved through improving the functioning of markets and by relating welfare to work. There are a number of reasons why the

rolling out of early years policies cannot wait for the operation of market mechanisms to encourage and sustain them. First of all, there is the historical legacy left by local authorities to EYDCPs who are charged with planning how to meet the Government's targets for expansion of all early years provision (Randall and Fischer, 1999).

Provision of all forms of daycare remains least where need is likely to be greatest. Furthermore, in the EU, Britain has the greatest proportion of children living in homes where no adult is in paid work (Micklewright and Stewart, 2000) and so in deprived areas, or where there is a sudden change in the employment situation - such as in the textile industry (Hetherington, 2000) - the new tax and benefit mechanisms cannot easily close the childcare gap.

Evidence from the ground suggests that if present early years policies are to succeed in delivering the outcomes the Government seeks in terms of young children's quality of life, longer-term educational achievements and socio-economic performance, they must address the barriers posed by the economic policies and strategies underpinning the funding and delivery methods of the three main strands of early years provision discussed in this article.

To date, the bulk of Government measures intended to contribute to eliminating child poverty have concentrated on indirect support channelled through the tax and benefits system, and linked to the 'welfare to work' agenda. Among the different forms of support from the Treasury for the wide range of early years initiatives, the current system of a demand-side subsidy for childcare services coupled with a supply-side subsidy for early education is unlikely to deliver the hoped-for sustainable expansion of these services. This would appear to be achievable only if there is a greater parallel direct investment in such services for children, irrespective of their parents' employment status and therefore uncoupled from the 'welfare to work' agenda. The potential long-term benefits of a universally accessible early years system were highlighted by the Audit Commission in its 1994 and 1995 reports. The case studies for such provision at the end of this article illustrate the pitfalls inherent in the current forms of Government support.

Another problem arises from the planning mechanisms for service delivery put in place by the present administration. The concept of the policy maker/provider partnership has been developed into the mechanism of choice for planning and overseeing the implementation of local early years provision, which is intended to include children in need. The EYDCPs, supported and regulated entirely from within Whitehall rather than on a regional basis, form a case in point. While partnerships involving the community and parents are

undeniably key to quality early years provision (Stone, 1997; Stone, Gee and Tunnard 1997), the plethora of early years initiatives involving partnerships are putting increasing pressure on both the voluntary and statutory sector, while the private sector is rarely motivated to participate actively unless local employment conditions favour business.

In most areas the same organisations and individuals may be involved in partnerships ranging from Sure Start to SRB via EYDCPs, with very little or no funding available to enable their participation in terms of travel and substitute staff expenses until an advanced stage of development of a partnership bid. Black and minority ethnic organisations, which the Government is keen to involve, are finding it exceptionally difficult to play a meaningful partnership role which benefits their constituency (Joseph, 1999; REU, 1999).

A recent report from the Performance and Innovation Unit (2000) based in the Cabinet Office identifies these developments as a threat to the successful delivery of Government objectives, especially on education, health, crime, competitiveness, sustainable development and social exclusion, singling out area-based initiatives as particularly problematic. Recommending a strengthened and higher profile for Government Offices in the regions, and closer co-operation with Regional Development Agencies, it describes the problem as follows:

*Central Government initiatives which affect the same people in local areas are run separately and not linked together. This reduces their effectiveness, not least in the poorest neighbourhoods, and imposes unnecessary management burdens on local organisations. Regional networks of Government Departments are fragmented, with no part of central Government responsible for bringing its contribution together to assist local areas.*

Finally, it would appear that some of the barriers to a successful expansion of the current early years service system which providers experience do relate not only to the way it is delivered and funded, but also to its lack of internal coherence.

### **Promoting a seamless early years service**

One of the most striking characteristics of the way in which the promotion of early years services has been configured by the present administration has been the primacy afforded to the provision of free part-time early education for three and four year olds as part of the national childcare strategy. Indeed, all other early years services are increasingly being constructed and described in terms of

'wrap-around care', ie care services wrapped around part-time early education. As a result there is lack of coherence in service delivery and worse, lack of continuity for very young children between different forms of care in any one week or indeed any one day.

The primacy being accorded to the early education policy runs counter to recommendations concerning the need for an integrated early care and education service made over the years on the basis of British, (Pugh in press, Siraj-Blatchford, 1995) New Zealand (Statham et al, 1990) and European experience (Moss and Penn, 1996). It ignores the fact that: "*After more than a century of universal education it is becoming recognised that the school contributes to parents' childcare problems*" (Petrie, 1996).

The state of affairs described so far makes it more difficult for parents and carers to arrange a seamless, stress-free package of care and education for young children. Moreover, even under the new arrangements, not all young children receive the quality services to which they are now entitled. For example, while all four year olds should by now have access to such a place, more than half of four year olds actually find themselves in primary school reception classes, as confirmed by DfEE annual statistics, where their entitlement to an early years curriculum delivered by relevantly trained staff may be compromised.

As far as three year olds are concerned, the rolling out of free early education places depends on EYDCPs allocating them on the basis of social need. In the face of rapidly dwindling playgroup and nursery school provision (DfEE, 1999), the future may hold only a choice between three-year-old early education places in primary school nursery classes and private provision in more well-to-do areas, even though the Government claims that it expects around 80% of these places to be established in the voluntary and independent sectors.

As for daycare, the emphasis has been on short-term start-up funding for out-of-school care for children aged 4 to 14 through the New Opportunities Fund (NOF), rather than on direct funding towards care provision (Randall and Fisher, 2000). Although the possibility of providing some three-year NOF grants is being considered, it has already been made clear that this will not become the norm. As a result, there remains a significant gap between supply and demand in out-of-school care provision. One-year funding for out-of-school provision is proving unable to ensure its sustainability, especially in areas of low employment and in rural areas.

As noted above, while early education is being encouraged by a supply-side subsidy, all other forms of care must depend largely on the childcare market's

operations being stimulated through demand-side subsidies in the form of the Working Families Tax Credit and the Children's Tax Credit (HM Treasury, 2000). The provision of daycare places for under-threes remains extremely low and no start-up funding is available for this kind of provision. Daycare Trust (2000) found that there are 600,000 under-threes living in poverty (out of a total of 1,181,100), but only 42,740 free or subsidised places out of a total of 268,260 registered childcare places for three year olds, which are mostly part-time. The Sure Start programmes which are gradually coming on stream are expected to contribute no more than some 1,700 full-time daycare places for children under four to the total current complement.

Viewing this situation from a historical perspective, Randall and Fisher (2000: 11) conclude that: *Central government may need, certainly in the short run, to target additional resources to extend the range of provision offered in the more deprived areas.* For these authors the local authority must remain a key player in respect of the provision of daycare where levels of social deprivation are highest, working with the voluntary, private and statutory sectors. It is difficult to see how local authority education or social services departments can achieve this in the era of EYDCPs, except with reference to their duties towards children in need under the Children Act. But while the EYDCP guidance recommends that the EYDCP and Children's Services planning mechanisms should be streamlined, this remains optional, not compulsory.

### The view from the ground

Vignettes from three members of the National Early Years Network demonstrate the difficulties of sustaining current policies, especially in relation to children in need. While in no way claiming to be representative of the whole of the country, the experiences of these early years projects are nevertheless typical. They highlight the pressures experienced by providers and the decisions EYDCPs are forced to make when allocating resources. The three projects are a rural children's centre in England's largest rural county and two inner-London boroughs with high ethnic minority populations and high poverty levels.

#### *Wistanstow Under-fives Centre, Wistanstow, Shropshire*

Nine years after its start as a parent and toddler group, Wistanstow Under-fives Centre now has 40 children using its playgroup four mornings a week and for one extended day, while some 30 one and two year olds and their parents attend three parent and toddler group sessions. It has passed its Social Services and Ofsted inspections with flying colours, has with some difficulty managed to find one-to-one funding for a support worker helping a child with a serious disability to attend, it employs a key worker system and its four workers have

received appropriate early years training. The waiting list is steadily growing, but although keen to expand, the centre cannot extend its childcare provision, including out-of-school care, or indeed explore the possibilities for the introduction of Sure Start, until and unless it manages to acquire a building of its own, instead of using the Village Hall which it currently shares with other groups.

There are a number of barriers to such much-needed expansion, some relate to the rural dimension. For a start, even if NOF funding were to become available, this would not cover capital developments. Parents' contributions are going to be a negligible source of income. The few local employment opportunities are mostly part-time, or seasonal, and low paid. Unless they work 16 hours a week, parents will not qualify for the Childcare Tax Credit. Also, local transport is too infrequent to enable children and their parents without access to cars to travel into the village from other areas to childcare provision. The number of childminders has been steadily decreasing too.

The EYDCP has adopted a thoughtful and innovative approach to the new opportunities. Most of the 2000/2001 Shropshire county childcare grant of £245,900 has been allocated to either the provision of special staff to support children with SEN in early years settings or to childcare development officer salaries. Over 50% of new places for four year olds are being developed in voluntary or independent sector provision in the most rural areas, where playgroups have traditionally been the main form of provision for this age group.

Shropshire retains three term school entry. Admission to nursery classes is at the start of the term in which children become four. Twelve nursery outreach workers are employed to work with four year olds entering primary school reception classes in rural areas without nursery schools and classes, to ensure that they receive an appropriate curriculum by appropriately trained staff. In the whole of the county there are currently 63 funded places for three year olds. With the help of 13 local Early Years Forums, a successful training programme is delivered by the EYDCP to increase the proportion of trained childcare staff.

The case of this thriving centre illustrates the difficulties of implementing the national childcare strategy in rural areas, where employment and pay rates are low, under current funding conditions. Interestingly, the issues faced by the very successful inner city children's centre profiled next show striking similarities. Again, different employment and unemployment patterns of parents hamper the

operation of market mechanisms which are supposed to help sustain the childcare service, while the competition from schools means that such integrated centres do not necessarily benefit from the new funding available for early education.

*Bow Nursery Centre, Tower Hamlets, East London*

The Bow Nursery Centre is a 25-place community nursery offering integrated full-time and part-time early care and education, as well as NOF-funded out-of-school care to a range of children aged 6 months to 10 years. In practice, full-time provision is mainly used by under-threes. Three and four year olds generally attend nursery schools and nursery classes in local schools and only use the centre for wrap-around care. In response, staff have organised transport to pick up some of these children from one local nursery school and bring them back to the centre. The centre is a little disappointed that few parents choose to let their three- and four-year-old children benefit from early education from the fully qualified centre staff and enjoy continuity of care and education throughout the day, but instead choose to place their children in schools at the earliest opportunity, adding to childcare logistics problems. Parents refer to pressure from primary admissions policies in justifying this choice.

While some of the parents pay the full centre fees out of earned income, others have their childcare at Bow Nursery Centre subsidised or paid in full, as part of the childcare package provided via the neighbouring SRB-funded Bromley by Bow community regeneration project. This is in turn linked to a NOF-funded Healthy Living Project. Despite being close to Canary Wharf in London's Docklands, the centre has noticed that employer support for childcare in the area is diminishing. Parents working in high-status jobs at Canary Wharf apparently make their childcare arrangements closer to home. Indeed, while the centre's strategic plan originally envisaged major developments in the area of employer related childcare, this forecast has now had to be revised.

Senior staff admit to wearying of the effort required to access different pockets of funding in order to maintain the range of services on offer and provide continuous, reliable and high-quality services for children and parents. One-year NOF funding for the out-of-school provision has proved insufficient to get the club firmly established. The local nursery school has similar reservations about NOF funding for a holiday playscheme and a term-time breakfast club. In summer particularly, play schemes are sorely needed to improve the quality of life of a wide range of children and their parents, not just for use by children of

employed parents.

The final example is of a family support service operating successfully in an inner London borough which itself has a history of providing early education to three and four year olds in maintained nursery classes and schools, as well as in reception classes.

*Hopscotch Asian Women's Centre, Camden, North West London*

The centre offers four playgroup and crèche sessions weekly for children aged zero to four, some with disabilities or special needs, while their mothers attend English-language and other adult-education classes. Originally supported by Save the Children, the centre now operates independently with support from the borough and a range of funding sources. For many of the mothers, the visits to the centre are their only outings, apart from taking older children to school, going to the shops, and going on family visits with their husbands. Those who have older children attending nursery education at local schools are pleased with their children's progress.

Most of the women live within walking distance of the centre in small apartments on housing estates. The majority belong to the local Bengali community and have husbands who are in the catering trade, often working late shifts. Husbands and their families are the sole sources of childcare and the women express a strong wish for additional 'respite' childcare provided at the centre, especially during holidays.

Housing, health and transport problems are top of their agenda for change. Being rehoused in buildings with working lifts and no higher than on the second floor is a priority for many. They are concerned that their children do not get taken outside much, to local parks or other amenities, because of the practical problems of getting out of the buildings where they live with pushchairs etc. None know neighbours with young children. Even if they make friends at the centre, transport costs, safety concerns and the absence of childcare means that reciprocal babysitting is rarely an option. Fifteen centre users were consulted by the local Sure Start development team and they are keen to hear whether they themselves will benefit from the planned developments.

The Hopscotch Centre's experience demonstrates the need for this type of family support and the demand for childcare to enrich the lives of the children and their families and eventually stimulate the uptake of employment

opportunities by these women, should they arise. While the Coram Family development in the same borough is able to offer integrated early years care, education and family support, the women and children using Hopscotch can as yet only access family support, adult education and a limited amount of early years childcare at the centre, while their needs and demands are for an extended and integrated service.

### **Summary and conclusion**

This article has explored whether the economic policies and strategies underpinning the delivery of family support, care and education provision for young children and their families may result in an inequitable and divided service and major problems with its sustainability. It has been argued that the outcomes sought by the Government in terms of young children's quality of life and their longer-term educational and socio-economic achievement and performance are not guaranteed by the present approach to the delivery of these three strands of provision through the national childcare strategy and other area-based Government initiatives such as Sure Start.

The funding mechanisms driving these initiatives pose substantial burdens on providers as confirmed by the Government's own think tank, the Performance and Innovation Unit, which has warned that problems with proper liaison between the plethora of area-based initiatives are becoming acute, especially in the poorest neighbourhoods. These problems can be addressed in part by giving a more prominent role to the different types of Government Offices in the regions in supporting such initiatives and in improving the fit between mainstream programmes and area-based initiatives.

It has been noted that recent legislative developments in the regulation and provision of services for young children in need do not in themselves provide encouragement to early years service expansion over and beyond that promoted by the Children Act. Amendments in progress do not substantially affect its ability to do so, but only really concern quality assurance mechanisms.

If a complete reconfiguration of the system of family support and early years provision is not feasible then current levels of child poverty and increasing inequality would appear to require at least a dual-track approach in which the links between access to parts of this system and parental employment status are uncoupled and more direct investment in such services for young children is made. The evidence suggests that the case for their role as part of a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and a means of improving young children's quality of life and later life chances is exceptionally strong.

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# using systematic reviews to investigate research in early childhood

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how the evidence base for aspects of early childhood has been explored using systematic research synthesis methods developed at the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre). Three early childhood systematic reviews have been carried out using EPPI-Centre procedures and tools. The article discusses the principles underlying systematic research synthesis, the way in which the three reviews were set up, the processes involved in reviewing studies for the reviews, and the nature and generalizability of the reviews' findings.

**KEYWORDS** *early childhood, research methodology, systematic review*

## introduction: systematic research synthesis

The main idea behind systematic research synthesis is that research evidence should be carefully sought out, described, appraised, synthesized and summarized so that decisions by practitioners, policy-makers and the public can be informed by the most reliable and relevant evidence. Individual studies addressing any specific policy or practice question may be difficult to find and will be variable in quality. As well as information about the numbers of individual studies, research users need access to comprehensive and reliable syntheses of research. A key issue for users is the trustworthiness of review findings and increased transparency about the process of reviewing. Researcher bias, it is argued, can lead to less trustworthy findings both at the

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level of the studies being reviewed and at the level of the reviewers who synthesize those studies. Reviews may depend overly on the individual reviewer's prior knowledge, contacts and opinions for locating studies and describing and analysing them. To counter this, systematic reviews can apply explicit methods to appraise and take account of the potential for bias in individual studies and can use other methods, such as the use of two reviewers working independently in parallel to reduce the likelihood that a review is influenced too much by any one reviewer's values or understandings. To increase transparency these methods are usually specified in detail in final reports and plans for review methods are often published in advance.

Several international and nationally-based initiatives currently promote collaboratively agreed criteria and processes for synthesis. Initiatives to promote a systematic approach to research synthesis are most established in the fields of health (Cochrane Collaboration) but more recently such work has extended more generally throughout the social sciences (Campbell Collaboration). The EPPI-Centre has focused on supporting systematic reviews of educational research.

## **the work of the EPPI-Centre**

The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating (EPPI) Centre, based at the Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London in the UK, was established in 1993 to address the need for a systematic approach to the organization and review of evidence-based work on social interventions. Since February 2000, the EPPI-Centre has been funded, primarily by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills), to develop capacity in research synthesis for education and to help build a rigorous, web-based, evidence base as an underpinning for future policy-making, practice and research in education, nationally and internationally. The Centre provides a web-accessible resource of tools, and guidance for conducting, storing and disseminating systematic reviews and provides searchable registers of reviews and primary research and accredited training in methods for research synthesis.

Governments in the USA and in the UK, have increasingly used the rhetoric of 'evidence-based policy' as a justification for decision-making. Academic responses have not always been positive to evidence-based policy initiatives (see below), but leading educational agencies in England such as the Teacher Training Agency, now Teacher Development Agency (TDA) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) are increasingly relying on the EPPI systematic review system as a basis for commissioning summaries of research evidence. Both TTA and NUT have funded or part-funded reviews done with EPPI support. Various government departments have also directly commissioned systematic reviews.

Over 25 Review Groups have worked as part of the EPPI-Centre's educational review initiative since 2000. The groups have covered a variety of educational topics, including English teaching, thinking skills, assessment and citizenship. More than 70 systematic reviews of educational research have now (2006) been completed. The Early Years Review Group registered with the EPPI-Centre in 2001. This article explores in detail the methodological processes characterizing the EPPI-Centre approach to systematic reviewing and their usefulness to the field of early childhood.

The present article is based on the Early Years Review Group's experience of carrying out three systematic reviews to try to inform education and care policy-making in England. The first review was on the topic of the integration of early care and education, a topic of considerable policy interest within England where at national and local level, what are termed 'early years' services, have been integrated within a single administrative setting (Penn et al., 2004). The second review, partly prompted by the war in Iraq, concerned the effectiveness of socio-cognitive support to young children directly affected by war and armed conflict (Lloyd et al., 2005). The third review concerns the outcomes and relevance of longitudinal cost-benefit studies of centre-based early years interventions (Penn et al., 2006).<sup>1</sup> This article discusses the concept of collaborative research involved in setting up the Early Years Review Group, the way in which evidence from studies was selected, categorized, abstracted and weighted, and the basis on which policy, practice and research recommendations were drawn up. It also considers the impact of the reviews in policy formulation. Before exploring these issues, however, we outline the approach, methods and tools central to EPPI-Centre educational reviews and the continuing debate around this and other research synthesis approaches in educational research.

## **the EPPI-Centre systematic review process**

The EPPI-Centre education systematic review initiative is based on a number of key assumptions.

- Explicit and detailed methods are used at every stage of the review, and these are set out, where possible, in advance of the review itself. The aim is to apply judgements consistently across studies, and avoid some of the ways in which reviewers can introduce bias.
- These methods are applied collaboratively, not by one or two reviewers, however expert, as has traditionally been the case with literature reviews. Anyone interested in a review topic, as a researcher or non-academic user, can in principle, with training in the use of the systematic review tools, take part in the review process.

- Quality assurance, that is a system of checks and balances, including cross-disciplinary workshops, peer reviewing, and decision sampling, underwrites key decision-making and reporting stages of the review.
- Potential users, that is, recipients and providers of the type of education being investigated, and parents, policy-makers and others, are, ideally, involved in the review process, if possible from the stage of setting the review question onwards and at critical junctures in the process. They are asked to comment on its relevance to their concerns. The influences of different constituencies upon a review should be made explicit, for example, who decided on the question to be addressed and how it should be conceptualized.
- While there is scope for groups to develop additional classifications and criteria, reviewers apply a standard, core set of detailed questions to describe and appraise the studies they review. Particular scrutiny is applied to study design and execution, so as to assess the extent to which a study can provide reliable evidence to answer the review's research question; also to the study's relevance – for example, whether the population under study or measures used fit well with the review's specific focus. Reviewers' answers to the core set of questions contribute to a centralized register of primary studies that can be searched across the topics, and populations covered by all reviews.
- Lastly, the process is transparent, so that every step of the process is itself open for scrutiny. This also makes it easier for the review to be updated when new research becomes available.

The information about research studies that is described and analysed as part of EPPI-Centre education systematic reviews is made accessible via a searchable, web-based database known as the Research Evidence in Education Library (REEL). This electronic library also contains a range of reports of the review findings, from the full, technical reports of finished reviews through to commissioned user perspectives on the reviews. The register of studies created through centralized coding across all reviews and spanning the review groups' topic areas can also be accessed via REEL, as can educational materials about systematic reviews. REEL also contains a reviewing tool that is accessible using regular Internet browsers. This tool takes reviewers step by step through interrogating individual studies and has been used by geographically dispersed groups to manage their review's progress.

The EPPI-Centre provides access to the centralized review tools and staff provide external quality assurance. Staff at the centre also act as editors for REEL, overseeing peer refereeing and making decisions over publishing materials related to reviews. As a new initiative in a relatively new field of research methodology, the EPPI-Centre is continually refining its tools and processes, and is presently engaged in a user survey of its methods. The

transparency, collegiality, and quality assurance built into the system, it is argued, makes it, above all, a relatively reliable and bias-free source of information to policy-makers and others operating in a complex knowledge economy.

### **the criticisms of the EPPI approach**

The concept of evidence-based policy, or 'what works' continues to occasion suspicion and some heavy criticism amongst educational researchers and within meetings of professional and research bodies in education. There is a lively debate both in the USA (Chalmers, 2003; Chatterji, 2004; *Educational Researcher*, 2002; Mosteller and Boruch, 2002) and in the UK (Oakley et al., 2005; Pring and Thomas, 2004) about the assumptions supposedly embedded in the notion of evidence-based policy. Put briefly, these are that such an approach presumes a monolithic view of education enquiry, one which feeds into attempts by governments to restrict educational enquiry in order to suppress possible criticism of its policies (Hammersley, 2001). Evidence-based approaches are said to rely on 'a prescription of methods and a rigid definition of research quality' (Feuer et al., 2002: 4). The systematic review process, in particular, is said to over-value quantitative data, especially data produced as part of randomized controlled trials, at the expense of qualitative data. In answering the question 'what works', it narrowly focuses on effectiveness or outcome measures rather than on processes; and it ignores exploratory, descriptive or comparative studies, which are an integral part of the discourses of educational research (MacClure, 2005).

In addition, the review process is seen as unnecessarily detailed, even obsessive, for very little informational return. For example, in many of the reviews that have been undertaken, most citations found during searches are discarded as being irrelevant to the research question set by the reviewers. Others, although rarely more than a handful in any single review, have been set aside because they are judged as being of an insufficiently rigorous standard. There have been accusations that the EPPI-Centre and other proponents of systematic reviews and evidence informed policy and practice, far from being collegial, are exercising unwarranted control over the direction of research in education (Ball, 2001; Hammersley, 2001).

Many of these criticisms have led to equally vigorous refutations. Rather than consider them at this point, we propose to describe our three reviews, and then to discuss the criticisms and the responses to them in the light of our own experiences.

## **using systematic reviews in early childhood education and care**

Early years in English speaking countries is traditionally a fragmented field (OECD, 2001/2006). Although in the UK the jurisdiction for early years is devolved to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, each taking a slightly different approach, in general most educational provision for three- and four-year-old children is delivered in part-time state-funded and run nursery education classes. Poverty reduction is a key issue in determining policy on early education and care (Lloyd, forthcoming). This has led to the development of publicly-funded welfare-orientated family support services for children aged three and under (e.g. Sure Start in England) to promote the welfare of vulnerable or at risk children. But in addition, changing perspectives on the employment of women have led to tensions between child-focused (education as of right for all children) and employment-focused (childcare for children of working mothers) strategies, which in turn have given rise to conflicting approaches to the development of for-profit provision (Mahon, 2005). The for-profit and non-profit independent sectors now provide the bulk of childcare provision for working parents. The recent appointment of a Minister for Children in England, has meant that there is more of a policy continuum between these different policy strands, but there continue to be both overlaps and tensions in policy-making (Penn, forthcoming; Penn and Randall, 2005). Any review of 'evidence' which attempts to inform policy in early years has to try to take account of this complex picture.

## **setting up the EPPI Early Years Review Group**

The Early Years Review group attempted to constitute itself so that competing interests were represented. Membership of the group included researchers experienced in using different kinds of methodologies and practitioners from different fields of practice. As with all the review groups, maintaining the interest and commitment of practitioners, in such a lengthy, technical and detailed process as a systematic review, has proved difficult, and the EPPI core team are themselves reviewing the efficacy of practitioner involvement. The Early Years Group's membership has varied according to the topic of the review, but consisted of an active core membership of four persons across all the reviews. For the first review, we also included practitioners; for the second review we included people who were working for or who had worked for aid agencies. In the third review, we included two economists. By the time of the third review particularly, much of the work was done virtually, through email correspondence, using the provisions of REEL. For each review there has been a peripheral group of a further three to four people who have read and commented on material at critical junctures. The peripheral group for the third

review included three international members, from France, the USA and Canada.

Like the other EPPI review groups, the Early Years Group has had a small grant from the DfES, managed at the discretion of the group. This money has mainly been used to cover the employment and search expenses of an experienced data researcher whose task has been to search for studies and manage their flow through the review. In effect, no-one's time was fully remunerated, and most of the work was voluntary. Funding for academic posts assumes a proportion of time to be spent on research activities, but for freelancers and practitioners, time is money. Like other review groups, we had to debate as to whether the review was in itself a valuable and useful activity, and warranted the time spent; a position not fully upheld by all the members of our group. The question of funding remains an outstanding one. It remains to be seen how much longer one can depend on goodwill and voluntary effort in establishing a review system that is built on collaboration, but requires such close and continuous attention to detail.

## **writing the protocol**

As indicated above, as part of the process of transparency, each review requires a statement of protocol that is a detailed explanation of the review's scope and methods. The protocol includes the research question to be addressed in the review, and an explanation of why it has been chosen. The choice of research question for our three reviews was left up to the group, although for the third review the choice of topic did involve discussions with government officials. After the initial tranche of education reviews carried out by the EPPI centre, the DfES has been more directly involved in negotiating the questions investigated by the reviews. The protocol also outlines the methods that will be used in undertaking the review and a description of the search terms and the databases and journals searched for studies. This protocol is peer reviewed. Modifications are made at this stage, in the light of the peer reviews. Once accepted by the EPPI-Centre team, the protocol for the review is put on the web. As well as establishing the remit of the study, the protocol acts as an extra transparency check. If the terms of the protocol are retrospectively modified, then clear explanations must be provided of why this has occurred.

The research question that informs the review and defines its scope has to be very carefully adumbrated. All possible ambiguities in the question have to be teased out and eliminated, partly in order to determine the search strategy, but mainly to try to provide conclusive answers, even if the answer does no more than to highlight the difficulties in formulating certain policy options or in relying on particular kinds of evidence.

In order to explain the importance of the research question and the ensuing

protocol, we use the example of our first review, on integrated early care and education, although we will make reference throughout to the other two. We were prompted by our practitioner members to explore the research literature on the integration of services for young children. However, 'integration' is an umbrella title that encompasses many different meanings. It may refer only to different types of early childhood services working alongside one another, in adjacent spaces, loosely co-ordinated, but without any fundamental change of approach. At the other extreme, it may mean a coherent service equally accessible to all potential users, with a common costing, staffing, health, pedagogic and curricular framework for all provision. It may also mean combining care and health provision, or care and family support provision (Lloyd, 1997), rather than care and education provision.

We spent considerable time as a group considering what we meant by 'integration'. We decided to focus only on the integration of care and education, but even then faced the problem of how to define each of these concepts for the purposes of the review. As one of our international advisers commented, it is conceptually problematic to present care and education as separate. In the UK, and in the USA, childcare and education may be treated as distinct in policy and practice, and in the research literature, but in many European countries they are not distinguished from each other (Moss et al., 2003). It might be more appropriate to represent integration of care and education as a continuum in which English-speaking countries tend to represent one end of the continuum and, for example, the Nordic countries the other (Petrie et al., 2003). These differences of conceptualization of care and education across countries led to many difficulties in making comparisons and we subsequently produced a chart that highlighted the differences across countries in order to further inform our review process.

We finally adopted a minimalist, pragmatic approach. We defined 'care' as provision offering six hours a day or more of care for children – in other words longer than a full school day and long enough to offer working mothers an opportunity to have their childcare needs met or partly met. We defined 'education' as a system that followed an agreed publicly-stated curriculum. Having reached agreement on a pragmatic definition of integrated care and education we then had to take a further pragmatic step. It was decided that these aspects of provision might, in some cases, be deducible from the study's context (i.e. the country in which the research took place). In Norway, for example, *all* childcare is state-funded and state-organized, and by default, open more than six hours a day and organized around a formal curriculum. Provision in some countries, however, is less predictable. It was decided that, for studies from such countries to be included in the review, use of a publicly-stated curriculum and opening hours of six or more hours a day needed to be described in the study's report(s).

The definitions we finally set out in the protocol were as follows:

- *Care*: institutional (i.e. not by childminders or relatives) and full-time (i.e. open at least six hours a day, five days a week).
- *Education*: a formally agreed framework for a curriculum and delivery of activities arising from the curriculum, for example, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA/DfES, 2000).
- *Integration*: this combines the above definitions of care and education – that is out of home care for six hours or more *and* a formally agreed curricular framework and delivery of activities for children aged between birth and six.
- *Impact*: in the sense of outcomes for children including pleasure, well-being, health, cognitive change or language development, behavioural change, test and exam performance, and long-term social integration and social and emotional adjustment outcomes such as juvenile delinquency rates. We did not limit the definition of 'long-term'. We also used impact in the sense of outcomes for mothers and fathers, including maternal and paternal health and well-being; maternal and paternal employment rates; improved parenting skills; and changed relationships with child.
- *Processes*: analysis and discussion about how any changes appear to have been effected, such as through particular staffing arrangements; pedagogies; choice of curriculum; health-promoting activities; access; parental support; and funding.

These definitions were translated into inclusion and exclusion criteria, that is, a precise statement of what we would and would not include in the review. We also had to set a time frame and chose 1975 to the present; and languages, which were restricted to those covered by members of the group. (See the Appendix for details of the inclusion–exclusion process in the first review.)

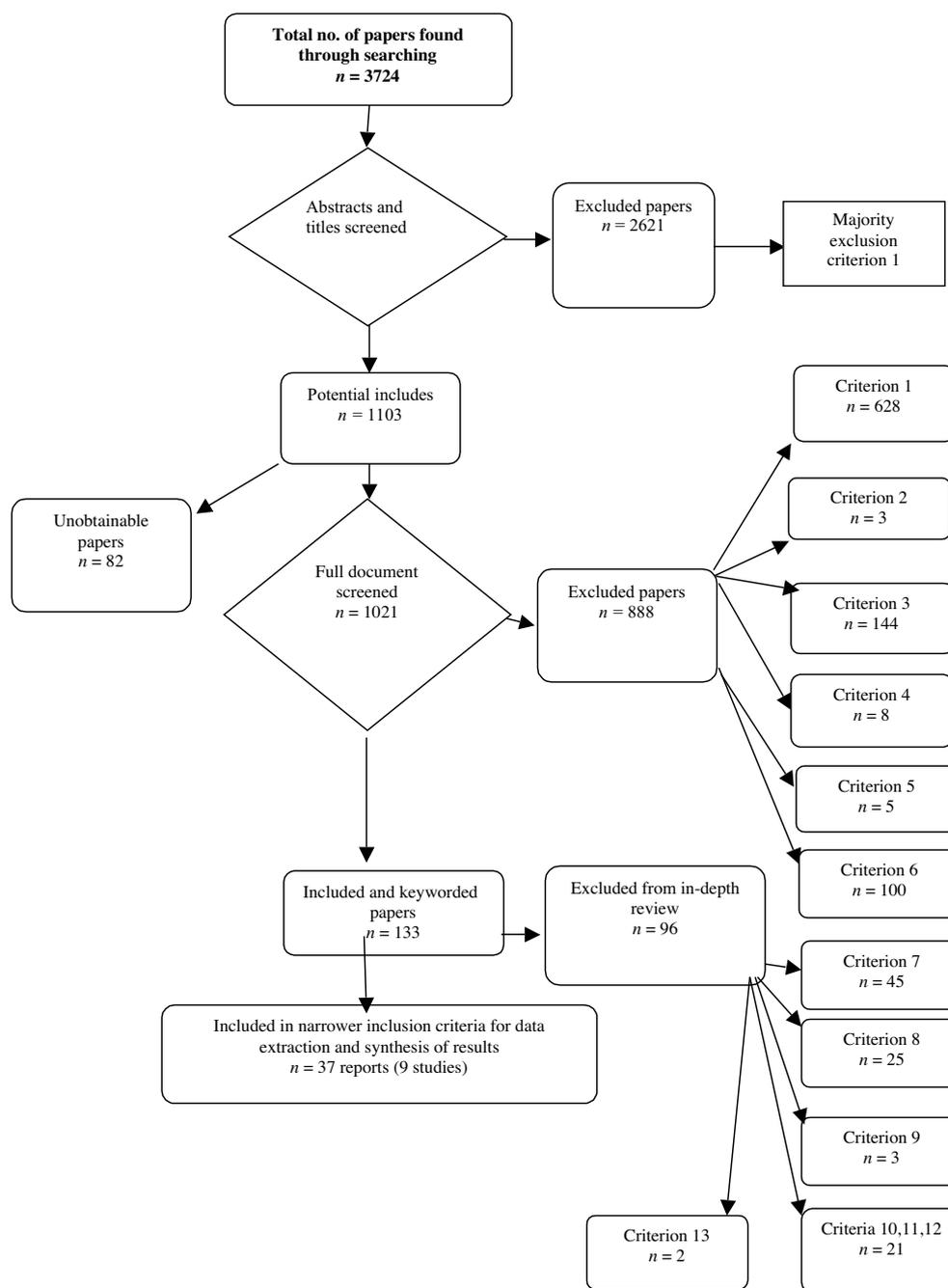
We went through the same processes of defining and redefining the research question and setting the language base and time frame in our two other reviews. In the second review, on young children and armed conflict, we considered how direct experience of armed conflict might be described, and we extended the time frame to take account of studies taken immediately after the Second World War. Our third review, the most controversial of the three, explored longitudinal cost–benefit studies of centre-based early childhood interventions. We explicitly excluded studies that were not centre-based, that is, various parenting or home-visiting programmes because of the difficulties of comparing like with like. We shortened the time frame again, because of the difficulties inherent in longitudinal studies, and defined longitudinal as a minimum of 15 years in our inclusion criteria. In the first two studies, we were prepared to include 'grey publications' (for example, publications about local projects, which were not in peer reviewed books or journals) in our search strategy. This meant using local contacts to track down local research,

following up citations, and hand searching. In the event, although we found some useful background material, we were not able to use any of the 'grey publications' directly as part of our reviews because none of them met our stringent reporting requirements in the third study. We only found three studies that fell within our initial inclusion criteria of longitudinal cost-benefit studies, although we did discover many secondary studies, that is, re-analyses of the original data. These three studies, the Perry High Scope, the Abecedarian and the Chicago Parent Child Centers, are all very well known, and re-interrogating them, given their iconic status in the literature, was somewhat problematic (see below).

### **the mapping stage**

For each review between 3000–5000 possible papers were identified by keyword searches.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion and exclusion criteria developed as a result of the research question, were then applied to the abstracts and titles by a team of students and the database researcher, with quality assurance checks on approximately 10 percent of the results. Figure 1 illustrates this process for the integrated early care and education review. Typically, a majority of papers were excluded as irrelevant to the research question (an indication of current weaknesses in the literature in key-wording articles and providing abstracts). Around one third of the abstracts were followed up and the papers and books were obtained and catalogued, using university libraries and inter-library loans (which the research budget underwrote). A small proportion was unobtainable. The full papers were then scrutinized by members of the group, using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Members of the group, in pairs, read and coded the remaining papers so as to classify them in general terms and enter them on to REEL.<sup>3</sup> The map of studies gave a broad characterization of research studies that broadly addressed the research topic. As an example of this filtering process we illustrate the mapping stage, again from our first reviews (see Figure 1). The mapping process for the second review was broadly similar, but in our third review, there were only three cost-benefit studies that met the initial inclusion criteria. However, the interventions themselves generated many studies about their outcomes over time. We retrieved 58 of these intervention studies (i.e. those at the beginning of the intervention, describing the detail of how they were set up, and those at the end of the period, describing the outcomes). We also obtained most of the secondary economic literature re-analysing or offering economic commentaries on the outcome data. In this review, for extra clarity, the reference list gives a set of references for each of the three interventions, and a separate set relating to the secondary literature.

**figure 1** filtering of papers from searching to map to synthesis for first review



## **selecting studies for the in-depth review**

Following the descriptive mapping, if the number of studies were still large, the group created an additional set of criteria to select a smaller number of studies to review in depth. For the first review, we applied additional inclusion and exclusion criteria, and we finally selected nine studies for in-depth analysis, three from the USA, three from Scandinavia, one from France, one from Israel and one from Taiwan. In the second review, we found 13 studies that met our initial criteria, but after applying further inclusion and exclusion criteria, we selected three studies for in-depth review, one from Eritrea, one from Bosnia, and one about Sudanese refugee children in Ethiopia. As mentioned, for review number three, there were only three studies that met our initial criteria of longitudinal, cost-benefit studies of centre-based interventions.

To reduce time spent trying to abstract information from reports with minimal methodological reporting, we also decided that, to be included at the in-depth stage, study reports would need to present readers with study research questions or hypotheses, and would need to describe the methods used and study participants, that is, the sample. In essence, this amounted to requiring studies to be written up in such a way as to allow replicability. Applying the reporting criteria (EPPI-Centre, 2003a) was something of a revelation for the group. We realized how many studies in the field of early years were poorly reported, and did not contain sufficient information about the research question, the research methods or the research sampling. Like other EPPI review groups, using the review tools led us to the uncomfortable realization that much research may or may not be of poor design and implementation but is too badly written up to be able to judge its quality. The research question may not be clearly stated, samples and sampling frames not made clear, methods of analysis not spelt out, results not given in full, and ethical considerations rarely made explicit. Our focus on 'what works', that is, research designs that had outcomes which were clearly demonstrated, rather than on process issues, did privilege quantitative data. Some authors, for example, Chatterji (2004) argue that process issues are as important as outcome issues and both should be fully reflected impact evaluations. We return to this point below.

All comparative research presents problems of comparing like with like, but in the case of our review of integrated provision, this was a particular hazard. Researchers usually take their own systems of education and care for granted, and do not attempt to describe them clearly for an international audience – nowhere more so than in the USA. In the field of early years, provision for young children differs greatly (OECD, 2001/2006). This finding echoes Petrosino's (2000) similar objections to certain, non-systematic, reviews in the area of early childhood programmes where the nature of what is being compared is not made fully explicit.

## **detailed description of studies in the in-depth review**

The EPPI-Centre in-depth review is done online via REEL using the EPPI-Centre Guidelines for extracting data and quality assessing primary studies in educational research (EPPI-Centre, 2003a, 2003b). These guidelines, used for a wide range of educational research, not just early years, draw out details (extract data) on the aims of the study, the nature and characteristics of the intervention, the nature and characteristics of the sample, the methods of analysis of the study, the outcome measures, results and conclusions. As indicated above, studies were assessed for 'weight of evidence' (high/ medium/ low) on three criteria, soundness of method, appropriateness of method, and relevance, which are combined to give an overall weighting.

Reviewers worked independently in pairs to conduct data extractions of these studies. A percentage of data extraction findings were quality assured by a member of the permanent EPPI-Centre team. The data extraction results are available on the web for anyone else to check.

## **discussing the findings**

The next stage of the review is to weigh up the evidence. The detailed description or in-depth data extraction summarizes the study designs, including sampling, methods used to obtain and analyse data, and ethical considerations. At the end of the data extraction, there is a judgement about the soundness and relevance of the studies selected as useful sources of evidence in answering the research question. The EPPI-Centre has attempted to make the process of weighing up the evidence as transparent as possible by using three sets of criteria in weighting evidence:

*on soundness of method* (that is the extent to which a study has been carried out according to accepted best practice within the terms of the methods used; on *appropriateness* of study type to answer the particular research question; and on *relevance* of the topic focus to the question being posed in the review. These separate judgements can then be combined in an *overall judgement* of 'weight of evidence' that determines which studies contribute most to the conclusions of the review. (Oakley et al., 2005: 17)

The data extraction and weighting of the evidence is carried out independently by two reviewers, and there is additional quality assurance from the EPPI centre team who also independently undertake data extraction on a proportion of the studies. In each of our studies, typically for EPPI reviews, the reviewers are not in complete agreement over the data extraction or the weightings. There is then a process of negotiation over the results, where the differences between the reviewers are discussed, and a consensus view is agreed. In our review of integration, for example, there was considerable discussion about one

of the studies where the narrative raised many of the issues we considered most pertinent – the difficulties in setting up and running an integrated centre but where, on closer examination, the description of the sampling was so poor, and the methods of analysis so unclear, that we downgraded our weighting to the lowest rating. In the second review, there was a continuing discussion about the validity of case study evidence, much used to describe psycho-social interventions. In the end, the group reluctantly decided such studies could not be used to answer a ‘what works’ question. In the third review, because of the iconic status of the three studies in question, and the group’s vulnerability to criticism in questioning them, we had considerable arguments with the economists in the group about the importance of the secondary evidence. Also, all the data extraction was quality checked by the central EPPI team.

## **the findings**

Our first review on integrated early care and education found that the ‘integration’ was far too loosely described – even in recent UK studies such as that of Sammons et al. (2003) – to be able to draw very firm conclusions. For example, the Sammons study argued that hours of care were a marginal issue in relation to educational outcomes and chose not to investigate it as a variable.

Using evidence drawn mainly from USA and Scandinavian studies, it was clear that full-time education and care provision for children before preschool age produced good outcomes for the children; but that the policy situation in the UK was too complex for this information to be of any direct use in current debates. The second review, young children and armed conflict, noted the extreme logistic and ethical difficulties in carrying out research in this area, but concluded that precisely because of the vulnerability of the children, it was important to have good evidence. The evidence available tended to support the view that what was most likely to support such vulnerable children was ‘normalization’, being able to get on with their lives, rather than specific psycho-social programmes. The third review, as we have stated, only found three longitudinal studies, all from the USA. On close scrutiny, the evidence was variable and open to a variety of interpretations. The main cost-benefit analysis in two of the three studies were based on estimates of savings arising from the reduced likelihood of crime in the intervention group; but the third study found no differences in crimes committed between the intervention and control groups. In addition the studies were highly context specific, that is, African American children in ghettoized neighbourhoods.

## **conclusion**

The reviews are intended to inform policy-making, hence the emphasis on

'what works'. Ultimately, as reviewers in the more established fields of health research synthesis have commented (Chalmers, 2005), reviews can only provide reliable descriptions of interventions, their contexts and their effects and other associated phenomena. There is always a need for reviewers – and readers – to interpret how similar these interventions might be to those that could be implemented in particular contexts of interest, in other words to make 'a best guess'. As one commentator has put it, in relation to our third review:

Having applied the strictest of rules, winnowed out almost all studies and shown the limited application of even those remaining, shouldn't someone be lowering the bar and bringing together the best guess kinds of research? Otherwise we run the risk of having a very tiny evidence base and ignoring those imperfect but nevertheless valuable pieces. (Schuller, 7 July 2005, personal communication)

This is the crux of the matter. Having been so very careful to be transparent, and to follow agreed procedures, we are still exercising judgement in considering how our findings might relate to our understanding of policy, practice and research. The point of being part of a specialist group – the early years review group – is that we have relied on our prior knowledge to shape the research question, and our perspective has continuously informed our work. As reviewers we have been more than automated technicians. Like all researchers, we have been trying to make a case based on the strength of our evidence, very carefully scrutinized, and the logic of our evaluation of that evidence. In the case of our third review, we did a considerable amount of background reading, over and above the particular studies we selected for in-depth review, in order to try to inform our perspective more fully.

We reported the concern at the beginning of this article that the EPPI systematic review process was unnecessarily detailed, and privileges particular kinds of evidence. We conclude that the process is very detailed, and certain kinds of evidence can be more useful than others in addressing impact questions, but that this kind of scrutiny and use of evidence, are very useful, especially when, as in our third review, we are questioning received wisdom. We have been forced into thinking more carefully about the nature of research into early childhood, and the uses it has been put to in justifying policy-making, even if our own results, in two of the reviews we have undertaken, are not as conclusive as we had hoped. Our three reviews are all published online so readers can judge for themselves.

In our three reviews, we have focused on 'what works' questions, since these are the kinds of questions policy-makers ask. RCTs and experimental designs offer the most robust answers to these kinds of questions. We have not tried to evaluate the process questions which are more typical of qualitative research, but the EPPI system does not preclude them, and indeed we would want to move in this direction, if we undertook a fourth review. Nor have we been constrained by government in our choice of questions – reviewing the impact

of war and armed conflict on young children does not fit in with current government agendas. The findings from our third review, that the headline figure of seven dollars saved for every dollar spent on early childhood interventions does not reflect the considerable variation in outcomes across time; and that the evidence is highly contextual and does not relate directly to UK concerns, is not a comfortable conclusion, given how much this statistic is cited. In all our reviews there is a discourse, where we try to explain how and why we have made our judgements. The REEL system allows for readers to comment on those processes. Such commentary is an established part of the Cochrane and Campbell reviews.

In terms of the starting point, the impact on policy-making, it would be naïve to suppose that the relationship between research and policy-making is ever linear or unambiguous (Chalmers, 2005; Gorard and Taylor, 2004; Pawson, 2002). We have discussed our protocols and findings at senior levels with policy-makers, but the precision of our questions and the many caveats of our answers, have been of very limited use to those making wide-ranging, value-based policy decisions. However, it has recently been claimed that:

a central issue concerns the ownership of, and access to, knowledge . . . authors of systematic reviews are called upon to make their judgements explicit; in the choice of question, the selection and appraisal of literature, and the interpretation of findings, and their efforts to involve others in making these judgements. (Oakley et al., 2005: 24)

Establishing procedures for such open scrutiny of the evolving research basis for policy decisions is a necessary part of a 'knowledge economy'. How and if such procedures become established, how revisions take place in the light of experience, depends on the support and commitment of policy-makers and academic communities more widely for such a process. We think that whatever its limitations, the systematic review process has proved a useful exercise in scrutiny and clarification of studies in the field of early years.

### **acknowledgements**

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### **notes**

1. To avoid confusion, these three reviews will be referred to here by abbreviated names: (1) integrated early care and education; (2) young children and armed conflict; and (3) early years cost-benefit studies.
2. It needs to be understood that the high proportion of excluded studies is currently a necessary artefact of variable indexing by bibliographic databases. Searches are highly sensitive so as to catch all the studies relevant to a review's question, at the

same time catching large numbers of studies that are not. Early childhood studies, for example, are indexed using scores of different terms, many of which have additional meanings and terms are applied inconsistently even amongst indexers working for the same database (a search solely using the term 'nursery' runs the risk of finding studies of plants and baby fish and missing studies that are actually focused on nursery care for children).

3. To help develop a central register of educational research, all review groups use a set of core codes, with accompanying definitions. The version used for this review is the EPPI-Centre's Educational Key-wording System (version 0.9.5). This system codes for aspects such as the topic focus of the study, population on which the study focuses (e.g. teachers, learners, etc.), age and sex of study participants and learners, and the contextual focus of participants in the study (e.g. curriculum and educational setting of the participants). It also captures study type (e.g. description, exploration of relationships, evaluation).

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**appendix 1: Inclusion criteria for the two stages of the review**

Studies at the mapping stage were included if they met ALL of the criteria numbered 1–6 below:

1. *Study focus is on one or more examples of the provision of integrated care and education, where integrated care and education is defined as:*
  - institutional
  - which is open for at least six hours a day, five days a week, and
  - has a formally agreed curricular framework and delivery of activities.

*and the study is not of*

- specific teaching methods devoid of their context within integrated care and education
  - the progress of children with disabilities unless the provision also offers integrated care and education
  - primary school based provision unless it is also stated that it offers extra care outside normal school hours.
2. *The provision under study is aimed at children aged six years old or younger*

The provision might ALSO be for older children, for example up to age eight (current UK childcare legislation refers to children 0–8) but needs at least in part, to be aimed at the birth to six age range. Where the age range provided for is wider than birth to six, 50 per cent of the population being provided for should be younger than six. Longitudinal studies, where the age of the children during all or part of the intervention meet the above criterion, will also be included.
  3. *The study is evaluative, in other words it*
    - evaluates the impact of provision on children's and/or parental and/or service providers and/or community outcomes or evaluates the processes involved; and/or
    - is a review of such studies.
  4. *The study is published in one of the following languages: English, Dutch, French, Bengali, German or Spanish.*
  5. *The study is reported after 1974.*
  6. *The study is reported in a format other than a thesis.*

To be included in the in-depth review, studies had to meet all of the above criteria, plus all of the criteria numbered 7–13 below.

7. *The study evaluates effects on outcomes.*
8. *The study is a primary study and not a review.*
9. *The study is about children's or parents' outcomes.*

10. *The study research questions are stated* (i.e. the author(s) provide a succinct statement describing what the study is trying to find out/explore/describe/discover/illuminate etc. Research questions could be stated in the abstract, in the introduction/background section or in a separate section entitled, for example, 'aims/objective').
11. *At least some information is reported about the study methods*, in each one of the following areas: the tools and/or people used to collect data; how the tools measured/captured the phenomenon under study; and sampling and recruitment methods.
12. *At least some information is given on the sample used in the study* (i.e. the units from which the data were collected) for at least two of the following characteristics: age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, health status, children attend for how many hours/full time or part time?, other relevant characteristics.
13. *Provision starts before age 5.*

# The Interface between Childcare, Family Support and Child Poverty Strategies Under New Labour: Tensions and Contradictions

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*New Labour's national childcare and family support strategies have been aimed at improving mothers' labour market participation and children's future educational achievements. As such, they constitute a key component of the child poverty agenda. HM Treasury has assumed a pivotal role in furthering the strategies' objectives. This article explores whether the mixed market economy selected as the vehicle to deliver childcare and family support provision, promotes separate markets for the poor and the better off, while hindering the achievement of child poverty strategy outcomes.*

## Introduction

Writing shortly after the Labour Government first took office, Daniel and Ivatts (1998: 145) observed that:

no other aspect of the post-1945 UK welfare state has failed children so badly as its policy on early years education and care.

From 1997 a raft of Labour Manifesto proposals concerning the provision of early childhood education, childcare and family support provision, were swiftly translated into policy and strategic action plans addressing this fragmented field (DfEE, 1998). These were set out alongside other family policy proposals from the newly established Ministerial Group on the Family in a wide-ranging consultation document, *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998), ranging across five domains. *The National Childcare Strategy* (DfEE, 1998), was identified as a key factor in achieving the overall objectives of three domains: (1) better services and support for parents, including targeting disadvantaged areas through the *Sure Start* family support initiative, (2) better financial support for families through the tax and benefit system and (3) helping families balance work and family life by promoting family friendly working practices and increasing family-related employee rights. *Supporting Families'* primary focus was on developments in England, as it followed the ratification of four UK devolution acts, which enabled the devolved jurisdictions to lead these and other social welfare policy areas.<sup>1</sup>

With an explicit role in promoting mothers' employment and children's future educational achievements as a means of addressing child poverty, the *National Childcare Strategy* aimed to ensure universal access to quality and affordable childcare<sup>2</sup> for children aged nought to 14 in every neighbourhood. As part of this strategy, New Labour introduced a universal entitlement to free early education for all three- and four-year old children,

reflecting a 'public good' vision of education in general (OECD, 2006). The majority of four-year olds were already enrolled in reception classes of state primaries, though. Early education for the remaining four-year olds and three-year olds was to be provided within the mixed economy of statutory and private providers; the latter sector qualified for receiving the Early Education grant, provided a new early years curriculum was implemented (Duffy, 2006). Most free early education for three-year olds continued to be delivered by the for-profit and not-for-profit private sector (Butt *et al.*, 2007). Eventually, the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007) would extend this entitlement to certain disadvantaged two-year olds.

In contrast, a complex mix of short-term and tapering, supply-side subsidies to childcare and family support providers was introduced to encourage the development of wrap-around childcare services, early childcare for under threes and school-age childcare, while tax credits acted as a demand-side subsidy to help employed parents with registered childcare costs. The entire system of demand- and supply-side subsidies was intended to stimulate the childcare markets (Pugh, 2006: 12). To promote integrated early education and childcare provision nationwide and simplify the system for both children and parents, over one hundred integrated settings, many developed from maintained nursery schools, became designated 'Early Excellence' centres, intended as models of good practice.

Simultaneously, in 1998 the Treasury played a pivotal role in establishing the multi-agency *Sure Start* initiative, a targeted programme for children aged three and under and their families living in disadvantaged areas. Designed to improve both children's quality of life and school readiness (Glass, 1999; Belsky *et al.*, 2007) and informed by USA longitudinal research whose applicability to the UK situation is problematic (Penn *et al.*, 2006), *Sure Start* delivered family support along community development lines with a great deal of parental involvement. Its mix of family provision included parenting education, drop-ins and crèches, family health provision and job advice, but not childcare. It clearly reflected the 'welfare model' of early childhood provision in targeting mothers in order to support their parenting (Penn, 2007: 196). This type of family support remained distinct from the package of support measures to help parents balance work and family life, which was subsequently developed by the Department of Work and Pensions (Lewis and Campbell, 2007).

Alongside *Sure Start*, the *Neighbourhood Nurseries* initiative, rolled out from 2000 in England, represented the first large-scale programme aimed at substantially expanding childcare provision in disadvantaged areas and demonstrating how integrated early education and childcare could be delivered through a mixed economy of private for-profit and not-for-profit and statutory providers (NAO, 2004; La Valle *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2007).

Right from the start, the Labour Government's childcare and family support strategies reflected a clear anti-poverty focus, both in their promotion of parental employment, especially that of mothers (Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001) and in their emphasis on improving children's educational performance (Gregg and Machin, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001). These policies were informed by economic and policy research in industrialised nations, suggesting that mothers' employment was central to creating a route out of poverty for children and their families (Solera, 2001; Vlemminckx and Smeeding, 2001). These strategies became key to the emerging child poverty agenda (Lloyd, 2006), itself part of a wider anti-poverty agenda initiated by the Treasury (HM Treasury, 1999, 2001).

Rigby *et al.* (2007) draw attention to the longer-term social and political consequences of early childhood education and childcare policy designs selected by policy makers.

Taking examples from a major OECD comparative study (OECD, 2001, 2006), they illustrate how policy formation institutionalises ethical and value-laden positions and dominant paradigms, which in turn influence subsequent social and policy debates. They conclude that:

What makes this process so critical is the institutional stickiness of policy designs, which makes it difficult to alter a course of action once a particular institutional arrangement has been adopted. (Rigby *et al.*, 2007: 106)

The implications of New Labour's childcare policy decisions for their interface with the child poverty strategy were to emerge gradually. The extent and stark nature of child poverty and social exclusion in Britain in the late nineties had been extensively documented (Gordon and Pantazis, 1997, Middleton *et al.*, 1997; Gordon *et al.*, 2000). While spending on children increased (Sefton, 2004), its effectiveness would remain in doubt (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005; Harker, 2006).

Rather than as a response purely to national conditions, both New Labour's focus on child poverty<sup>3</sup> and the high profile given to childcare and family support evolved against an international policy background, informed by European (Ruxton and Bennett, 2001) and global anti-poverty policy initiatives, such as the 1995 Copenhagen Summit. Labour inherited both the previous administration's commitment to overall poverty reduction, and its aspiration to realise the rights of British children under the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including their right to an adequate standard of living stipulated by Article 27 (UN, 1989).

New Labour's initial childcare strategy strongly reflected the views of US economist James Heckman on the impact of investment in the early years (Heckman, 2000), as well as the impact of the 1997 European Employment Strategy, which resulted in the 2000 Lisbon Declaration by European leaders. This committed the EU to becoming by 2010 the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world (EU High Level Group, 2004). During the nineties, the OECD's Education and Training Directorate (OECD, 2001) had undertaken a comparative and thematic review of 12 member states' early childhood systems. A substantial public investment in services and their infrastructure was identified as a key element of policy likely to promote equitable access to quality childcare provision for children as an entitlement in their own right.

Conveniently for Labour policymaking (Penn (2007: 193), these recommendations were later flatly contradicted by the OECD's Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (OECD, 2003, 2005), who considered increasing maternal employment as the primary rationale for investment. Nevertheless, other OECD reports also emphasised the economic grounds for treating early childhood care and education as a 'public good' (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2003) and thus avoid social stratification (Leseman, 2002). Subsequent UK developments proved at odds with the policy direction suggested in either category of OECD reports.

### **Childcare, welfare reform and the Third Way**

At the level of national politics, New Labour's childcare and family support policies need to be located within the wider context of its welfare reform agenda. Driven by Third Way politics (Giddens, 1998, 2000), this emphasised the coupling of (welfare) rights with

responsibilities; predictably, children's own position within the rights and responsibilities debate remained contested (Such and Walker, 2005). Such reforms, aimed at creating a sustainable welfare state, had a clearly defined dual purpose:

A revitalised welfare state has just two purposes – to move people into work or into new skills. The days of open-ended welfare need to end. (Latham, 2001: 27)

Again, Britain was not alone in pursuing this agenda. At the time, welfare state retrenchment and the increasing subordination of social policy goals to economic ones could be widely observed in democratic capitalist welfare states (Swank, 2005), although the incompatibility of economic competitiveness with high levels of welfare spending would continue to be questioned (Hay, 2005: 197).

Given this context, the question arises: how central were the issues around quality of life, education, welfare and optimal development of young children themselves within such policy developments? Reflecting on the first Labour administration, Hendrick (2003: 206) argues that Third Way thinking did acknowledge the actual and potential impact on children's welfare of the three major transformations in society: globalisation, the emergence of the knowledge economy and the changes to the structure and functioning of the family. However, children's place within the new society, their place within their communities and within their families, had not yet been worked through at the time of the first Labour administration (Hendrick, 2003: 209).

While acknowledging that the profile of young children and childcare had been raised early on in Labour's first term, Daniel and Ivatts (1998: 166) warned that:

any optimism that the current consensus will provide a new deal for young children must be tempered by the fact that the debate has . . . been far from child-centred. Whether on the needs of working parents or the requirements of the economy for a skilled workforce, the debate has, in the main, been dominated by adult concerns.

This warning proved prescient. The principle of 'progressive universalism' (HM Treasury, 2001) shaped provision for the poor or those less able to compete in the employment market, presumably including children, i.e. some support for all from public funds, but most for those most in need of it. High priority was given to improving children's life chances and the pledge made to eliminate child poverty altogether by 2020 (Blair, 1999). However, as welfare policies evolved, rhetoric concerning citizens' rights and responsibilities still figured prominently (Brewer *et al.*, 2002). Under New Labour the dominant discourse around child poverty was to remain in terms of potential loss of human capital (Hendrick, 2003: 212).

With New Labour's early childhood policies subservient to the aim of welfare reform, childcare and family support, like other health and welfare services, were delivered within a mixed economy of welfare (Powell, 2007; Stewart, 2007), underpinned by neo-liberal free market principles. The emphasis on the private-for-profit and the private-not-for-profit sector entering into service delivery partnerships with Government continued the trend set under the previous Conservative Government, although the marketisation and privatisation of childcare provision became even more pronounced after 1997 (Cohen *et al.*, 2004; Penn, 2007).

In this way, the UK consolidated its position among the Anglo-Saxon or liberal welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999), which:

emphasise targeted policies including means-tested benefits, and prioritise the market with government intervention in the case of acute market failure. (Moss *et al.*, 2003: 6)

Only a summary of the wide and complex range of New Labour's early childhood and child poverty policies and strategies can be provided here, but in-depth discussions are available elsewhere (Cohen *et al.*, 2004; Pugh and Duffy, 2006).

### **Childcare and child poverty under New Labour: tensions and contradictions**

Even during its first term in office, New Labour's package of childcare and family support policies came in for some criticism from early years organisations, practitioners, managers, academics and policy analysts, primarily because of the complexities of their implementation and the burden placed on providers by the volume and short-term nature of childcare funding strategies. Penn (2007), though, considers that the majority of academics and advocates in the field of early years persistently ignored the implications for poor children of the political shift in Labour's thinking, which prioritised the economic benefits of women's labour market participation over the redistributive function of a universal, publicly funded and equitable system of early childhood education and care provision uncoupled from parental employment status.

Expansion of provision largely occurred among day nurseries for children under two (DfES, 2001). The interface between demand and supply side childcare subsidies was characterised by anomalies and caused problems for parents and providers (Lloyd, 2000). The universal free early education entitlement for three- and four-year old children covered only twelve and a half hours of provision weekly during term. Parents of children this age therefore needed 'wrap-around' childcare provision if they were to take any paid work. To qualify for childcare tax credits parents needed to work at least 16 hours. Moreover, modelling the economic impact of different formats of childcare subsidy, Duncan *et al.* (2001) concluded that they might influence parental choice and quality of provision without encouraging maternal employment. Eventually, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (House of Commons, 2007: 6) would highlight the persistent failure of the tax credit system.

Although the early education targets for three- and four-year olds were achieved, variable levels of childcare availability for children aged nought to 14, especially at atypical times, caused significant pressures for families (La Valle *et al.*, 2002; Dex, 2003; Statham and Mooney, 2003). Research uncovered a variety of parental attitudes towards maternal employment and the use of formal childcare for very young children, and a preference for informal, and hence unregistered, childcare for this age group (La Valle *et al.*, 2000; Woodland *et al.*, 2002). In the changing policy environment, mothers continued to struggle to reconcile paid work and family life (Skinner, 2003), while entering paid work seriously complicated the daily lives of lone mothers and their children (Sutherland, 2002; Bell *et al.*, 2005a).

Among policy analysts, Cohen *et al.* (2004: 195) claimed that a gulf remained between the principles underpinning childcare and early education services, although Smith (2007) would conclude that the first ten years of Labour had amounted to a

quiet revolution in early childhood services. Moss (1999, 2001) regretted that Labour eschewed the opportunity to rethink the purpose of early childhood services and create a more coherent system of early childhood provision in favour of maintaining some of the problematic divisions by which it had previously been characterised. According to Penn and Randall (2005: 79) these problems not only reflected the:

constraining legacy of previous policy and provision, but must also be related to the way childcare has fitted into the wider government agenda, and 'Third Way' discourse.

Maintaining the split between publicly funded early education and a subsidised market in childcare for working parents and largely paid for by them, hindered poor children's access by preventing the development of an equitable and universal childcare system (Moss *et al.*, 2000; Brannen and Moss, 2003).

The more disadvantaged children, who stood most to gain from good quality provision (Melhuish, 2004), particularly those from Black and minority ethnic families, were more likely to encounter segregated and lower quality provision, unless it was statutory (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). Although the poorest parents in a UK study were keen on childcare for their children for social and educational, rather than primarily economic reasons, they often failed to access it (Ghate and Hazell, 2002).

*Sure Start* remained on target, as funding had been earmarked for an unprecedented ten-year period. Budget underspend was the main financial issue confronting *Sure Start* in its early years (Ball, 2005; Tunstill *et al.*, 2005), but it faced several challenges associated with its area-based nature (Barnes, 2007). First, the majority of poor children lived outside disadvantaged areas (Tunstall and Lupton, 2003). Next, the governance and administration of such initiatives not only placed considerable burdens on local delivery partnerships when operating in an environment of highly centralised and directive policymaking, but also suffered from problems of representativeness and accountability (Cabinet Office, 2000). Finally, a look at the history of area-based UK and USA anti-poverty initiatives would have revealed only a minor impact (Alcock, 2005).

To fight child poverty, Bradshaw (2001), cited in Hendrick (2003: 211), contended that Labour should have pursued redistributive policies much more actively and early on. He went as far as to claim:

In fact, the first two years in office of this Government were dire for poor children. (Bradshaw, 2001: 10)

According to Hendrick (2003: 211), the primary reasons for any early lack of vigour in tackling child poverty can be traced back to New Labour's need to clearly differentiate itself from Old Labour's 'tax and spend' image. Working initially within the spending limits set by the Conservatives was part of that. Sutherland and Piachaud (2001) concluded that while there had been a reduction in British child poverty levels towards the end of Labour's first term, they remained high relative to other European nations, while Brewer *et al.* (2003) demonstrated that the statistically significant decline in child poverty levels might have been related to the choice of poverty line.

### **Refocusing childcare, family support and child poverty strategies**

Towards the end of its first term in office, the New Labour Government was forced to confront the unintended consequences of the free market approach to its early

childhood and child poverty programmes. As a consequence, the Treasury took on a more prominent childcare policy role, alongside its role as the lead department for poverty. The *Inter-Departmental Childcare Review* (Cabinet Office, 2002) heralded a significant early childhood policy reorientation early during the second Labour administration (2001–05), which culminated in the publication of the *Ten Year Strategy for Childcare* by HM Treasury itself (HM Treasury, 2004a). For an in-depth analysis of the changing role of HM Treasury in relation to early childhood policies in the first six years of Labour, including its emphasis on the volume of childcare and relative neglect of the issue of quality, see Cohen *et al.*, (2004).

Even before the publication of the *Childcare Review's* recommendations, the *Spending Review* (HM Treasury, 2002) announced increased childcare budgets, as well as a more strategic and responsible role for local authorities. A closer relationship between education and employment was forged through the creation of the Interdepartmental *Sure Start* Unit, as the Department for Work and Pensions' programme of parental leave and family friendly employment policies dovetailed with the childcare and family support programme within the overarching framework of the strategies to help parents balance work and family life (Pugh, 2006).

Although the *Childcare Review* acknowledged that in the short term the market alone would not deliver the substantial increase in childcare places needed to support the Government's employment and poverty targets, especially in disadvantaged areas, it reiterated its longer-term vision of a childcare market, in which every parent could access affordable, good quality childcare. Hence it proposed only 'market failure' remedies for the interface problems between the childcare and poverty strategies. For instance, yet more supply-side, but only pump-priming, support to providers in the public, private for-profit and not-for-profit sectors.

An early decision had been taken to complement family support in the original *Sure Start* programmes, renamed *Sure Start Local Programmes*, with childcare provision for working parents (Tunstall *et al.*, 2005). Alongside Neighbourhood Nurseries, Early Excellence Centres and other settings, they were transformed into less generously funded Children's Centres, one for every English community by 2010. Initially aimed at disadvantaged communities, they offered childcare, health and family support services for young children and their families and links to training and employment services, (Pugh, 2006). That childcare even in these settings should become self-sustaining remained axiomatic, although the likely financial viability of provision targeted at poor families, once supply-side subsidies were phased out, had already been seriously questioned (Harries *et al.*, 2004).

Rolling out the National Extended Schools Programme alongside the Children's Centre initiative reinforced the distinction between targeted and universal provision. Extended Schools would offer school-based wrap-around and holiday childcare provision, study and parenting support in every primary and secondary school by 2010. But the challenges faced by these integrated programmes in going to scale have been documented in several reports (Cummings *et al.*, 2006; NAO, 2006; Ofsted, 2006).

The vision for childcare articulated in 2002 was predicated on three factors: first creating employment opportunities for mothers – poor, lone and black and minority ethnic mothers in particular – second, persuading them to take these up and, third, consequently stimulating demand within the local childcare markets. Yet mounting evidence suggested that neither the routes towards achieving such conditions, nor their projected benefits, would prove obvious or straightforward (Brewer and Shaw, 2004; Brewer and Shepherd,

2004; Kemp *et al.*, 2004; Kazimirski *et al.*, 2006). Even full employment might not guarantee the disappearance of child poverty and social exclusion (Gordon *et al.*, 2000).

At the interface between childcare and family support strategies, a new agenda to improve developmental, educational, health and economic outcomes for all children and narrow the gap between the poor and better off, was announced in the 2003 Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, given legal force in the 2004 *Children Act*. This reform agenda for the delivery of children's services entailed both the improvement and integration of universal services, such as in early years' settings and schools, and the reconfiguration of family support services around children and families in one place, and delivered by multi-disciplinary teams, as in Children's Centres and Extended Schools (Pugh, 2006). Despite this becoming a major element of Labour's childcare policies, evidence of any direct impact on the uptake of childcare and family support, and resulting implications for child poverty levels, was scant, while the effectiveness of strategic partnerships remained in doubt (Percy-Smith, 2006).

Building on the *Every Child Matters* agenda, the refocused *Ten Year Childcare Strategy* formulated the next steps to achieve the original childcare strategy's objectives of affordability, choice, sustainability, flexibility and quality, which had all been found lacking in an impact assessment by the National Audit Office (2004).

Crucially, the *Ten Year Strategy* also reflected the findings from the *Child Poverty Review* (HM Treasury, 2004b) and an even more explicit convergence with the Government's child poverty strategy became apparent:

This strategy will not have succeeded if, along with its other achievements, it will not have helped more of this generation and the next out of poverty and worklessness. (HM Treasury, 2004a: 4)

On the cusp between New Labour's second and third term, it became clear, however, that this strategy, too, failed to address the needs of poorer families, such as large families, families with a disabled child or parent, and minority ethnic families (House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2004; Dickens *et al.*, 2005; Bell *et al.*, 2005b; Kazimirski *et al.*, 2006). Even in Sure Start Local Programmes, black and minority ethnic children were shown to be at a disadvantage (Craig *et al.*, 2007).

The provision of childcare for the children of workless parents, or those working in the 'grey' economy, remained problematic (Dickens *et al.*, 2005). Surprisingly, for middle-class parents, too, the childcare market was not operating according to the markets of economic theory (Ball and Vincent, 2005). A survey found over a third of parents paying for the supposedly free early education entitlement (Butt *et al.*, 2007). Childcare not being free even within the new Children's Centres deterred families with the greatest needs from accessing their services (NAO, 2006; Ipsos-MORI, 2006).

The publication of interim findings from the 'National Evaluation of Sure Start' (Melhuish *et al.*, 2005) proved a turning point. Reaching out to the poorest and most excluded families had been problematic, while there was also some evidence of adverse programme impacts on these children and their mothers. It had always been virtually impossible to reconcile its aims with those of other care and educational policies for young children (Clarke, 2006), while its very role in combating child poverty was questioned by Rutter (2006, 2007).

it is not in the least bit self-evident that a lack of employment or a lack of parental initiative led to the huge rise in child poverty that took place in the 1980s and early 1990s... However

worthwhile the *Sure Start* initiative, it seems implausible that child poverty could be dealt with satisfactorily without more radical changes in taxation and benefits. (Rutter, 2006: 139)

Emerging evidence of significant improvements in children's circumstances and parental employment in *Sure Start* areas (Barnes *et al.*, 2006), of positive impacts on family functioning after several years (Belsky and Melhuish, 2007) and of the factors influencing variations in programme effectiveness (Anning *et al.*, 2007) has only been partially taken into account in the development of the Children's Centre model.

Maternal employment rates, meanwhile, had remained almost static between 1994 and 2004 (ONS, 2005) undermining one of the main tenets of New Labour's welfare reform. Rising child poverty levels, however, posed perhaps the greatest challenge to realising the *Ten Years Strategy's* ambitions (Brewer *et al.*, 2007; Shaw, 2007). As half of all children in poverty in the UK lived within working households (Palmer *et al.*, 2007), increasing employment alongside childcare provision in disadvantaged areas could only be part of the answer. On a par with its economic and academic repercussions for children's life chances (Goodman and Sianesi, 2006; Feinstein *et al.*, in press), the social costs of poverty for children warranted an urgent and multi-faceted response (Attree, 2007).

### **Consequences of the mixed economy of childcare**

In Labour's third term the primary response to the problems identified above has been to interrogate the workings of the childcare and family support markets (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2006a, 2006b), rather than to revisit the neo-liberal principles underlying welfare and public sector reforms and to question the very basis on which services for young children are provided.

The Government has reaffirmed its commitment to the mixed economy of childcare in the *Childcare Act 2006*. This introduces a requirement on Local Authorities to secure sufficient provision locally for employed parents, while themselves only acting only as 'provider of last resort'. From 2008 they have more discretion and flexibility to fund diverse local childcare markets, taking account of 'provider sustainability' (DfES, 2006). Both private for-profit and not-for-profit providers are expected to contribute to the delivery of childcare and family support services in Children's Centres and Extended Schools.

In the swiftly transforming childcare and family support service system in England, the private for-profit sector has assumed a dominant role. Market conditions have favoured the corporate childcare sector, which has grown sevenfold since 1997, after a good deal of consolidation (Penn, 2007: 202). In 2007, private for-profit providers, both corporate chains and sole traders or small partnerships, made up 78 per cent of the UK children's day nursery market, as compared with 11 per cent each supplied by the private not-for-profit and public sectors (Laing & Buisson, 2007).

In such a market, pressure for deregulation is increasing, as evidenced by the Code of Practice introduced to address the issue of private providers charging parents 'top-up' fees for delivering the early education entitlement (DfES, 2006). Could the protection of providers become a significant policy driver in this not-so-free market? In contrast with the predictions of economic theory, two successive Ofsted overview reports have failed to produce evidence for major quality improvements, despite rising childcare costs (Ofsted, 2006, 2007).

In Australia, where childcare corporatisation has progressed apace, Sumsion (2006: 99) asks whether support for continued expansion of corporate childcare chains is

ethically justifiable, while a secondary analysis of longitudinal US data has confirmed quality repercussions of provider status, with private for-profit chains scoring lowest overall (Sosinsky *et al.*, 2007). According to a Canadian study (Cleveland *et al.*, 2007), standards in not-for-profit and maintained provision are higher by about 15 per cent than in the for-profit sector, while in the UK several studies provide critical evidence of the very mixed performance on quality by the UK private for-profit childcare sector (La Valle *et al.*, 2007; Mather *et al.*, 2007).

The delivery of integrated early childhood education and care in the UK is bedevilled by the contrast between child-focused early education, which arguably is being treated as a 'public good', and childcare, which is regarded as a commodity to be purchased by parents. This 'sticky policy design', to use Rigby, Tarant and Neuman's (2007) description, coupled with New Labour's persistent belief in a market approach to social welfare provision, has affected all institutional arrangements in this area. Under these circumstances it is uncertain even whether the planned extension of the free early education entitlement for three- and four-year olds to 15 hours weekly by 2010 (Kazimirski *et al.*, in press) will make much difference to accessibility.

Yet a policy approach that generously funds integrated early childhood education and care as a 'public good' does have a sound theoretical basis (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2003). International evidence demonstrates that:

Without strong state investment and steering of this field, the result will be an insufficient supply of services for those who need them most, leading to increased numbers of children with special needs and learning difficulties; a lack of equity for poorer families; and overall poor quality of provision. (OECD, 2006: 256)

Among OECD member states, the UK is in a minority of liberal economies featuring a strong private market in this area, whereas compelling evidence exists that markets do not work effectively in all parts of the public sector (Greener, 2008). The *de facto* situation in other OECD member states supports the argument that predominant public funding has strong social and educational rationales (OECD, 2006).

## Conclusion

Faced with this evidence, the question is warranted whether the impact of New Labour's child poverty strategy is being undermined by the free market approach informing childcare and family support strategies. The coupling of early childhood provision with parental employment status and its link to markets in integrated childcare and family support, appear particularly problematic at both a pragmatic and a principled level. Apart from the early education entitlement, access to quality childcare provision is not free for poor children in either of the two parallel early childhood provision systems currently operating here. Not only is this particular market inequitable, it is also inefficient and lacking in quality (Ball and Vincent, 2007).

In the light of the Treasury Committee's call to Government to intensify its efforts to meet its child poverty targets (House of Commons, 2007), addressing the interface problems between the Government's child poverty and national childcare strategies as part of this task would appear to make sense. The evidence presented here suggest that, as a first step, uncoupling the provision of childcare from parental employment status and extending a free entitlement significantly to children in their own right, might have

beneficial impacts on the lives of young children growing up in poverty and counter social stratification.

Arguably, with Labour now in its third term, key issues concerning the social, moral and political status of children as social actors in their own right remain unresolved. For instance, relevant official documents remain ambivalent as to whether they or their parents are the consumers of childcare and family support provision. In addressing the position of children within its policies and reforms, any Government is faced with the need to balance the interests and views of parents, children and the state itself (Archard, 2003). The present analysis of the interface between Labour's childcare, family support and child poverty strategies suggests that so far this balance remains tipped in favour of the perceived needs of the state.

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### **Notes**

1 Developments in England form the main focus of the present paper.

2 This paper adopts the Government definition of formal childcare that encompasses all forms of early education and childcare for children from birth to compulsory school age and out-of-school care for school age children, but not informal care by for example grandparents and other relatives.

3 Child poverty is defined as children living in households with less than 60 per cent of median household income, the Government's definition.

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## Professionalising the Early Childhood Workforce in England: work in progress or missed opportunity?

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**ABSTRACT** This article considers policies and strategies employed to professionalise the early childhood workforce in England since the Labour government took office in 1997. The term 'professionalisation' is associated here with moves towards creating a graduate early years workforce, which could have implications for training, pay and employment conditions, the specific body of knowledge and the professional identity of early years practitioners. The new status of Early Years Professional is explored, which has its legal underpinning in the 2006 Childcare Act. The discussion is informed empirically by the views of a small sample of practitioners training as Early Years Professionals. It is argued that the concept of professionalism applied here does not meet the criteria employed within sociological theories of the professions. It also contrasts with that of other professions working with young children, such as qualified teachers and social workers. Finally, it conflicts with early years practitioners' own views on their professional identity. This process could therefore be regarded as representing a missed opportunity in professionalising the role of early years practitioners in England, but instead it is viewed as a work in progress, in the light of evidence for early years practitioners' professional attitudes and commitment.

### Background

This article considers policies and strategies employed to professionalise the early childhood workforce in England since the Labour government took office in 1997. The term 'professionalisation' is associated here with moves towards creating a graduate early years workforce. This may have implications for training, pay and employment conditions, the specific body of knowledge and the professional identity of the early years practitioners who are the target of these developments. Early years practitioners [1] make up only part of this workforce, alongside teachers and social care professionals. In recent years, great efforts have gone into this process of professionalisation. Yet, the British government has neither fully defined the notion of the early years professionalism being progressed here, nor paid sufficient attention to the possible implications of the historical routes along which different types of practice in working with young children emerged (Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009). Consequently, the historical, practical and philosophical divide that exists between early childhood care and education appears to have been strengthened rather than resolved by this development.

After a general introduction to the recent history of early childhood workforce issues in England, locating these within a theoretical framework, this article's focus shifts to the exploration of a newly created 'status' for early childhood practitioners, obtainable to those with a degree-level

qualification (McGillivray, 2008). The status of Early Years Professional [2] has its legal underpinning in the 2006 Childcare Act. The discussion in this article is informed empirically by the views of a small sample of practitioners training as Early Years Professionals. It will be argued that the meaning of professionalism as used in this context does not meet the criteria employed within sociological theory or match that used in relation to other professions working with young children, such as qualified teachers and social workers. Moreover, it appears to conflict with early years practitioners' own views of their professional identity. Therefore this development may represent a missed opportunity in progressing the professionalisation of the role of early years practitioners in England.

The conceptualisation of professionalism within sociological theories of the professions owes much to the work of Max Weber (1978). In his view, professions as competing interest groups are typical of the conflicts inherent in society as a whole. Pursuing this line of argument, subsequent theorists have demonstrated how monopolisation of specific and exclusive knowledge and skills, group member solidarity, restricting access to learning opportunities and requiring accreditation to practise continue to be employed in the maintenance of professions and professionalism. However, these can only be achieved with support and cooperation from governments, educational institutions, other professions and the public (Macdonald, 1995). Paradoxically, altruism, integrity and long-term professional commitment may also flourish within the context of monopolistic strategies, as the threat of competition diminishes. Finally, the restrictions on access to the professions and strong group identities help position professionals favourably in relation to negotiating enhanced pay and employment conditions (Freidson, 1994). Such a traditional and power-based sociology of the professions approach may overlook disempowering dynamics inherent in professionalisation practices. Given that the characteristics associated here with professional status can be viewed at least as prerequisites for professional practice and leadership, we nevertheless consider it apt in the present context.

The increasing professionalisation of early childhood practitioners and the meaning of the notion of professionalism in this context is contested by several European academic writers (Moss, 2008; Oberhuemer, 2008). Urban (2008, p. 136) notes the emergence of 'contradictory debates on the early years profession that have gained new prominence in many countries in recent years'. Thoughtfully questioning the link being assumed by policy makers between a particular model of professionalisation and the achievement of quality targets, Urban takes the side of those, like Dahlberg et al (2007), who believe that 'too often the language of "quality" is employed to legitimise the proliferating maze of regulations in early childhood education and care, and to undermine instead of support professional autonomy' (Urban, 2008, p. 138). Arguably, though, an implicit assumption is made here as to a definition of professionalism capable of being contrasted with alternative approaches. In contrast, in the present article we merely test the prevailing definition of professionalism as used in the construction of Early Years Professional Status in England against the criteria developed originally within the sociology of the professions. In order to develop this argument, we first need to illustrate where early years practitioners did and do fit within the wider early years workforce.

### **Traditional Divides within the Early Years Workforce in England**

Traditionally, England's early childhood education and care system has featured divides between early childhood education, childcare for the children of employed parents and childcare delivered as part of child welfare services. Until the reforms instigated by the Labour government after 1997 (Lloyd, 2008), these divides were not only reflected in administrative responsibilities at central and local government level, underpinned by separate types of legislation, but also within the early childhood workforce itself. Moreover, early childhood care and education services were split between services for children aged three to five and for those aged under three (Moss & Penn, 1996; Cohen et al, 2004). Early childhood teachers qualified to degree level were in charge of the delivery of early childhood education in state-funded and sometimes in private for-profit and not-for-profit nursery schools and classes for children aged three to five, while a range of predominantly unqualified early childhood practitioners were either employed in childcare facilities in state-funded, private and community day nurseries or as childminders providing family-based

childcare aimed at younger children (Mooney et al, 2001). An interesting discourse analysis by McGillivray (2008, p. 252) reveals the absence, until recently, of an established job title which clearly identified the role and nature of these diverse early years practitioners working in England, illustrating who is an early years professional. Oberhuemer's (2008, p. 137) observation that in countries of the European Union operating split early years education and care systems, education professionals tend to be more highly valued than other types of childcare practitioners is illuminating in this context. Social workers took a lead in child welfare services for young children and their families, which also employed a range of family support workers (Tunstall et al, 2007). Some so-called integrated settings combined all three strands of early childhood provision and a variety of early childhood worker types (Penn, 2000). Since the early 1960s, parent-led part-time playgroups, staffed largely by parent volunteers, had formed another distinctive component of the English early childhood service system (Lloyd, 1989; Statham et al, 1990). Despite the diversity of early childhood provision and variety within the early childhood workforce, until the late 1990s parents and children were not offered a real choice of provision, as distribution and prevalence were locally determined (Penn & Randall, 2005), with early childhood provision traditionally more common in Labour local authorities and reflecting social stratification (Moss et al, 2000).

In England, early years workforce policy and its status for a long time echoed public attitudes towards the role of early years practitioners. Having been socially constructed as being primarily about 'minding' or 'caring', in contrast with the role of early years teachers (Hevey & Curtis, 1996; McGillivray, 2008; Miller, 2008a), this role only gradually came to be perceived as skilled and responsible, notably after the introduction of the Children Act 1989. Although collaborations between the different types of practitioners within and across a variety of early childhood settings would be referred to as multiprofessional interactions (David, 1994; Anning et al, 2006), a gap in professionalism arguably continued with respect to the early years practitioners in such multiprofessional collaborations. After all, their position failed to meet criteria such as graduate status, accreditation by a professional body and formal pay structures. The whole situation surrounding the early childhood care and education system and those working within it underwent considerable change though, when in 1997 a Labour government took over after 18 years of Conservative rule.

The New Labour government's National Childcare Strategy (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) addressed inequalities of access, although Ball & Vincent (2005) illustrate the failure of such policies to eliminate the social stratification of childcare and early education. The strategy ushered in genuine administrative changes at central and local government level, and also encouraged greater coordination between the three strands of early childhood provision (Pugh, 2006). For the first time, a universal entitlement to two years of part-time publicly funded early education for three- and four-year-olds was introduced (Cohen et al, 2004). By 2004, the implementation of this policy was complete and, since 2007, part-time early education has also been provided for targeted two-year-olds living in disadvantaged areas (Smith et al, 2009).

Characteristic of this provision is an emphasis defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as 'preparation for school', in contrast with a social pedagogical approach oriented towards support for children's wider development within the context of their families (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). Notably, though, a setting's receipt of early education grants has been tied to the delivery of a prescribed early years curriculum by a range of early years practitioners, rather than to the status of the practitioners delivering it, so the role of acknowledged education professionals – for instance, qualified early years teachers – has not been extended as part of these developments (Devereux & Cable, 2008).

Early years workforce issues featured prominently on the Labour government's early years policy agenda and the interconnectedness between teaching and early childhood practice in particular was emphasised in policy documents. Nevertheless, in the National Childcare Strategy, the institutional and conceptual divide between the early childhood teacher and practitioner was maintained, inherited as it was from previous administrations going back to the nineteenth century (Moss, 2007). This fact alone provides sufficient grounds to posit that the attempted professionalisation of the early years workforce in England since 1997 cannot be defined as a true reconceptualisation.

Early childhood education and child welfare services remain predominantly staffed by practitioners and managers neither qualified to degree level nor licensed to practise by a professional body, i.e. they are not members of a professional workforce as defined above. Some analysts, therefore, remain of the view that none of these developments opened up new possibilities for rethinking the early childhood system as a whole or reconceptualising the early childhood education and care workforce (Moss, 2003; Penn, 2007). We now locate recent developments in professionalising the early years workforce within their wider post-1997 policy context.

### **The Early Years Workforce in England under New Labour**

The most recent moves towards the professionalisation of the English early years workforce, including the creation of the status of Early Years Professional, are taking place against a background of related developments. Seen from an outsider perspective, this approach towards professionalisation is bound to come across as complex and fragmented, but even for British observers its highly technical nature, the limited innovation it represents and its opaque policy rationale remain problematic (Moss, 2008).

The simplification of the existing early years training framework was first tackled in 1997 under the first Labour administration and supported by a range of funding initiatives (Owen, 2006). No targets for upskilling the workforce were introduced at this stage, however, and neither was the discourse surrounding professionalisation of early years practitioners evident as yet. Most importantly, financial support for training remained patchy and additional qualifications were not reflected in pay and employment conditions.

Miller (2008a) provides a useful reminder of previous attempts at professionalising the sector. Under New Labour, professionalisation through graduate status in the early years was initially encouraged by means of the Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree. This introduced a new employment status, Senior Practitioner, which the government intended to enable practitioners to be valued as professionals and gain recognition for their achievements (Department for Education and Skills, 2002). By 2007, over 360 students had qualified as Senior Practitioners after obtaining this degree, making it the most frequently gained among all foundation degrees. But their role and subsequent career path remained ill-defined (O'Keefe & Tait, 2004), while many felt let down by unfulfilled professional recognition (Hallet, 2008). As will be argued below, the Senior Practitioner's role was reconceptualised and replaced by the new status of Early Years Professional.

According to Calder (2008), lack of transparency also characterises the contribution made to professionalising the early years workforce by means of the United Kingdom's early childhood studies undergraduate and postgraduate university degrees, which have been developed since the early 1990s. The challenges anticipated and experienced by such students in constructing their professional identity have been well illustrated by Jones (2008) and by Adams (2008) in a Scottish context.

Active moves towards professionalising the early years workforce were reinforced by a much wider initiative informed by the *Every Child Matters* (Her Majesty's Government, 2003) policy agenda, legally underpinned by the Children Act 2004. Following a major child abuse inquiry in which inadequate interprofessional working had been identified (Laming, 2003), this agenda initiated substantial reforms in delivering children's services. This reform programme entailed a restructuring of the six categories of practitioners comprising the children's workforce as a whole and reconceptualising cross-sectoral relationships with a view to improving outcomes for all children and young people (Deakin & Kelly, 2006). The discussion of this wider children's workforce framework within which changes to the early years workforce are taking place falls outside the remit of this article, therefore we will concentrate here on the practical steps taken to effect the latter's professionalisation under three Labour administrations.

Following the case made in the 2003 Laming Inquiry for the skilling-up of all parts of the children's workforce to encourage successful multiprofessional collaboration, *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: a ten year strategy for childcare* (Her Majesty's Treasury et al, 2004) unveiled plans for the promotion of early years workforce training, qualifications, skills and competence (Owen & Haynes, 2008). Explicit targets for the professionalisation of the early years workforce in

England were only formulated during the third Labour administration, with the publication of the *Children's Workforce Strategy* consultation document (Her Majesty's Government, 2005), the government's response to this (Department for Education and Skills, 2006a) and the plans for an associated integrated qualifications framework for the children's workforce as a whole to be implemented in 2010 (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b).

Recognising the need for public investment to realise the proposed changes, the government in 2006 introduced the Transformation Fund, now the Graduate Leadership Fund, explicitly designed to allow the employment of a graduate early years practitioner or early years teacher in each group childcare setting. In the same year, the Children's Workforce Development Council (2006) announced plans for 70% of the early years workforce to be qualified to vocational training level 3 by 2010. Himmelweit & Land (2007) acknowledge that training for the early years workforce has received more short-term funding than other parts of the social care workforce, but they also point out that staff turnover and early years setting closure rates may undo any of its longer-term beneficial effects.

The Ten-Year Strategy for Childcare reflects the government's position on the professionalisation of the early years workforce. This has been reiterated at least three times: in the 2007 policy review of children's services (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007); in the latest review of the children's workforce change programme (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008b); and in the second major review of the National Childcare Strategy (Her Majesty's Government, 2009). This professionalisation is being realised through a very gradual transformation into a graduate workforce.

The key role envisaged within such a workforce is that of a graduate Early Years Professional, a status which was initially described as equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status, though this interpretation would be consistently contested by teaching unions. In this role, an EYP is expected to improve practice only in settings within the private, voluntary and independent sector, but not in maintained schools (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2008a). The choice as to whether to implement a professionalisation of the entire early years workforce by the introduction of this status as opposed to professionalising only the leadership in early years settings obviously made for a serious policy challenge. The latter strategy has won the day thus far, as we shall see in the next section of this article.

### **The Status and Role of the New Early Years Professional**

Present government targets include having an Early Years Professional in every full day-care setting by 2015 and in children's centres as early as 2010 (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2008a), with two graduates in settings in disadvantaged areas. As yet, no longer-term targets for the professionalisation of the remainder of the early years workforce, apart from its leaders, have been set. Who are the practitioners and who are the candidates for this new status, and how is it attained?

It would appear that the Senior Practitioner's role described above has been rethought and replaced by the nationally recognised award of Early Years Professional Status, which provides a career progression route from the Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree to graduate professional status. The standardised training is funded for practitioners providing full and sessional day-care in private for-profit and private not-for-profit early years settings and within children's centres (National Audit Office, 2006), but not for practitioners working in maintained – i.e. publicly funded schools. The creation of this new status is thus explicitly aimed at professionalising the private early years sector and, by implication, raising its service quality.

In the light of previous experience with the Senior Practitioner role, the EYP role must not only be credible, but also capable of being embedded within the early years sector, particularly as many foundation degree graduates with Senior Practitioner Status are undertaking the EYPS Long Extended Professional Development Pathway. This pathway is one of four separate part-time and full-time vocational training pathways towards gaining EYPS, which have been in operation since 2006, fully funded by the Children's Workforce Development Council. Two alternative routes are being piloted at the time of writing. For the full-time pathway, candidates can be graduates in any

subject and no prior experience or knowledge of work with young children is required. Admission to different pathways, some work-based, depends on levels of prior training and experience.

In order to attain EYPS, candidates must satisfy their assessors that they can meet 39 predetermined standards, organised into six separate sets of knowledge, understanding and effective practice. These sets cover the following areas: knowledge and understanding; effective practice; relationships with children; communicating and working in partnership with families and carers; teamwork and collaboration; and professional development (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2008b). It falls outside the scope of this article to question why learning domains concerned with creativity, dance, drama, music, etc. are excluded, when the notion of education is inextricably linked to broadening of learning opportunities and insights.

Early Years Professionals are expected to take a lead role in delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, the statutory programme for children from birth to five years delivered in all types of registered early years settings. This programme was introduced in the Childcare Act 2006 and has been rolled out since September 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). At the time of writing, in early summer 2009, some 35 training providers, mostly universities working in partnership with employers, have helped just over 3000 graduates achieve the Early Years Professional Status. The Early Years Professional is intended to be a 'change agent', whose achievements are meant to result in raised standards in early years settings (Miller, 2008a, p. 23). Being a professional leader within the early years sector is an emerging concept, explicitly connected with raising standards (Jones & Pound, 2008).

Research is yet to demonstrate that this new role is having an impact on quality of provision and children's outcomes, but the very assumption of a simple linear relationship between workforce reform and service user outcomes is problematic. In a discussion of the complex interaction between structural and process factors influencing quality in early childhood education and care provision, Leseman (2009) identifies staff qualifications as only one such factor, and unlikely to have a major impact on their own. In a review for the Children's Workforce Development Council of the evidence for the effectiveness of workforce reform, Broadhead et al note that:

It is clear that whilst we have an emerging and growing knowledge of processes, particularly in terms of new forms of multi-disciplinary working, we need to know much more about outcomes and impact. The major challenge for future research is to explore how workforce reform links to outcomes and impact and to provide an assessment of concrete outcomes for service users and clients. (Broadhead et al, 2008, p. 10)

Academic analyses of these developments highlight the confusion arising from the EYP role in relation to what constitutes professionalism (Miller, 2008a, p. 28); the prevalence of continuing support for a non-graduate pathway into the profession (Owen & Haynes, 2008, p. 12); and evidence that increasing regulation and prescription may undermine rather than promote early years professionalism and turn practitioners into 'technicians' delivering a set of national standards (Osgood, 2006). Moss (2008) strongly puts the case for a professionalisation of the entire early years workforce, not just its leadership, as part of a 'democratic professionalism' in which early years professionals are no longer set apart from teachers.

Other early childhood research does positively relate early childhood practitioner training and qualifications to children's outcomes. Both the OECD survey of early childhood education and care systems in 20 member countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2006) and a major longitudinal study of the relationship between the quality of provision and children's later educational progress (Sylva et al, 2004) drew attention to the effect of practitioner qualifications on early years service quality and children's outcomes. Indeed, Sylva and her colleagues recommended an enhanced role for teachers in early years settings on the basis of their findings. Such recommendations appear to have been ignored in the plethora of policy documents describing moves towards professionalising the early years workforce in England.

Denied the status of a qualification, the new status of Early Years Professional has been positioned almost in opposition to existing qualifications, such as those of early years teacher or children and families social worker. Thus, it reflects the Labour government's decision not to increase the number of qualified teachers in leadership positions in settings for children from birth to age five. Neither has the European model of the pedagogue been selected as a format for

promotion (Oberhuemer, 2005). It would be difficult to argue that the professionalism criteria of monopolisation of specific and exclusive knowledge and skills or of requiring accreditation to practice previously identified by theorists of professionalism are fully met by early years practitioners currently working as EYPs in early years settings.

If we return to the criteria for professionalism outlined in the first section of the present article, some other dimensions traditionally associated with increasing professionalisation and enjoyed by the teaching profession, such as professional accreditation and nationally determined pay and employment conditions, do not appear to form part of this early years professionalisation process either. Miller concludes that:

the diverse roles and responsibilities of early years practitioners, the variety of settings they work in, and the lack of a professional registration body and formal pay structures make it difficult to agree what constitutes an early years professional in the English context. (Miller, 2008b, p. 266)

Owen & Haynes (2008, p. 17) highlight interesting evidence from early government documents for the view that skills and qualifications should be rewarded fairly, but recognise that 'references to pay and rewards are absent in later documents, and it appears that government is moving away from a commitment to review pay, conditions and rewards, at least in the short term'.

Halfway through the period of the Ten-Year Strategy for Childcare, the recently published review of the strategy (Her Majesty's Government, 2009) does not offer concrete proposals in this respect either. Three points relating to quality of provision stand out in particular by virtue of their tentative nature and the likelihood that they will not be realised under prevailing economic and political conditions. These are that the government, working with partners, will:

- ensure that everyone working in early years provision has a full and relevant qualification of at least level 3 (equivalent to A level) and consider making this a requirement from 2015;
- consider making it a legal requirement that every full day-care setting has a graduate from 2015; and
- develop career pathways and reward commitment and excellence across the workforce (Her Majesty's Government, 2009, p. 8).

The childcare advocacy agency Daycare Trust (2008) has argued in a position paper developed with the support of the Trades Union Congress that failing to improve pay and conditions for the early years workforce may jeopardise other initiatives aimed at raising quality and qualifications. Such improvements were also urgently demanded in a recent survey of EYPs by a United Kingdom union (Willis, 2009), which will be discussed in the next section of this article.

Meanwhile, a national vocational qualification at level 3 remains the highest qualification level legally required of managers of registered early years group settings (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). The 2007 Early Years Providers Survey (Nicholson et al, 2008) confirms that while 64% of early years practitioners are now qualified to this level across the early years workforce and across all settings as a whole, only 11% of this workforce are qualified to level 6 or above, i.e. that of EYPs and qualified teachers. In contrast, in full day-care provided in children's centres and in nursery schools, around 80% of staff hold at least a level 3 qualification. So, to what extent does the position of EYPs working within this framework match the remaining criteria for professionalism listed in the first section of this article, namely group member solidarity and professional identity?

We now turn to listen to newly qualified EYPs and those in training, as their views are essential to gaining an insider perspective on EYP professional identity, including their sense of belonging to a well-defined professional group.

### **The Views of Early Years Professionals**

Given that the first graduates to acquire EYPS did so only in 2007, it is perhaps not surprising that their views and experiences have not yet been widely explored. What does it mean to be an EYP, to demonstrate professionalism, to promote the professionalisation of a sector that has been historically regarded as low status, due to the female-gendered workforce and their associated role of caring for children (Kay, 2005)? Professionalism in the early years is complex, and has been likened to a ball of knotted string. In order to untangle and understand the concept of

professionalism within the sector, all the knots of professionalism should be untangled. These include issues around gender, women's cultural and socialisation role in society and an understanding of leadership (Friedman, 2007), and access to specialised training and a specialised body of knowledge.

In view of the lack of research to date focusing on EYPs' views on their professional experiences, we offer two contrasting sources of information here. The first source consists of qualitative data collected by one of the present article's authors (Elaine Hallet) to gain an insight into practitioner attitudes towards the professionalisation of early years practitioners. The second source is a recent trade union survey of 300 EYPs and those on EYP training pathways (Willis, 2009), where qualified EYPs constituted 70% of the respondents.

Through small discussion groups Hallet explored the views of 20 EYP candidates on the EYPS Long Extended Professional Development Pathway at a training provider in the Midlands region. All candidates were women Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree graduates, experienced women practitioners working as nursery nurses, family support workers, day-nursery managers or children's centre managers. Four themes extracted from literature on the topic provided the focus for the discussion: professionalisation of the workforce, professional identity, professional attributes and belonging to a professional group. The participants contributed particular words they associated with the four themes and through the discussion a collective view emerged (Yin, 2003; Marinker, 2006) of diverse aspects of the developing concept of early years professionalism.

These EYP candidates viewed the professionalisation of the workforce at two levels. Firstly, they recognised the national agenda of raising the workforce's status and quality through higher qualifications with a view to raising the quality of provision and ultimately to improve outcomes for children. Secondly, at a personal level, they viewed it as 'being valued' within the workforce, achieving a personal goal of gaining a 'qualification' with related pay and conditions – although the latter expectation may not be realised, as we shall see. Referring to the 39 EYPS standards they were expected to meet in their everyday work in order to qualify for conferment of EYPS, they felt their work with young children and families was valued. Mostly positive personal and professional components to their own identity were mentioned: 'confidence', 'empowerment', 'pride', 'passion' and 'respect' as personal components, and 'improved status', 'a title', 'a qualification', 'role', 'behaviour' and 'recognition' as professional components of their individual identity as an aspiring EYP. Their views reflected a personal and professional confidence and an embracing of the EYPS ideal. Yet recognition and acceptance of the role within the public domain appears to be slow; indeed, Whalley (2008) contends that an understanding of the new professionalism within early years practice may take up to a generation to be accepted.

The views of these EYPs in training on professional attributes – the third theme – clustered around three topics: qualities and knowledge, interpersonal skills and leadership. In respect of knowledge, self-knowledge, particularly knowledge of their 'own strengths' was mentioned, reflecting a recognition of their newly found role of working with other professionals. Specialist early years knowledge and professional knowledge and experience were also considered important professional attributes. The EYPS as a graduate professional award does, of course, make a connection between the importance of a graduate level of knowledge and the notion of being a professional.

The EYP candidates viewed the following interpersonal skills and qualities as professional attributes: 'understanding', 'a listener', 'trustworthy', 'genuine', 'consistent', 'believing', 'passionate' and 'a risk taker'. Such views correspond to the two aspects regarded by Miller et al (2005, p. 25) as characterising professional behaviour: namely professional attributes and knowledge. Miller and her colleagues identified similar professional attributes such as 'commitment, conscientiousness and humanity' as being of particular value in education and care settings, alongside competence, knowledge and specific skills developed through professional practice.

Professional attributes associated with leadership were expressed in the discussion by the use of the following terms: 'motivational', 'to inspire others', 'being a role model', 'enabling', 'charisma', 'improves', 'progressive', 'strategic', 'decision maker' and 'delegate'. Their use suggested the candidates' understanding of the leadership aspect of the EYP role. An important

aspect of professional behaviour, it means that practitioners should be able to 'move thinking and practice beyond what is normally done' (Miller et al, 2005, p. 25). Leadership attributes and behaviours are required for this part of the EYP role and in the discussion such leadership attributes were clearly identified.

As for a wider professional identity as an EYP – the fourth discussion theme – the views expressed demonstrated an understanding of this at an individual level. Currently, though, there is no chance of a national professional identity through belonging to a distinct professional group which EYPs can join after achieving the status. According to Miller et al (2005), the establishment of a national professional group for EYPs could provide a forum to develop an understanding of professionalism within the context of early years practice; it could define a national understanding of the EYP role and of professional behaviours within that role to promote professional effectiveness. It could also collectively challenge policy and practice in a reflective way and provide professional credibility for the EYP within the early years workforce and the public domain (Osgood, 2006).

The aspiring EYPs' views on belonging to a professional group highlighted their need for a collective professional identity in 'a cohesive group', with a clear 'identification' and 'a sense of belonging', and a group characterised by a 'shared vision and understanding'. A need was acknowledged for a 'collective voice' with 'shared agencies' to be actively engaged in 'supporting change', a group that could operate as a vehicle for 'networking', to access 'training', to learn about 'policy and legislation' and to 'improve business'. The need for group member solidarity within a professional body, as expressed here, corresponds clearly to this key characteristic of professionalism recognised within the sociology of the professions. These practitioners' distinctly professional attitudes appear to clash with current realities. The lack of such a professional body provides yet more evidence of the problem surrounding the attempted professionalisation of the early years workforce along the lines described here.

Many of the views collected for this article coincide with those expressed in a recent member survey by the Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts (Aspect) of practising EYPs and candidates on EYP training pathways (Willis, 2009). This survey attracted 300 responses, 70% being from practising EYPs. Coincidentally, the views of aspiring EYPs explored above also suggest that Aspect, a small professional association and trade union representing United Kingdom professionals in education and children's trusts, including EYPs but not qualified teachers, may not yet be widely recognised by EYPs as a pertinent professional body.

The Aspect survey respondents expressed serious criticism of the conditions they experienced in their new role within the private for-profit and not-for-profit early years sector and the manner of their deployment. Lack of recognition of the new status and role, lack of career prospects, lack of parity with teachers, as well as scant improvements in pay and conditions after acquiring the status, formed major concerns. While most respondents acknowledged some benefits from this professional development for themselves, their colleagues, their workplace and the children using these settings, those working towards EYPS spoke out even more strongly in favour of key developments such as agreed pay scales and terms and conditions. According to the survey, 'it was noticeable above all how consistent across all groups the results are, and how clearly EYPs believe change is necessary and action must be taken if the EYP project is to survive' (Willis, 2009, p. 9).

The unequivocal reservations expressed here about the absence of the professional recognition, respect and reward considered their due by the practitioners surveyed serve to reinforce the argument that, in reality, this new professional status lacks most of the essential characteristics associated with professionalism. Concern is justified as to how long these EYPs can be retained in the children's workforce under these conditions, or the future likelihood of EYP training pathways remaining attractive to early years practitioners. This survey, too, highlights EYP professional attitudes and expectations coming into conflict with current workplace and workforce realities in England.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have employed a literature review coupled with EYP testimonies to argue that the creation of the Early Years Professional Status can be seen as a flawed attempt at professionalising

the early years workforce. We have supported our argument with reference to sociological theories of the professions, demonstrating how despite the best efforts and professional aspirations and attitudes of the practitioners involved, the new status fails to match each of the four main criteria identified there as characteristic of professionals and professionalism.

Rather than leading to a reconceptualisation of the role of early years practitioners, the creation of this new status appears to have exacerbated pre-existing institutional and conceptual divides between teachers and other practitioners working with the youngest children. Any crossover between EYPs and qualified teachers within the workplace is impossible, as EYPs cannot be employed in early years settings within the maintained sector such as in state-funded nursery classes and nursery schools. As a consequence of these limits set on EYP employment, young children may receive their early education and childcare from distinct groups of professionals, depending on the nature of the early years setting they attend.

Disappointingly, nowhere in this process of transition from a largely informal workforce to a more professionalised approach do we detect an impact on policy developments from the important debates concerning early years professionalism which are taking place elsewhere (Boddy et al, 2005; Dalli, 2008; Karila, 2008).

We have questioned whether the current process of professionalising the early years workforce should be described as a work in progress or, rather, as a missed opportunity. Evidence is presented here of commitment to professional practice, leadership and professional ideals among early years practitioners working as EYPs and studying on EYP training pathways. This, coupled with the fact that many of the identified constraints are eminently amenable to being addressed at central and local government levels and by national training and professional organisations, suggests to us that true progress remains feasible.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- [1] The terms 'early years' and 'early childhood' will be used interchangeably in this article, as the current government chose the term 'early years' in preference to 'early childhood' to denote a new category of professional work with young children: Early Years Professional Status. This term differs from the current terminology of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).
- [2] The full terms will be alternated in this article with the abbreviation EYP for Early Years Professional and EYPS for Early Years Professional Status, as used by the Children's Workforce Development Council in England.

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# Why do childcare markets fail?

## Comparing England and the Netherlands

In the last 10 years governments in England and the Netherlands have vigorously encouraged the growth of childcare markets but the very concept of a childcare market is problematic, contend Eva Lloyd and Helen Penn

**I**n childcare, England and the Netherlands have employed similar policy instruments: demand-side subsidies in the form of tax credits for parents using childcare and supply-side funding targeted at socially disadvantaged children and/or areas (Penn 2007, Noailly and Visser 2009). Both countries also introduced legislation specifically promoting childcare markets, the Dutch 2005 Wet op de Kinderopvang and the 2006 Childcare Act in England. This article, based on a comparative study of early education and childcare policy and provision in England and the Netherlands carried out in 2009, highlights some of the shortcomings of these policies. In highlighting two dissimilar European nations with similar childcare market policies that are equally problematic, the study strengthens the evidence that there are problems associated with childcare markets per se.

### The context

In both countries the number of children under 5 is about 6 per cent of the population (although England has three times the population of the Netherlands at 50 million inhabitants). The total female employment rate is similar in both at around 65 per cent (2007 figures), but in England women are more likely to work full-time (Moss and Korintus 2008). In the Netherlands, by con-

trast, there is a strong and widely held belief that mothers should only work part-time. Consequently, attendance at childcare facilities in the Netherlands is primarily part-time, especially for children under 3 (Plantenga and Remery 2009a).

The child poverty rate is significantly different in the two countries: it is low in the Netherlands at under 10 per cent, whereas in the UK, it is over 20 per cent, a very high rate by international standards (Bradshaw 2009), and one that has decreased only slightly in the last 10 years. In England much early childhood provision has been organised to try to target child poverty – most notably via New Labour’s Sure Start programme – and child poverty is a constant theme in policy, professional and practitioner discourses about services for young children (Lloyd 2008). In the Netherlands such discourses barely exist except in relation to minority ethnic populations.

### Childcare and early education

The Dutch and English childcare markets consist of mostly small for-profit businesses, comprising full and sessional group care, out-of-school care and family day care with childminders. Dutch not-for-profit playgroups primarily provide sessional social and developmental opportunities for children, notably for children whose first lan-

guage is not Dutch or with other additional needs. Until recent reforms, local authority-administered supply-side subsidies were used to stimulate and support – mainly not-for-profit – childcare provision in non-urban areas of the Netherlands, and waiting lists were common (Noailly and Visser 2009).

The main difference between the two countries is in relation to nursery education. In both countries 5 is the compulsory school starting age. In England a universal entitlement to free, part-time early education was introduced from 1997. Since 2004 all 3 and 4 year olds have been guaranteed such a place, while access is now being extended to targeted 2 year olds. However, English early education can be delivered by private for-profit and not-for-profit childcare businesses, provided they meet curricular requirements, which are less stringent than

## **In both countries childcare workers' pay and employment conditions are only loosely regulated and many childcare workers earn little more than the minimum wage**

those in the main education sector. Private providers are funded on a per capita basis by local authorities to deliver nursery education. England is almost unique in Europe in this use of the market to provide nursery education (NESSE 2009). So despite rhetoric about new nursery education places, most of this expansion has not been in state funded nursery classes and nursery schools, but has taken place within private childcare provision.

In the Netherlands, since World War II, children from their fourth birthday have had a right to free and mostly full-time early education in primary school nursery classes. There is no discourse about private market involvement in nursery education. It is too well established and too highly regarded.

Finally, informal care has also traditionally formed a significant proportion of childcare use in both countries; grandparents are the most common informal carers. Home-based care by nannies and au pairs has yet to be brought within the childcare policy remit in either country.

The profitability and sustainability of the childcare market are dependent on the low wages of those working in the sector; better qualifications mean higher rates of pay. Qualified teachers in early childhood education in primary schools and nursery classes earn considerably more than the childcare workforce, which on the whole is also very poorly qualified (de Kruif et al 2009, Lloyd and Hallet 2010). In both countries childcare workers' pay and employment conditions are only loosely regulated compared with those of qualified teachers and many childcare workers earn little more than the minimum wage in each country.

### **Regulating childcare markets**

The reason the Dutch and English governments adopted a market approach was to encourage business efficiency and a better balance between supply and demand, while extending consumer choice (Plantenga and Remery 2009b).

In England there has been standardisation and centralisation of childcare regulation. Ministerial responsibility is now concentrated in the Department for Children, Schools and Families, while childcare settings have been registered and inspected through the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) since 2001. Under the 2006 Act's 'childcare sufficiency' duty English local authorities must ensure the efficient operation of the local childcare and early education market of private providers. Such business should also operate a 'cost neutral' franchise model of childcare provision in extended schools as well as in Sure Start Children's Centres, located in disadvantaged communities and/or aimed at disadvantaged children.

**Table 1. Contrasts between childcare markets in England and the Netherlands**

England	The Netherlands
Free early education for 3 and 4 year olds and targeted 2 year olds in private for-profit and not-for-profit settings and in schools	School-based free early education from age 4
Tax credits for registered formal childcare	Tax credits for registered formal and informal childcare
Some private childcare, some listed on stock market	Some private childcare, not listed on stock market
Optional employer contribution	Mandatory, dual, employer contribution
Regulation by Ofsted, prescribed curriculum	Deregulation, no prescribed curriculum

After some years of stimulus measures, the Dutch, in contrast, moved towards decentralisation and an almost complete deregulation of the childcare market. In addition, a tripartite funding system was introduced, where parents, employers and the state shared costs equally. At central government level the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is now responsible for childcare and early education, while playgroups are administered by Public Health, Welfare and Sport. The Netherlands does not employ a unitary regulatory regime; childcare provision is inspected by the local public health authorities, while the local authority is tasked with registration. Regulation is light touch, with minimal quality requirements agreed on annually via a 'compact' between parent, provider and practitioner organisations.

The 2006 Act in England provides the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, to ensure a quality standard which early childhood settings must adhere to in order to qualify for the early education grant. Dutch childcare businesses on the other hand are required to produce no more than a 'pedagogical plan'. This requires an outline of the centre's vision on its work with young children in daycare and a specific description of working methods under five different headings, such as staff work roles, maximum group size and age profile within groups and the nature of support for children's social and emotional development.

Table 1 summarises the differences between English and Dutch childcare markets.

### Impact of reforms

The impacts of the childcare market reforms supported by the two countries' childcare legislation are summarised in Table 2.

In the Netherlands the overall uptake of registered childcare has been considerable since the 2005 Act, *Wet op de Kinderopvang*. Much of this has been via the provision of childminding by relatives. The number of registered childminders, including grandparents, has increased by over 200 per cent. There was a 16 per cent increase in the number of full daycare settings between late 2006 and late 2008. By far the largest increase, 68 per cent, was observed among businesses brokering childminding provision – agencies helping parents find a childminder (Paulussen-Hoogbeem and Gemmeke 2009).

Noailly and Visser (2009) suggest that the number of not-for-profit providers in poorer urban areas has fallen, but the number of for-profit providers in more prosperous areas has risen. According to the latest findings of the Dutch academic childcare research consortium, quality of provision is deteriorating (de Kruijff et al 2009). Compared with a similar representative sample of childcare settings studied in 2005,

**Table 2. Impacts of childcare marketisation**

England	The Netherlands
For-profit provision expansion and consolidation	For-profit provision expansion
Not-for-profit provision consolidation	Not-for-profit provision attrition
Surplus provision	Continuing waiting lists
Quality unchanged	Quality deteriorating
Budget underspend	Budget overspend
No policy change	Policy retrenchment
Parental costs remain high in two-thirds	Parental costs lower in one-third
Maternal workforce participation unchanged	Maternal workforce participation unchanged; remains mostly part-time
Move towards professionalisation of early years workforce, but no change in employment conditions	No professionalisation or significant change to qualifications of early years workforce

a significant worsening of the quality of the physical environment as well as a much impaired sensitivity and responsiveness in staff/child interactions were evident among the sample studied in 2008. Among provisional explanations identified by the research team were increased pressures on staff due to the industry's rapid growth, an insufficient focus in childcare training on working with very young children, and the limited childcare setting choice open to parents. As there are still waiting lists, parents are unlikely to move their children even if they are unhappy with the quality of provision.

Parental childcare costs in the Netherlands are now demonstrably lower than around the time of the Act's introduction in 2005. Because so many more families were using childcare, the 40 per cent rise in the uptake of childcare tax credits meant the annual childcare budget was a good deal over target. Had trends been allowed to continue, by 2011 childcare costs would have almost doubled to 3.5 billion from 2 billion in 2007, according to official calculations. Tax breaks for parents and employers alike accounted for 80 per cent of childcare costs on average. Draft legislation is now in the pipeline to amend the 2005 Act

(Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap 2009) in order to reduce the deficit and to change aspects of provision.

Interim measures due to come into force in 2011 include a freeze of tax credit levels. Even though claims for tax credits rose sharply, there was no corresponding increase in the numbers of mothers entering the workforce. This has led to an investigation by the Dutch tax authority and its Benefits Agency into possible fraudulent use of the childcare tax credit system. Limits will be set on the number of informal care hours per child for which parents can claim. The role of childminding brokerage bureaux, which link parents with providers and which recently played a significant role in 'formalising' informal care, is being significantly curtailed.

From 2010, grandparents will no longer be able to register as childminders unless they agree to certain conditions. These include a willingness to care for a certain number of children, not all from their own family, and/or for certain specified hours. All childminding provision will be linked to local daycare or out-of-school centres, both for support and for registration purposes. The maximum childcare tax credit contribution for childminding provision is now

lower compared with that for group care and quality criteria are also differentiated.

By and large in the Dutch context the effect of unintended consequences appears to have outweighed that of those that were intended (CPB 2009). Rough estimates suggest that 80 per cent of the childcare system funding is accounted for by public subsidies, yet this has not led to a significantly higher maternal employment rate (Berden and Kok 2009a).

In England the for-profit childcare sector has grown by 70 per cent since 2002. Private, for-profit UK childcare businesses now have a 72 per cent market share, while not-for-profit businesses have 17 per cent and the public sector 12 per cent. Small businesses constituted 75 per cent of the private, for-profit sector. Many nurseries, originally 'mom and pop' or single trader opera-

## In England a distinctive feature of the market is corporatisation

tions, have consolidated into larger operations. A distinctive feature of this market is corporatisation. Shareholder companies provide about 8 per cent of all UK childcare places in 2009. Most of these are subsidiary enterprises of offshore companies (Penn, in press).

Parents still pay about two thirds of childcare costs. These costs rose by 4.9 per cent in 2008 and by a further 5.1 per cent in 2009. Approximately 13 per cent comes from Government subsidies, which include fiscal support for employer contributions, while some 20 per cent is accounted for by direct and indirect employer contributions through workplace nurseries and childcare vouchers respectively. In practice, though, vouchers are paid for by parents with tax credit support (Blackburn 2009).

The precise allocation of childcare costs in England is opaque, due to the complex interface between the early education entitlement and tax credits (Goddard and Knights 2010). As in the Dutch market there

has been social stratification. Ofsted reports that poorer quality nurseries tend to be found in poorer areas and the best in wealthier areas (Ofsted 2008). Such stratification is particularly worrying given the clear evidence that only good-quality early years provision makes a difference to disadvantaged children's intellectual and social development while poor services have greater adverse effects on them than on other children (Sylva and Roberts 2009). The quality advantage of state-funded early education and childcare provision is demonstrated once again in the latest findings from the Millennium Cohort Study (Roberts et al 2010).

### Childcare markets in the recession

The Dutch government has cut back on spending and tightened regulation, although these developments have been more to do with the inefficiency of the market rather than with the recession. Providers now appear to be reluctant to enter this market or to expand (Berden and Kok 2009b).

In the UK there has been a decline in the number of places. Approximately 12,000 places were lost in 2009 (Ofsted 2010). Of 40 per cent of for-profit nurseries reporting their economic performance weakening, a third reported a 'significant worsening'; for every two childcare business start-ups there were three closures, a considerable turnover (Blackburn 2009).

Given the childcare strategy's emphasis on quality provision for disadvantaged children, childcare viability in Children's Centres ought to be a priority. Among Centres delivering childcare provision in a recent study by the National Audit Office, 53 per cent operated at a loss and only 6 per cent made a surplus (National Audit Office 2009). Moreover, in 58 per cent of Centres studied as part of the Government's bi-annual childcare provider survey, childcare and early education was provided directly by the local authority rather than by private providers, in direct contradiction

of the 2006 Act's provisions (Philips et al 2009). Lack of parental demand for more than the free early education removed provider profitability. Given that a significant proportion of nursery education is being provided within the market, this lack of sustainability undermines nursery education as well as childcare policies.

### Where next?

Given the evidence for the contribution of quality childcare and early education to young children's current and future well-being, irrespective of its role in enabling parental labour market participation, a strong case can be made in England for extending the free education entitlement to at least 20 hours (Goddard and Knights 2010), similar to the Dutch situation. France

## The evidence suggests that the very concept of a childcare market is highly problematic

opted for this model more than 30 years ago and nearly all French children from the age of two-and-a-half now receive 28 hours of free education weekly. In England nursery education is also the most popular option for parents, and has over 95 per cent uptake wherever it is provided (Speight et al 2010). Nursery education in schools also has consistently higher quality ratings than any other form of service (Hansen et al 2010). As the OECD points out, 'a public supply-side investment model managed by public authorities brings more uniform quality and superior coverage of childhood populations than parent subsidy models' (2006: 114). The evidence suggests that the very concept of a childcare market is highly problematic.

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