
Politics and power in the babycare business – Structural aspects of childcare provision

Politik und Macht im Baby-Betreuungs-Geschäft – Strukturelle Aspekte der Kinderbetreuungsinfrastruktur

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Abstract

Who cares for babies is an emotive topic that has challenged philanthropists, parents, policymakers, practitioners and researchers for decades. But as very young children's care outside the family home becomes increasingly commodified and marketised in many countries of the world, moral arguments are often supplanted by others grounded in micro and macro-economic reasoning, using scientific evidence as justification. Attention then turns to a neoliberal preoccupation with affordability, accessibility and the structural dimensions of quality in provision for parents. Babies and their carers are positioned as service users and providers and the latter feel themselves to be subject to the impact of market forces and those for whom these provide the authority to dictate its conditions: politicians, regulators, employers and consumers (parents). This chapter considers how perceptions of power can influence the nature of relationships between babies and their carers. It is based on research carried out in private and state-maintained day nurseries in southeast England since 2008.

Zusammenfassung

Die Betreuung von Babys und Kleinkindern ist ein emotionsgeladenes Thema dessen sich seit Jahrzehnten Philanthropen, Eltern, Entscheidungsträger, Betreuer und Forscher annehmen. Da die Betreuung von Kleinkindern außerhalb der Familie in vielen Ländern immer mehr kommerzialisiert wird, rückt die moralische Auseinandersetzung oft in den Hintergrund und wird von einer mikro- und makroökonomischen Argumentation verdrängt, die sich über wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse rechtfertigen will. Dadurch steht die neoliberale Sorge um die Finanzierbarkeit, Verfügbarkeit und die strukturellen Dimensionen der Angebotsqualität für Eltern im Vordergrund. Kleinkinder und ihre Betreuer werden zu Kunden und Dienstleistern, wobei die letzteren den Auswirkungen des dynamischen Marktes ausgesetzt sind und derer, welche die Macht haben, die Marktbedingungen zu diktieren: Politiker, Aufsichtsbehörden, Arbeitgeber und Kunden (Eltern). Dieses Kapitel geht der Frage nach, wie Macht und Machtausübung die Beziehung zwischen Kleinkindern und ihren Betreuern beeinflussen kann. Es gründet auf Forschungsarbeiten in privaten und staatlichen Kindertagesstätten im Südosten Englands im Jahr 2008.

1 Introduction: “On the agenda” – the context of childcare in England

The care of young children is no longer the exclusive preserve of families in England. Since the early 1990s, with political encouragement and financial incentives, childcare has become a growing commodity in a mixed economy that encompasses “state” run provision alongside services established by private and voluntary sector organizations. In the late 20th century, the British Government began to develop policies concerned with childcare, which have arguably conflated a service for parents (predominantly one that is intended to enable mothers to go out to work during their child’s early years) with an educational intervention for young children. In addition to the supposed economic benefits to families and the more recently claimed developmental benefits to children, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged households, the national economy profits from a childcare sector that was growing faster than the country’s economy as a whole in 2011 and was expected to be worth £7.2 billion (approximately 9.4 billion Euros) in 2015 (Key Note 2011).

Paull (2014) has noted that successive governments have sustained a policy drive and interest in childcare since the 1990s and the underlying motivations

appear to have been: facilitating women's paid employment (pre 1997); reducing child poverty through increased maternal employment (post 1997-2010); using early education to address social inequalities (2004 onwards); and increasing the economic productivity of parents now and children as future adults (2013 onwards). From the point of view of mothers, research has suggested that the majority (69%) return to work out of financial necessity after childbirth and so require childcare as a consequence. The unfortunate irony of childcare provision intended to empower women, coupled with the effect of low wages customarily paid to its workers, is that, "poor working women are paying other poor working women to look after their children" (Cooke and Lawton 2008: 10); and, in policy terms, attention to 'the needs of the working mother fail[s] to incorporate the needs of the nursery worker, who might also be a mother' (Osgood 2012:44). Nevertheless, when they were asked as part of a large scale enquiry, more working mothers said they would rather go out to work than said they would prefer to stay at home to look after their child(ren), if they could afford to do this (Huskinson et al 2013). So it would seem that there may be more than a financial incentive to paid employment despite the relatively high costs of childcare that may be involved. However, the child's age and working patterns may have an impact on preferences (see e.g. Sylva et al 2000) and, "[d]ecisions concerning child care may not in fact be decisions at all but choices between a range of possibly non-preferred options" (Barnes et al 2006: 4).

The types of childcare used by families for their young children vary but are generally grouped into three broad categories: informal, formal and other. The latter represents care by one or other parent, usually the child's mother but sometimes her husband or partner; the first represents care by members of the child's extended family (such as grandparents), friends or nannies who look after the child in his or her own home; and the second comprises childminders, crèches and day nurseries (Brind et al 2014), all of which mean the child is cared for in an out-of-home context and usually in the company of other children. In England, where these formal providers offer more than 4 consecutive hours of care, they must conform with the statutory welfare, learning and development requirements of the *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework* (DfE 2014) for children from birth to five years, and be registered and assessed by the Government-appointed, regulatory body 'Ofsted'.

Although maternity law in the UK allows women up to one year's leave from work with decreasing income over this time, some choose or need to return to work before their child is a year old. In these circumstances, the majority who settle on formal childcare for their babies will use day nurseries (Huskinson et al 2013), where a separate space for children from birth to two is a statutory requirement under the EYFS. This is typically known as 'the baby room', which formed the focus for the research that has informed this chapter.

2 Hierarchically and status oriented distinctive concepts: Childcare or Early Education?

In the last twenty years, England has achieved a structural integration of governance for early childhood education and care (ECEC), which is currently within the remit of the Department for Education. The EYFS attempts to bring together the traditional view of ‘care’ (as attending to welfare needs of young children while their parents go out to work), with early education. Kaga et al (2010: 8) have suggested that integration is problematic at a conceptual level, saying that, ‘[g]iven their distinct historical roots, ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ services...embody different visions and understandings of children, programme goals, approaches and contents.’

The qualities and qualifications of staff for childcare and for early education roles have also been seen to differ (Brehony 2003; Nutbrown 2012) with a particular push by the current and previous Governments to ensure that there are people with graduate level qualifications working with children nearer the top end of the early years phase (i.e. 3-5 year-olds). This policy decision is part of a wider quality improvement agenda and is closely linked to the findings from the EPPE study, which found linked the presence of a qualified teacher in a leading role to improved outcomes for children (Sylva et al 2004; see also Mathers et al 2011).

Distinctions in qualification levels are exacerbated by financial considerations, particularly for private and voluntary providers. Preoccupations with the viability of a business (whether for-profit or not) based on affordability for parents¹ must be balanced against the cost of staffing. Staff training is expensive and qualified teachers attract far higher rates of pay and better terms and conditions of work than other early years and childcare staff².

Recalling her entrance to the civil service and subsequent responsibility for early childhood policy between 1999 and 2006, Eisenstadt reflects that, “in Britain in 1996 there was no recognized profession for early childhood” (2012: 2). The New Labour Government, (under which Eisenstadt served as Director of Sure Start) published the *Children’s Workforce Strategy* in 2005. This Strategy sought to ‘upskill’ the workforce, encouraging more graduates into and within early childhood and highlighting opportunities for all staff to progress up a ‘qualifications framework’. Incentives were offered to childcare providers for advanced training of staff, supported by a ‘Transformation Fund’ of £250 million in 2006 and Graduate Leader Fund of £305 million in 2008-11 (Jones 2014). This was followed by

1 Many parents struggle with the costs of childcare. See Save the Children (2012).

2 See Tickell’s ‘Report on the Evidence’ for her Review of the EYFS (2011: 10f).

the introduction in 2007 of a new title: Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), described in the Workforce Strategy as “‘new’ teachers” (DfES 2005), although arguably greater emphasis was placed on existing graduates achieving the new status than raising the qualifications of non-graduates (NUT 2008).

As Lumsden (2010: 175) has noted, generally speaking professions ‘have an ecological dimension that is impacted on by individual, organizational and state interventions, the latter arguably leading to some professions becoming technical in their approach to professionalisation’. While broadly welcomed by the early years sector, the imposition of the ‘status’, its standards and the possibility to achieve EYPS with little or no previous experience of working with young children has also been criticised (e.g. Osgood 2012). In 2013, EYPS was phased out and replaced with Early Years Teacher (graduate level 6) while another new title, Early Years Educator, was introduced to signify diplomas achieved through vocational training (level 3).

Financial considerations continue to constrain workforce development and high quality early years provision (see DfE/DwP 2013³). In her final report on the Government-commissioned *Independent Review of Early Education and Childcare Qualifications in England*, Professor Cathy Nutbrown recommended the introduction of an early years specialist (birth to seven) route to QTS (Nutbrown 2012). This was intended to help raise the status of early years professionals by improving the parity between those working as leading practitioners in PVI settings (e.g. EYPs) and qualified teachers (QTS) working in maintained settings, and to allow greater ease of employment transition between the sectors. The introduction of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) routes to “Early Years Teacher Status” (EYTS) was the Government’s response to this recommendation. But it was criticised by Nutbrown who argued that, ‘the devil is in the detail’ (Nutbrown 2013: 2) because the EYTs would ‘not have the same status as teachers of children over five years of age’ (Roberts 2012). Teachers in Key Stage 1 must hold QTS to be responsible for children aged 6 years and older. Although it has been argued that the early years has traditionally worked with a system of distributed leadership (Aubrey 2014), the introduction of the new status (EYP or EYT) has created differentiated levels of ‘knowledge’ and the hierarchies that have ensued not always been well received in practice. Those who work with the youngest children – the babies – appear to be the least likely to gain such a status. Conversely, a longitudinal study of the impact of EYPs in practice (Hadfield et al 2012) suggests that those who have acquired

3 Childcare Commission. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evidence-to-inform-the-childcare-commission>.

EYP status spend less time with the babies than with the children nearing school age.

3 An impact on policy or of policy: Birth to three matters?

Despite grandiose claims about the benefits to young children of high quality early education that have peppered policy documents since the first National Childcare Strategy was published in 2004, the primary purpose of daycare for children under three has remained unclear. In 2013, a new flagship policy introduced free early education entitlements for disadvantaged two-year-olds as an early intervention measure, which suggested a compensatory aim. Subsequently, new assessment procedures were created to determine the developmental progress of toddlers aged between 24 and 30 months. Linked in part to the EYFS, these measures imply an educational aim for daycare provision. But, despite a single learning and development framework for children from birth to five, the lack of attention, investment and encouragement for those working with children under two suggests that the traditional childcare remit persists at a conceptual and discursive level: holding the baby while parents work. No official statistics are published about the numbers of babies aged from birth to twelve months or 1 to 2 years in formal childcare arrangements. These very young children represent an overlooked phenomenon even though many are spending up to 50 hours a week in daycare settings. There is uncertainty surrounding the quality of their care, since it has been acknowledged that significant discrepancies exist between the official Ofsted ratings for settings and the ratings generated using an internationally recognized ITERS (Harms, Cryer and Clifford 2006) evaluative tool for birth to three provision (Mathers et al 2012).

4 Systems of qualification and professionalism constructs: Staffing matters

In her call for responses to an open consultation that formed part of her qualifications review, Nutbrown asked questions relating to the perceived low status of the early years sector:

'There is a concern that looking after young children is perceived as 'easy' work, requiring no particular skills or experience. How do you think the early childhood workforce is perceived by the general public?'

How do you think the public's perception of this workforce could be improved?
(DFE 2012),

Given the low position of caring occupations in the hierarchical framework of professions defined by the Office of National Statistics, Nutbrown's questions are perhaps unsurprising. The Standard Occupational Classification system (ONS 2010) positions caring at level 6 (of 9 where 1 is the highest) and associated information states that a nursery nurse within this group has little more than a compulsory education and:

- baths, dresses, prepares feed for and feeds *babies*, changes babies clothing whenever necessary [our emphasis]⁴

4.1 Power and influence: marketisation

The last three decades have seen unprecedented political interest in the early years and growth of private, commercial provision of early education and childcare services. The introduction of the Childcare Act in 2006 has proliferated the marketisation of early education and childcare and has begun to erode the power of local (education) authorities as the leading or sole providers of such services in England (Miller and Hevey 2012). Two new voices have entered and have quickly come to dominate the early education arena: policymaker and corporate provider. Meanwhile, statutory sector nursery education providers and small voluntary or private childcare providers who have taken on the early education (EYFS) mantle have felt a sense of powerlessness to dictate the pace or direction of changes within the sector, including its 'professionalisation' agenda (Cooke and Lawton 2008).

4.2 Powerlessness and Identity: the baby room project

The subject of the status of baby room work and its relationship to the identity of these childcare workers and their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities formed a central theme within a research and development project that lasted from 2008 and 2012.

4 www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/dev3/data/SingleClass.html?soc=6121&from=612.

The Baby Room Project was intended to explore what happens in daycare for children younger than two years of age, primarily because an earlier review of research (David et al 2003) had highlighted a lack of evidence about this specific area of provision. Little was known about what babies and toddlers experience during their hours in institutional group care services such as day nurseries. The project deliberately integrated research with professional development. Group sessions known as ‘Development Days’ allowed baby care workers from 25 early years settings to come together to hear about and discuss research findings in relation to their own work with babies aged from 13 weeks to around 18 months. A bespoke online networking tool (The Baby Room NING) was also devised so that the project groups could continue to chat, debate, enquire, challenge and support each other in between the Development Days. Research data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, videoed observations in the baby rooms (Rolfe 2010, Mukherji and Albon 2010), documented group discussions and analysis of written contributions to the NING. All the participants took part on a voluntary basis. They came from day nursery settings in southeast England and between them were caring for around 360 babies.

Early findings showed that these baby room staff were frequently young women who worked very long hours caring for many different babies over the course of a week. They often expressed feelings of isolation and perceived themselves as overlooked, rarely if ever accessing any training or professional development that was relevant to their role in the baby room. They described their days in terms of routine practices – not dissimilar to those outlined by the Office of National Statistics as the tasks of a nursery nurse – and the regularity with which they fulfilled these perceived duties. Their written accounts brought to mind Elfer’s (2004) concern that practitioners’ written observations often lack emotion, and that routinised care practices may lead to a preoccupation with being busy with mundane tasks in an effort to counteract boredom. However, the project’s opportunities for dialogic encounters led to rich, nuanced depictions of practice and critical appraisals of policy as the participants were supported to move from signalling to signifying their work (Gouch and Powell 2013).

A critical moment occurred when one participant commented on the status of baby room practice, saying: *‘in early years, we’re the lowest of the low’*. Although there was agreement among the group about this low status, the discussions also highlighted differences in their work. As they described their shared practices, a variety emerged. For example, while all the baby rooms provided spaces and resources for changing babies’ nappies and clothing, some were located within the main room while others were more privately situated. These environmental features led to subtle differences in the common practice of changing babies’ clothing

and, through guided participation (Rogoff 1990), allowed for lively debates about the underpinning reasons or philosophies for such provision and practices. In turn, such discussions provided fuel for discussions about identity and role.

Although the project fostered solidarity within Development Days that was perhaps typical of a community of learners that gradually recognized what it perceived to be its own oppression, the nuanced plurality within their roles and the relative lack of occupational status (EYP or otherwise) meant that any collective identity was created by the group and within the group, rather than imposed by external bodies. Nevertheless, an identity perpetuated by media and policy discourses and indeed the occupational classifications (of childcare as unskilled women's work) was also evident when one practitioner claimed, *'I'm not a professional; I'm just a carer'*.

Stronach et al (2002: 113-114) have argued that there exists an interesting 'in-between-ness' where professional or occupational self-perception is influenced by 'outside in' discourses intersecting and creating a hybrid with 'inside out' notions of identity. Any collective professional identity, they suggest, masks the power / knowledge aspects of a discourse that emanates from 'official' sources (such as policymakers), although it might equally be argued that such sources are not automatically 'official' but are self-appointed to a position of authority. The Development Days in the project provided a space for participants to explore and claim positions of authority for themselves, being those who were most closely involved with and knowledgeable about the babies in their care. But they also described a range of factors that they perceived to influence the nature of their work, to inhibit their abilities to act with any authority and to shape their identities.

5 Concluding thoughts: how to gain a leading pedagogical role?

As we have reported elsewhere (Powell and Gooch 2012), a common theme of control was evident as were complex power struggles in which the participants were often oblivious to the privileged position that others held over them. For example, parents would often dictate sleeping routines and requirements for their babies, regardless of what the baby room practitioners believed to be in the babies' best interests. In many cases they offered a passive resistance to such disagreements, being positioned as young, inexperienced 'employees' in a consumer-oriented business where parents' buying power was paramount. However, as the project progressed, some developed greater confidence and, armed with new 'knowledge' (research evidence about the importance of sleep, for example) and

'vocabulary' (Durrant 2012), they gained a more powerful identity with which to argue their own perspective.

Returning to the ecological perspective, power and powerlessness at a micro level in early years settings has rarely been the subject of academic investigation or debate. However, the recent interest in the field of leadership has given rise to speculation about how best to effect a leading pedagogic role within early education and childcare provision. Within this sub-field, Briggs (2009) suggests that power comes in many different forms and from a wide range of sources. These, she outlines as follows:

- Positional (from place in a hierarchy)
- Personal (from association with a particular vision)
- Reward (from satisfying the needs of others)
- Coercive (from creating compliance in others)
- Enabling (from empowering others)
- Expert (from expertise)
- Resource (from access to restricted resources)
- Associative (from belonging to networks)
- Labelling (from identifying shared priorities) (*adapted from Briggs 2008: 69f*)

Without encouragement and support to review and challenge the 'every-dayness and taken for granted aspects of practice' (Sachs and Logan 1997: 244), opportunities to acquire many or any of these sources of power appears to be limited for many of the baby room practitioners.

The Baby Room project participants felt themselves to be of lowly status in any hierarchies, to be subsumed within the vision of commercial childcare providers and politicians, to be faced with regular coercion from parents and managers, to have limited physical resources at their disposal and to have little or no access to supportive networks or dialogic professional development. Consequently, their power sources, such as exist, may lie in the chance for intrinsic reward from satisfying babies' needs, developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with them and their families and rejoicing in babies' agency and accomplishments. In contrast, involvement in the project furnished the participants with access to a wider array of sources of power. As described earlier, these were harnessed to give a hitherto unheard voice to promote their own expertise and opinions and to advocate on behalf of the babies and in their 'best interests'. The power and powerlessness of the babies and their carers is inextricably linked. While many babies spend up to fifty hours a week in institutional daycare, their agency is closely associated with their carers' opportunities to develop the confidence and vocabulary with



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