

# Educare for the under threes - identifying need and opportunity

Report of the research study by the Manchester Metropolitan University  
jointly funded with the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust



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Edited by Lesley Abbott and Julia Gillen

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*A society can be judged by its attitude to its youngest children, not only in what is said about them but how this attitude is expressed in what is offered to them as they grow up.*

*Goldschmied and Jackson (1994)*

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## Preface

Educare for the under threes - identifying need and opportunity - is an ambitious research area. Five researchers studying the interactions and experiences of educators with young children (and their parents) over a period of two years has resulted in a wealth of data and information. Two books are being published at approximately the same time as this report (Abbott and Moylett, 1997a and 1997b). The Firm Foundations video materials pack is being used widely in the training of Early Years practitioners and inspectors. It is planned that further fruits of the project will be published, and a dissemination conference held at the Manchester Metropolitan University on 5th December, 1997.

# Introduction

## Origins of this study

This document reports on the findings of a research project into quality care and education for children under three in out of home settings. The study was jointly funded by The Manchester Metropolitan University and Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust. The two years of the project have seen dramatic changes and developments in the Early Years field. The nursery vouchers scheme introduced by the Conservative government signalled a move away from the ideas of collaboration and partnership promoted strongly since the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) towards an emphasis on market competition and entrepreneurship. Anxiety was felt across the sector that this owed more to an ideological impetus and flawed underpinning assumptions than to a realistic, pragmatic intention to improve the lot of young children and their families.

Since the election of a new Government on May 1st, and its rapid abandonment of the nursery vouchers scheme, optimism has risen in some quarters that the first steps towards a national childcare strategy promised by Gordon Brown in his first Budget on 2nd July 1997 will mean that the beliefs and hopes summarised in 1994's seminal Start Right Report of the RSA Early Learning Project will receive a more positive hearing. An aim of this report is to draw attention to the relevance of this document to our youngest children.

*Pre-school education leads to immediate, measurable gains in educational and social development and lasting cognitive and social benefits in children - provided it is of high quality... The most important learning in pre-school education has to do with aspiration, motivation, socialisation and self-esteem... Investment in high-quality and effective early education provides a worthwhile social and economic return to society in both developing and developed countries.*  
(Ball, 1994: 72).

Three questions are immediately raised in respect of Sir Christopher Ball's summary:

- How early does education start?

- Is education alone appropriate to the needs of the whole pre-school sector?
- What is effectiveness in this arena? What are the relationships between qualities identifiable in provision and children's development and learning?

*There is no general national policy for childcare to help parents take up employment and training.*

*(Audit Commission, 1996: 8)*

*A generation of parents have waited for their government to introduce a national childcare strategy.*

*(Gordon Brown, (Chancellor of the Exchequer) 2nd July 1997)*

Very little research has been carried out in the UK into the care and education of children under three until this current study. It is our hope that this work will inform debate at national, local and workplace levels. It also matters that parents are informed about the real issues of quality in caring for young children: we believe they know almost instinctively that whatever the relevance of the National Curriculum, league tables and formal assessments to later childhood, the earliest years should be a time of unfettered, unpressurised enjoyment. They will find solace in the fact that the child's happiness and wellbeing is uppermost in the minds of those who care for them when they are away from home. The terms 'happiness' and 'wellbeing' are relative and culturally determined of course, but, we believe, do not ultimately elude all definition.

The lack of research can perhaps be linked to the gap in policy in this country where the under threes are concerned. This omission is not particular to this country: a recent summary of the situation across the European Commission carries resonance for the UK and provides an impetus for this project report.

*Although options for nursery education and early years philosophies have been well developed in most countries there is more ambiguity about the balance of care and education for under threes. In many countries, nursery education is the function of the education ministry, but services for children under three are separately administered, and still regarded primarily as a health or care service. The caring aspects of services for children under three, such as constancy and sensitivity of staff, have been carefully analyzed and developed in some countries, but in general there has been less discussion about the educative content of services for children under three. In some countries, children's ability to learn and socialize at this age has been the subject of much research and other scrutiny. In other countries very young children's intellectual and social development is largely ignored as a factor in planning services or regarded as being best met in family or domestic settings; or where services are available a care and health orientated régime is thought to be sufficient.*

*(European Commission Network on Childcare 1996a: 18)*



As a member of the Rumbold Committee, Lesley Abbott, the director of this project, has long been concerned to correct these gaps in policy, provision and research. The Rumbold Committee called for cross-sector departmental debate and initiatives towards quality in early years care and education. She also sat on the advisory committee for the Royal Society of Arts Early Learning Project and contributed to Start Right (Ball, 1994) - the report of the RSA Early Learning Project. This study stands by the recommendations of that report as to the constituents of quality in the Early Years sector and calls for their implementation.

*The salient features of good practice in the direction and management of the provision of early learning appear to include:*

- i. the integration of education and care*
- ii. unified responsibility for provision*
- iii. targets for growth by a specified year*
- iv. coherent and thorough training of early years teachers and support staff*
- v. a curriculum based on the principle of 'purposeful play'*
- vi. effective linkage between the home and pre-school, and smooth progress between pre-school and primary school*
- vii. adequate resources.*

*(Ball, 1994: 30)*

Lesley Abbott gave evidence to the National Commission on Education in relation to the Early Years and participated in the Franco-British 1996 seminar on pre-school education in the two countries where it was recognised that decisions on a system of care and education for under fives needed clarity on issues of policy, co-ordination and quality (Laing, 1996).

Five years ago members of the research team took part in a conference in Denmark on 'educare' for the very young. Since that time the Early Years department at MMU have been committed to the concept. (See David, 1990; Rodger *et al*, 1995 for discussions of educare). One fruit of this work has been the development of the Multiprofessional Centre with its BA (Hons) degree in Early Childhood Studies, appropriate for those committed to the fusion of care and education and working in a multiplicity of backgrounds.

The Early Years team at MMU headed by Lesley Abbott undertook a research project in partnership with a local authority in the North of England. The research focus was the identification of factors contributing to quality experiences for children under five in a range of settings. The study confirmed that although there is a tendency for nursery class and nursery schools which have an intake of children aged three and four to assume (in terms of designing policies) that this may be their first experience outside a home environment, many in fact have already attended more than one out-of-home setting, for example in a creche, playgroup, day nursery or with a childminder.

That project identified a particular lack of research into such experiences of very young

children. For too long there has been a separation between care and education which has led to a distinction between the kinds of research studies which have either focussed upon the care of young children or the quality of educational experiences (MMU 1995).

We feel that 'care' and 'education' should be essential elements of the out-of-home provision for children of all ages, but it is particularly unfortunate that the two should be seen as separate in respect of the very young. The division between the two is often institutionalised in the UK in the sharing of responsibilities between Social Services and Education Departments, each with their sphere of influence.

*All services for young children contribute to both education and care ...  
(Audit Commission 1996: 7)*

Countries such as Denmark have long accepted the concept of 'educare' and the importance of a national policy in protecting the status of young children. Others such as Spain have more recently moved in that direction.

We in this research team are committed to educare as a concept underlying decisions regarding quality initiatives in out-of-home provision for young children, at a macro policy level and at the micro level of interactions between practitioners and their charges.

Members of the research team have many years experience of working in a variety of early childhood settings and visiting far more in many countries as researchers, writers, or in collaborative projects of various kinds. Our combined experiences lead us to fully support the starting point of the European Commission Childcare Network on the entwined affective, cognitive and social aims of programmes directed at young children.

*We believe that high quality services for young children should aim to ensure that children have the opportunity to experience:*

- *a healthy life*
- *spontaneous expression*
- *esteem as an individual*
- *dignity and autonomy*
- *self-confidence and zest in learning*
- *a stable learning and caring environment*
- *sociability, friendship and co-operation with others*
- *equal opportunities irrespective of gender, race and disability*  
*cultural diversity*
- *support as part of a family and a community*

*(Balageur, I., Mestres, J., and Penn, H. European Commission Childcare Network, 1991)*

Irene Balageur and her colleagues state openly that their aims 'are value-based; they reflect our beliefs.' Together with those authors, we recognise that the above statements are subjective and very open to discussion. No centre which participated in our project would disagree with the values promoted by the European Commission Childcare Network but, after two years of study, we are confident that these values are manifested subtly differently in each environment. Nonetheless the aim of this project is to look at the underlying implications of adopting such a 'philosophy', trace how it might be evolved into more specific indicators of quality, and, most importantly, look for its translation into specific practices and recommendations for improvement.

## Who are under the threes?

Early childhood is:

*a period of momentous significance ... By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers and as language users, and will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their worth.*

*(Donaldson, Grieve and Platt 1983:1)*

*Competent three-year-olds are:*

- *Self-confident and trusting*
- *Intellectually inquisitive*
- *Able to use language to communicate*
- *Physically and mentally healthy*
- *Able to relate well to others*
- *Empathic toward others*
- *Intellectually inquisitive*

*These attributes add up to a good start in life.*

*(Carnegie Corporation of New York 1994)*

We recognise that there is a very considerable cultural and historical dimension to views about what children need and how adults might provide for them. It is up to each early years setting to respond sensitively to the demands of children and their caregivers within a framework that is both flexible yet strong: strong enough to promote values gained through a process of dialogue. Parents, with their particular knowledge of their children and own values need to feel respected and listened to; but they will also be willing to learn themselves when they are genuinely impressed with practices they encounter and see are effective over time in building their children's skills, well-being and self-esteem.

*Children need to feel loved, respected and listened to; that they are sociable and enjoy the company of other children and adults besides their immediate family;*

*and that through affection, through social intercourse, and with a stimulating environment, they mature, learn and develop a remarkably wide range of skills and competencies in the first five or six years. This learning and development assumes a basic level of physical well-being.*

*(Balageur, I. et al, 1991: 7).*

## **Out-of-home settings for children under three**

### **European Policy**

The European Union has steadily developed its interest in services for young children, at both a policy and funding level. In March 1992, the Council of Ministers adopted a Recommendation on Child Care, which committed Member States to "take and/or progressively encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children." The Council Recommendation identified four areas where initiatives are necessary:

- leave arrangements for parents;
- making the workplace responsive to the needs of workers with children;
- supporting increased participation by men in the care of children;
- services to provide care for children with parents in employment or training or seeking employment or training.

Member states have made variable progress in these areas, but the UK has made little progress in all of them as a recent review makes clear (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996b). The UK, Ireland and the Netherlands are the only countries in the European Union where comprehensive publicly-funded services for children aged three, four and five in either kindergarten or pre-primary schooling has either not been achieved or is well on the way to achievement (Ibid: 2) In the UK, Netherlands Ireland, early admission to primary school is combined with limited or no pre-schooling. In the other member states the pattern is emerging for around three years of publicly-funded provision prior to compulsory schooling at age six or seven. (Ibid: 130) The pre-school stage then becomes increasingly significant. Sir Christopher Ball's suggestion that there should be a Key Stage Zero then becomes an attractive proposition (Ball, 1995).

A vital underpinning argument for a policy of investment in childcare services is its worth to the economy, both when regarded in terms of the child's potential future contribution and more immediately in respect of enhancing women's careers. The case for subsidising childcare is excellently summarised in the Equal Opportunities Commission (Duncan *et al*, 1995). It is heartening that recognition of this was signalled by the new British Government in Gordon Brown's Budget speech of 2nd July 1997.

*From this Budget forwards, child care will no longer be seen as an afterthought or a fringe element of social policies but as an integral part of our economic policy.*

*(Gordon Brown, 2nd July 1997)*

Sweden and Denmark have long been persuaded of the sense of this argument, so that it can be said to be embedded in the culture - which is not to say that the features of the provision are not dynamic over time, for both positive and negative reasons. In Sweden, for example, the extension of parental leave has meant that now virtually all children are cared for at home until their first birthday and public provision of services for this age group has therefore been reduced. 42% of one-year-olds and a higher proportion of two-year-olds are then looked after in services provided by local authorities. (ECNC 1996(b): 116). Swedish parents have high expectations of services, being used to a well developed system with high levels of affordability, availability and quality. The recent economic recession led to cuts in resources which have been met by concerns about quality and new efforts to increase parental involvement. (Ibid: 113).

The provision of publicly-funded services for children under three is extremely low in the UK when compared with other members states excepting only Ireland and Austria. (See Table 1, page 13).

There is a paucity of statistics on the provision that exists for children under three in the UK, as noted by Ball, (1994) and the Audit Commission (1996).

*Diversity is the hallmark of pre-school provision for the under-fives in the UK.*

*But not choice. Or coherence.*

*(Ball, 1994: 31)*

The affordable (yet very limited) provision of nursery classes assumes that children's primary carers (usually mothers) do not work; private provision often offering longer hours for children of employed mothers can be priced above the reach of those on low incomes. This situation is particularly exacerbated for families of children under three. The hotch-potch of provision may include any of the following:

- family members and unregistered childminders
- childminders (registered with social services)
- playgroups (voluntary and private)
- nursery schools (voluntary and private)
- daycare nurseries (provided by Social services for children 'in need')
- toddler groups (usually accompanied by a carer)
- creches (incl. workplace-funded)

*Neither market mechanisms nor planned public provision are enabling parents to find the pre-school education and care they want for their children, or children to make the right start to learning and life.*

*(Ball 1994: 31)*

But with proposed partnerships and planned developments for early years expansion the future may well be less bleak. Some optimism is raised by the recommendation of the government that future development should bring services together in providing multiprofessional centres to meet family needs. (Labour Party, 1997)

The (1992) EU Recommendation on Childcare asserts that in designing services for pre-school children "it is essential to promote the well-being of children and families, ensuring that their various needs are met." (Quoted in ECNC 1996b).

Principles that should underlie services providing care for children include:

- *affordable and available in all areas, rural as well as urban;*
- *accessible to children with special needs;*
- *combining reliable care and a pedagogical approach;*
- *flexible, diverse but coherent;*
- *based on workers whose training, both basic and continuous, is*  
*"appropriate to the important social and educative value of their work."*

*(EU 1992 Recommendation on Childcare Article 3 - quoted in ECNC(1996b)*

The recognition that the principles of the EU Recommendation on Childcare should underpin 'educare' services for children under three at all levels - international, national and local - provided an overall perspective for the research study. But further refinement in terms of structure and focus was required taking into consideration such factors as the wide diversity of out-of-home settings, the wide backgrounds and experiences of the members of the research team and opportunities and constraints afforded by the project in the context of our other related aims and activities.

Table I

Provision of publicly-funded services in Member States of the European Union for children under three

	Length of maternity leave and parental leave (in months)	Availability of subsidies for childcare L = lower income only Y = some/all irrespective of income	Age at which compulsory schooling begins	Provision in publicly funded services for children under 3	Year of data collection
Austria	24	--	6	3%	1994
Belgium	27	Y	6	30%	1993
Denmark	30	Y	7	48%	1994
Finland	36	--	7	21%	1994
France	36	Y	6	23%	1993
Germany	36	L	6	2% (W) 50% (E)	1990
Greece	9	Y	6	3%	1993
Ireland	3	--	6	2%	1993
Italy	9	--	6	6%	1991
Netherlands	15	Y	5	8%	1993
Portugal	27	--	6	12%	1993
Spain	36	L	6	2%	1993
Sweden	36	--	7	33%	1994
United Kingdom	7	L	5	2%	1993

Adapted from information given in European Commission Network on Childcare (1996b)

# Study Design

## Project Aims

Our aims can be separated into dual spheres.

Firstly, there was the necessary concern to differentiate between each researcher's particular area and define reasonably tightly the scope of their investigations.

The introduction to this report has set out something of our philosophy and the context for this piece of research. The project team members also brought their interests and concerns, developed over many years in working, training and researching with educarers in a variety of settings in the UK and internationally into the debate about the main emphases of this project. It is important to note, as we have mentioned before, that this report is by no means the only outcome of the study. Nevertheless it is a summary of our work according to the main investigative foci which were agreed as follows:

- Identification of appropriate curriculum experiences for children under three in a range of educate settings;
- Investigation of the range of assessment procedures adopted by educarers and the identification of appropriate strategies in order to provide continuity with the immediate pre-school years and Key Stage 1;
- Consideration of the ways in which educarers establish and maintain relationships with children and their parents with particular consideration of the key-worker system;
- Exploration, jointly with practitioners, of their practices intended to support children's growing sense of self.
- Description and evaluation of the provision of experiences relating to equality of opportunity.



Secondly, we were equally concerned from the outset with the quality of research processes engaged upon as we were with 'results'. We were conscious of the fact that any project, during its course, has an effect on the world in which it is set. Often this effect is deliberately designed to be as negligible as possible, reflecting the common view (corresponding to a positivist paradigm) that there is a virtue in research being detached and having as little influence as possible on its setting. But we take the contrary view and believe that during its own course the potential exists for the research process to have a positive impact. It is not only in terms of outcome products that research may have the potential to be constructive.

*It is the role of education both to interpret and pass on the values of society and to stimulate people to think for themselves and to change the world around them.*  
(NCE 1994)

Accordingly, we were determined to widen the potential benefits of engaging in the research process beyond the individuals who were members of the project team and simultaneously to broaden our knowledge base. The decision was made to conduct the research in two overlapping phases:

- Engagement of as many centres as possible in the UK, Sweden, Finland and Australia commensurate with our preferred techniques of operating in constructive partnership.
- The establishment of a long-term research relationship with ten centres in which at least one researcher and the research student would spend considerable time in longitudinal study, using a multi-method qualitative approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Aspects of the research design of each of these phases are discussed separately.

## Questionnaires/interview schedules

Sixty-seven of these were completed in four countries from a diverse range of educate settings for children under three. Our intention was that this would not be a 'questionnaire' in the usual sense of sending out a form which is completed by a sample of respondents. Our approach was, rather, as follows:

- The identification of centres for dialogue with whom we either already had a relationship or could build one during this study time. These relationships were sustained (sometimes begun) by BA(Hons) Early Childhood Studies multiprofessional students and B.Ed(Hons) teacher training students, some while on Erasmus exchanges;
- The completion of the questionnaires in a process of dialogue, often in the presence of team members and/or students and often in the course of team meetings or even staff development sessions.

See Table 2, page 19, for the questions included in the schedule.

## **In-depth studies of centres**

In this report we have deliberately focussed on instances of good practice. The settings described are not 'typical' or representative in any sense - they were initially identified as centres where we already had strong links (for example through initial and in-service training) and already had cause to feel they were potential sources of inspiration for others. The project has given us the opportunity to explore their very special qualities in greater depth than had previously been possible and to disseminate this to a wider audience, whom we hope may benefit

Observation was at the forefront of our multimethod techniques of data collection but even when engaging in non-participant observation (to the degree to which this is possible or desirable in settings involving young children - see the discussion by B. Griffin in this report) then we were conscious that research processes always have an impact on the settings being studied.

We were anxious to remain in a relationship of constant dialogue with the practitioners and seek out their views and those of other involved adults, most especially the children's carers. The nature of the issues explored was discussed in partnership and the mutual benefit of this process is evidenced elsewhere. Some practitioners wrote up their own experiences and ideas developed in the course of the study in the two books associated with the project (Abbott and Moylett 1997a, 1997b). Staff development sessions were implemented by members of the project team in response to interest in particular aspects of the study by their members of staff and some individuals have been motivated to begin new courses of study, e.g. at degree level.

The range of techniques employed was also inspired by the partnership ethos. They included:

- participant and non-participant observation;
- semi-structured interviews;
- questionnaires;
- case studies;
- documentary analysis eg. policies; personal writings generated during the project.

## The research team

Four researchers, all members of the Early Years team at Didsbury School of Education at the Manchester Metropolitan University worked on this study on a part-time basis, together with a full-time research student.

**Lesley Abbott** BEd, MEd, FRSA, Professor - Early Childhood Education (Project Director).  
**Janet Ackers** BEd, Senior Lecturer - Early Years, School of Education.  
**Brenda Griffin** (registered for MPhil) Senior Lecturer - Early Years, School of Education.  
**Chris Marsh** MEd, Senior Lecturer - Early Years, School of Education.  
**Natalie Grant-Mullings** BSc Psychology, Research Student.

Further support was provided by Julia Gillen, MA(Education), a PhD student also at the MMU, who acted as a critical friend to the project and co-edited this report.

Clearly this report could not have been written without the involvement of the children, staff and parents of the early years centres in which the research was conducted. We are grateful for their commitment to the project and for making our work so enjoyable.

We also acknowledge the participation of other members of the University, including Sue de Jonkheere PhD student and many BA(Hons) Early Childhood Studies students.

We are grateful to Professor David Hustler, Professor Ian Stronach, Helen Moylett and Rob Halsall from the Research Centre in the School of Education who acted as a 'critical community' throughout the project.

Our thanks are due to the administrative team in the Research Base - Trish Gladdis, Jean Davidson and Barbara Ashcroft whose continuing support throughout the project has been much appreciated and without whose help this report would not have been written.

Particular thanks are due to Martin Vaughan for the design of this document and to Marion Haigh - Project Officer, for advice and assistance during production.

Special thanks are given to the children who appear on the cover of this report - from Hilary's Nursery, Mold, Dryden Street Nursery, Manchester and to the photographers - Margaret Stevens and Rachel McHaffie.

## The centres

Clearly the most essential factor in the research has been the enthusiastic participation and patience of the centres where we carried out our in-depth research. They will remain anonymous, but in the interests of contextualisation we include some brief factual details. (See Table 3, page 20)

Table 2

Questions included in the questionnaires/interview schedules

1. Type of setting/establishment and hours of opening.
2. How many children are there and what is the staff/child ratio?
3. Do you have a key worker system?
4. Please give details of staff qualifications, background and training.
- 5a) What are your particular aims with regard to children under three?
- 5b) Why are these important to you?
6. In what ways do you make special provision for children under three?
- 7a) What kind of provision/curriculum do you provide in order to meet the needs of children under three?
- 7b) How does this differ from the provision/curriculum for older children in your establishment?
- 8a) How do you facilitate the acquisition of language with children under three?
- 8b) In what ways do you make special provision for second language learners?
9. How do you encourage children under three to express their imagination and ideas?
10. How do you encourage children under three to express their feelings?  
(for example, happiness, sadness, fear, loss)
11. How do you consider individual children when organising space and resources?
- 12a) How do you assess the learning and development of the children under three in your centre?
- 12b) Does this differ from the way in which you assess the older children in your establishment? If so, how?
- 12c) Who else is involved in the assessment process?
- 12d) What do you do with the information which you collect?
- 12e) How do you use this information?
13. How do you view the role of parents in the education of children under three?
14. In what ways are parents/carers/others involved in your establishment?
15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Table 3

Details of centres in which researchers were based

Centre	Funding	Hours	Staff	Children	Building/Location	Admissions	Qualifications
Children's Centre	Education Children's Services Department	7.30am to 5.30pm	28 in total 13.5 staff under fives	55 in total 36 under threes	Purpose built in 1991. Surrounded by Local Authority houses. User Groups P/T play schemes, child minders, training, community base.	50 places available 28 for the community 10 Local Authority workers 10 children in need 2 private places	NNEB NVQ MA
Children's Centre	Early Years and Play Division	7.30am to 5.30pm	8 workers 2 managers	50 full-time equivalent	Purpose built in 1990. Surrounded by Local Authority housing and shopping facilities. Similar user groups as above. Centre and premises are open until 9.30pm weekly.	30 community 15 neighbourhood 5 Local Authority workers	NNEB BED CSS ADCE
Community Nursery Centre	Social Services Education	9.00am to 5.00pm	13 in total 7 nursery officers 1 deputy 1 co-ordinator 1 teacher	62 places 37 under threes	Purpose built in 1980. Single storey mixed housing area close to city centre. User groups P/T play sessions, NNEB and child minder training. Early learning sessions (parents involved), holiday schemes.	Children in 'need' is the only criteria.	NNEB DPQS B.Ed PGCE MA
Day Nursery Nursery School	Private	7.30pm to 6.00pm	13 staff	57 in total 37 under threes	Off a main road with students houses and private and rented properties in area. Training for nursery nurses (fee paying). Built in 1890's.	Children attend from a wide area e.g. students and professional parents.	NNEB DPQS PGCE
Day Nursery Nursery School	Private	8.00am to 6.00pm	35 in total - 22 educators most full-time some part-time and job share	120 some part-time and full-time 30 under threes	Opened in 1987. A large family house in owner occupied area.	Available to all children in the area. Some parents live outside the area but work near the nursery.	Dip.Ed HVisitor & SRN NVQ levels 2&3 NNEB BTec N.D. DPQS

Centre	Funding	Hours	Staff	Children	Building/Location	Admissions	Qualifications
Day Nursery Nursery School	Private	8.00am to 6.00pm	15 in total 1 owner 4 full-time 11 part-time	76 children 9 full-time 35 under twos 41 over two	Part domestic, large house surrounded by converted barns. Rural area farming community.	Available to all children. Open to visitors and children attending on a sessional basis. Parental fees.	Cert.Ed NNEB DPQS
Children's Centre	Early Years and Play Division	7.30am to 5.30pm	7 full-time 2 job-share 1 cook 4 domestics 1 senior officer 1 deputy manager 1 manager	31 full-time 30 part-time under threes 21 part-time 16 full-time	Single storey building Purpose built in the early 1970's. Mixed housing area: mainly Local Authority.	No specific catchment area. 10 places for City Council workers capacity is 40 + children assessed as most in 'need'.	NNEB DPQS City & Guilds
Nursery Centre	Local Education Authority	8.00am to 6.00pm Everyday except Mon. until 3.00pm staff training	21 in total 12 educators for under fives supplemented by parents in Parent/Toddler group	36 full-time 118 part-time some mixing of age groups	Built in 1906 as a primary school. Near to the Town Centre User Groups include HMI training, parents Pre-school Learning Alliance and adult education.	Social Services referrals but take children from all over the borough. educational places for children whose parents are studying.	B.Ed MLEd BTec NNEB
Parent/ Toddler Group	Parental Fees	Three sessions a week	A deputy head educarer and a senior educarer	Varies from 17 - 25 children at any one session	In one large room at a Combined Nursery.	Borough wide resource Creche for children whose parents go to the local college.	BTec NNEB DPQS
Parent and Toddler Group Stepping Stones Pre-Nursery Group	Adult Education Services	Two Hourly sessions each week for each group	Two educators plus all parents 'learning through play'	15 children at each session	Specially adapted community rooms in a purpose built primary school.	Catchment area of the school.	Basic Adult Education qualification plus, City and Guilds 7307 NNEB

## **Adult roles and interactions:**

The ways in which educarers establish and maintain effective relationships with children and their parents with particular consideration of the key worker system

Chris Marsh

### **Research Focus**

Research on the education and care of children under five in Britain has highlighted the importance of children feeling happy, confident, and secure in their setting (DES, 1990; Ball, 1994). Similar findings have been obtained from other countries where the significance of the adult-child relationship has been demonstrated. When children in Finland were asked about the important features of their experiences when they were younger and were attending early childhood centres, the quality of relationships was raised as a significant factor (Huttenen, 1992). A Swedish study (Howes, 1990) emphasised the importance of stable child care arrangements whereby children interacted with only a few stable caregivers each day, and where staff turnover was low. Siraj-Blatchford (1995) also emphasises the importance of a personal link with one adult on a daily basis in strengthening children's development and learning. The key worker system is one means by which establishments attempt to build purposeful relationships between workers, children and their parents. However, in reality, as Goldschmied and Jackson (1994) and Ferri *et al.* (1981) note, the link between parents and key worker does not always come to fruition, and sometimes the daily contact between child and key worker is extremely limited.

### **Research Questions**

This aspect of the research studies two establishments, both of which operate a key worker system. The establishments are in different geographical areas, in different local authorities, and are centres of different kinds. The intention was that by studying two such different centres, some ideas about the role of the key worker system, its operation and its impact could be analysed.

The research questions were:

- How does the key worker system develop and seek to maintain positive relationships between staff and parents, and staff and children?

- What, if anything, does a key worker system achieve that may not be achieved without a system designating named individuals?
- What advantages does the key worker system offer for: staff, children, parents?
- What difficulties are inherent in the key worker system and to what extent can these be offset?

These questions are particularly important as Cowley (1991) pinpoints, the need for such a system to enable especially strong relationships to develop between key workers and their key children. The significance of this issue is also highlighted by Rouse and Griffin (1992) who note the National Children's Bureau guidelines on daycare which emphasise children's need for continuity in their care by significant adults with whom they have formed an attachment.

## **Methodology**

Two establishments were selected in which to undertake this element of the research. In the first year of the research the Children's Centre was the focus of study. This element of the research was completed before data was collected at the second establishment. Consequently, the research methods selected for the first period of data collection could be reviewed and modified, in the light of experience, in readiness for the second phase of the study, which took place at the Community Nursery Centre. The means by which the research was undertaken remained essentially the same however, that is, the use of qualitative research methods involving participant and non-participant observation, interviews using structured interview schedules, and questionnaires.

In the Children's Centre, participant and non-participant observation was undertaken in each of the three units during both morning and afternoon sessions. Observation also took place in Parent Toddler sessions, including one specifically for childminders.

Interviews were undertaken with fifty per cent of the parents of those children currently attending who were under the age of three years. Interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes each and were audio-taped to allow detailed analysis later.

Interviews were also undertaken with selected staff. Fifty per cent of staff were interviewed. They were chosen to present a range of professional experience and qualifications, age, ethnicity and gender. These interviews were also audio-taped and lasted about half an hour each. Structured interview schedules were used for both sets of interviews. All the staff who were interviewed had been observed previously so that it was possible to compare their practice with their stated philosophies. The Centre Co-ordinator was also interviewed, as her role in affecting practice and in providing a positive role model was crucial.



Questionnaires were also completed by parents and childminders attending Parent Toddler sessions.

In the Community Nursery Centre, participant and non-participant observation was undertaken in the "Under Threes" and the "Over Threes" room and in the Early Learning Group during both morning and afternoon sessions. Interviews were undertaken with two members of staff, these both lasted about an hour and were audio-taped. A structured interview schedule was used. Questionnaires were used for both staff and parents. This was instead of interviews, as it was found in the first phase of the research that much of the material collected, whilst valuable, duplicated that of earlier interviewees, so a decision was made to interview two members of staff in greater depth. The Centre Co-ordinator and the teacher were also interviewed together on another occasion to obtain background information about the Centre. This approach did prove to be more productive in terms of time and provided a useful contrast with the shorter, but more numerous, interviews undertaken during the first phase.

## **The Research Establishments**

### **The Children's Centre**

This Centre is situated in the North-West of England near the centre of a large conurbation in the midst of a high density residential area. Busy major roads, including arterial roads, are situated within a mile of the Centre in all directions and few communal open spaces are available to residents. The housing consists of semi-detached council properties which appear to be in a good state of repair and which have their own gardens. Public transport is well provided, so access to the city centre - about three miles away - is good and local shopping facilities are available. Despite very positive relationships with the parents of the children who attend the Centre, vandalism is frequently an issue at weekends and at night. There is a high level of unemployment in the local area.

Most of the children come from the surrounding area but since attendance is based on need as defined by the Social Services department, some children come from further afield, whilst some places are reserved for local government authority employees' children, who do not have to fill the criteria of need, and come from a much wider geographical area. The majority of the children who attend are white although a wide range of ethnic groups are represented in the population attending.

Various community groups use the Centre, including several parent toddler groups and a childminders toddler group, a play scheme during the summer for children aged between five and eleven, and an after-school club for primary school children. These community groups users are eligible on the grounds of catchment area as opposed to perceived need. For the purposes of the research, however, the main focus was the units for children under the age of five, where they stay without their parents for the sessions.

The Centre groups these under fives into "Under Twos" and "Over Twos". All details given here relate to when the research was undertaken. Since then, due to reductions in funding, the "Under Twos" unit has had to be closed and the children integrated into other units. Staffing ratios have also been affected and some staff have had to be relocated to other children's centres. Similarly, some of the groups and facilities mentioned above have had to be cut back due to changes in funding during 1997.

The "Under Twos" unit caters for babies from the age of six months up to two years. This opened as a direct response to the increasing number of under twos who were being admitted as a result of the local government authority offering workplace nursery places for employees with babies of six months and above. This unit has two key workers and up to a maximum of seven babies. There are two "Over Twos" units each with four staff and a maximum of twenty children. Each of the three units is self contained with areas for activities indoors and outdoors, and bathroom and toilet facilities for children and staff. The units are quite small in size, however, which does create some restrictions.

At the beginning and the end of each day, the child is greeted by one of the key workers (two to a room) in their room and helped to settle to an activity or to have a chat with the adult. For the children in the "Under Twos" unit the majority of their day is spent with these two key workers and the same group of young children, although the children attending varies with each day and session depending on their individual allocation of sessions (one half day to a full week depending on need). These children meet two other workers, one at a time with one of their key workers, whilst staff cover for each other's breaks. They may meet older children when the latter choose to visit their unit, usually briefly, or, if they are close to two years of age and due to transfer to an "Over Twos" unit, when they will have planned sessions with the workers who cover for their key workers in the Central Play Area. These will be arranged so that they meet some of the older children from their new unit there too. Older children will also have a series of visits to the new unit with their current key worker.

The "Over Twos" units each have two indoor activity rooms. Each is a base for two key workers and their children, but there will be opportunities to move between the two rooms where different types of activities are on offer for parts of the day. One room tends to have construction, structured play and table games, and the other water, sand and creative activities, sometimes with a slide and climbing frame. Thus, the children will meet other peers and other key workers. Unless the older and younger children opt to visit each other, or their key workers choose to get their groups together, for example at tea time, the two age groups are not likely to meet.

## The Community Nursery Centre

This Centre is located in an urban area near the centre of a town situated within a major conurbation in the north-west of England. The Centre is close to a major arterial road which connects the town to a large city. It is also very close to an urban motorway. These roads are easily visible from the Centre's outdoor play area and litter blows through the perimeter railings from the neighbouring area. Residential flats are also situated very close to the Centre. The nearby town has limited shopping facilities and few recreational facilities, for example, some shops are boarded up and the area has an aura of urban decay. In addition to the flats, small, terraced houses, often with no gardens and opening onto the street, are typical of the immediate area; whilst playgrounds do not have safe surfaces under the equipment and broken glass is abundant.

However, not all families live within walking distance of the Centre. Children are allocated a place on the criteria of "need" and may travel from further afield within the local authority. Most of the children who attend are white although a few children come from different ethnic backgrounds (traditionally, this area is one where very few ethnic minority groups have settled). Because of this categorisation of children and their families as having additional needs, it is difficult to establish a sense of the establishment being one for the local community and there is a danger of those children and their families who attend having a stigma attached to their involvement with the Centre. These difficulties are increased as local children may not be eligible to attend. The staff are trying to overcome such difficulties by developing the Centre as a community resource which is available to all local children for some sessions.

The Centre groups the children into "Under Threes", for children between two and three years of age, and "Over Threes", for children aged three and four. These groupings are flexible and there are opportunities for children to move between the areas at certain times of the day, as well as always meeting up with some children from the other age group at other times of the day, for example at meal times when children sit in key worker groups which are of mixed age groups.

The beginning of the day is always in "Under Threes" and "Over Threes" areas where the child is in a room with their age group peers, their key worker and two other key workers. One of these adults will greet children and parents on arrival and offer the child a drink. Thus, during the day the child interacts with their key worker and other key workers in their Family Room, and other known adults (key workers) from the older age group, as well as children of their own age (and Family Group and Room) and older children - those in their own key worker group, and possibly, by choice, due to friendships or choice of activities, with other older children.

As well as their base rooms, there are messy areas for sand and water and painting activities, and outdoor areas with tarmaced surfaces, including a covered veranda where table activities and structured play are located, and there is also an extensive grass area.

The Centre operates for an extended day with children attending for a mixture of morning, afternoon and full day sessions. In addition, some children attend for two days, others for three, four or five days a week. In addition to the nursery sessions, there is an Early Learning Group, so called because the parents tend to undervalue the term "play". This group is run for the community with parental involvement on a rota basis. The children attending are not therefore categorised as being as in as much need as the other children, although until recently they had usually been through the procedure of having their needs assessed, and had been recognised as being less "in need" than some of their peers. Sometimes their attendance at this group showed their needs to be greater than originally thought, resulting in their reassessment and then being offered a place in the nursery. There is a separate room for the Early Learning Group, as well as other rooms which operate on a shared usage basis between the "Under Threes", the "Over Threes", and the Early Learning Group. This latter group sometimes mixes with the other groups in these communal areas, which include a ball pool and soft play room, and a television and library room, as well as the areas mentioned previously. This gives the children from both groups opportunities to interact providing positive role models for the nursery children. The Centre staff consists of a co-ordinator, a deputy co-ordinator, a teacher, a senior nursery nurse and nursery nurses.

## The Key Worker System in Operation

At both sites the key worker has a key role to play in the induction of the child and their parent/s. The key worker is the person for liaising with parents on day-to-day issues, for writing records and reports on the child and informing colleagues of relevant information. They are likely to be available to greet the child on their arrival and/or departure, to sit and eat with them for at least one snack or mealtime each day and to be actively involved in play activities with them for some part of the day.

The major difference between the operation of the key worker system at the two sites is that at the Children's Centre, when the child changes from the "Under Twos" Unit to the "Over Twos" Unit, she will not continue to have designated contact with her initial key worker since on moving she will change to a key worker in her new unit. The child will spend all her time in the centre in this new unit with the new staff. This contrasts with the Community Nursery Centre where the child will still go to her "old" unit at the start and end of each day and of each session. In this centre the key worker will remain the same throughout the child's time at the establishment even though she will be going to play in a different unit for large parts of the day where she will play with other adults and children. Thus, like her counterpart at the Children's Centre, she will be interacting with different adults and different children, but in her case it will not be for the entire day. The Community Nursery Centre child will still meet up with her original key worker at the beginning and end of each session and day, as well as at mealtimes. Thus, in the latter establishment, children of mixed ages will have their meals together whereas at the former establishment children will be of a similar age range. The difference in age range of children attending the two centres is

important here: at the Children's Centre children attend from the age of six months up to school age, whereas at the Community Nursery Centre the children do not start until they are two years old. Here too, they can stay until school age, although parents often feel pressurised to send their child to the feeder primary school's nursery class if there is one, even though adult child ratios are considerably higher there than at the centre - one to fifteen compared to one to five. Consequently, the usual age range at the first establishment is from six months to four years eleven months, whereas at the second establishment it is from two years to between four years and four years eleven months.

## Observed Good Practice

### 1. Open, honest communication between educarers and parents

Such relationships are essential for the benefit of the child and are based upon professional, non-judgmental, friendly and supportive relationships. Staff at both establishments work hard to develop and maintain such purposeful relationships. As one educarer put it, "I'm like a friend, someone to chat to... but a professional friend." This is important when sensitive issues about a child's health and education need to be raised. The co-ordinators at both establishments lead by example here. The crucial role of the person in charge in setting an appropriate tone, that is of a staff who are approachable, friendly and concerned about the child and his or her family, is a prerequisite to successful practice (Marsh, 1994). Both establishments have a shared philosophy whereby parents are valued and supported in the upbringing of their children. One parent for instance mentioned how kind and helpful a member of staff had been to her in times of family difficulties when her children had been on the "at risk" register. At one of the centres in particular, the staff see it as part of their role to foster parents' self-esteem and awareness of the importance of their parenting role. This is significant because children are often allocated a place at the centre because their parents are experiencing difficulties in coping with their children or with their own lives. Consequently, staff try to support and encourage parents in their parenting role: many of these parents are isolated from or not supported by their wider kinship networks. This support often takes the form of informal enquiries about children's health appointments and minor ailments. In some cases, however, it may take the form of more direct support.

When one boy needed spectacles to improve his vision and his mother repeatedly failed to take him for an appointment, a member of staff arranged to take the child for his eye test and made arrangements for some spectacles to be made. This member of staff subsequently took the boy to collect his spectacles. In this particular case the mother's ability to cope with even basic day-to-day living was minimal and finances were severely strained, consequently, the centre found funds to cover the cost of the spectacles. This child is now having his hearing assessed with the support of the centre staff who have discussed the need for this with his mother. Thus where a parent is unable to meet their child's needs, staff will offer to address a problem on their behalf.

## 2. The process of admitting children on a gradual basis and of operating a key worker system

This helps to facilitate positive communication and allows a close relationship to develop between the key worker and the parent and the child. An open door policy where parents are encouraged to come in and discuss problems at any time also helps to develop fruitful relationships. Such a policy is in operation at both sites.

When a child is being admitted to the "Under Twos" Unit, or is transferring from the "Under Twos" Unit to one of the "Over Twos" Units, their key worker is released from some of their usual duties to enable them to concentrate on getting to know the new child and form an attachment relationship with them. During this process the new baby or child is allowed to negotiate their own requirements where this is feasible.

Samuel, a seven month old boy, grumbled constantly when he was placed in the "safe" area for non-mobile babies - this contained toys which babies could safely put into their mouths plus a special mirror for them to look at themselves in and the area was bounded by a plastic covered foam shape. Samuel's key worker found that he preferred to lie in the midst of the activity, in effect, in a thoroughfare which toddlers frequently walked through. Within the realms of reasonable safety his wishes were accommodated.

At the other centre, children do not start attending until the age of two years. Because of the need criteria, children may start attending less gradually. Where this happens, however, staff are keenly conscious of the possible stress this can cause the child and the parent and they respond sensitively to each individual. For instance, two year old twins, Natasha and Jason, started coming recently. Their mother has just had another pair of twins and consequently needed some support with her four very young children. Thus, although children are usually toilet trained before they start attending the centre these twins were admitted even though they were still in nappies. Thus, whilst in principle the idea of gradual admission is the ideal, in practice it may not be able to be achieved.

Natasha and Jason had only been coming to the centre for a few sessions when the researcher saw them. Natasha had already gone off to play with some other toddlers but Jason was still unsure and was passed straight from his mother's arms into those of his key worker. Jason stayed cuddled up being consoled as his key worker talked to him about his family and the nursery activities. She stroked his hair and sat down with him on her knee near the sand area. The other children his age were outside playing but Jason showed no wish to join them or to get down from the comfort and security of his key worker's knee. She chatted quietly to him cradling him gently, understanding his feelings of abandonment but also aware of his mother's difficulties in catering for four such young children. As she said to me later, "In our establishment many parents have their own needs which we try to meet... it can sometimes be traumatic for parents to leave a young child possibly for the first time; we are aware of this and try to give some reassurance."

### 3. Flexibility in children's attendance

Whilst a child is offered a set place (full or part time on particular days) management and staff are prepared to adapt in response to changes in family circumstances.

For example, when one mother had to stay in hospital the child at the centre stayed for extended hours and her older sister joined her for a session after school so that they were able to have tea together at the centre before being collected by a relative. This proved valuable in several ways. The older girl had previously attended the centre and was happy to come back. The sisters were together, in an environment they both knew and were comfortable in, and they had the reassurance of each other's company during a traumatic time in their lives. It was also reassuring for the sick mother in hospital to know her children were being well cared for, and the fact that they could stay later and be fed at the centre made life more manageable for the relative looking after them.

Similar flexibility is shown if a parent is working and their hours or days are changed; where possible their child's sessions at the centre will be altered accordingly.

### 4. Flexibility of response to children's needs and community needs

The increased number of children under the age of two who were attending one of the centres led to staff suggesting the development of an "Under Twos" Unit, as these young children's needs were quite different from those of the two to four years olds in the existing units. At the time of the research, the "Under Twos" Unit had been in operation for two years.

Examples of attention to individual children's needs being met thoughtfully were observed in both establishments and were evident in discussion with parents and educarers at both sites. One child stopped being happy settling for a sleep at her centre and, after a discussion between her key worker and her parents, she was no longer encouraged to have a sleep at the centre. This girl was observed at the beginning of a sleep period when she asked, "I don't have a sleep now, do I?" Her key worker confirmed that she no longer had a sleep at the centre and the child, reassured, went off to play.

Where possible, key workers are available to greet children in the morning and to say "goodbye" on their departure in the afternoon, as well as to settle children to sleep (if they have one) and meet them when they awake. However, in reality, with staff shifts and holiday rotas due to the extended days and opening throughout the year, except over Christmas, both centres have difficulty in ensuring key worker contact at times. Clearly, this becomes even more of a problem when staff are sick. However, as both centres have more than one key worker in a room (usually two in the "Under Twos" Unit and four in the "Over Twos" Unit in one establishment, and three in the other establishment), this does provide a

reasonable compromise in that parents are likely to have a long term relationship with at least one of the workers in their room even if it is not their personal key worker. This security is also important for the children, for as Elfer and Selleck (1996) point out, children can cope with several adults looking after them as long as these adults are those with whom they are familiar and feel close to.

#### **5. Staff responding sensitively to children's non-verbal and verbal communications**

An example of a key worker responding positively to a twelve month old girl's movements occurred when Claire waggled her finger at her key worker who imitated her action. Claire grinned delightedly. Later, Claire struggled to lift herself up to a standing position and her key worker gently helped her. On another occasion, Claire lifted her arms up to indicate that she wanted picking up and received her desired response immediately. Such non-verbal interactions between Claire and her key worker made it clear that a positive relationship had been established. The worker also provided a running commentary for Claire as she went about her routines, providing a valuable language experience for Claire - the sort that is readily available for many children at home, but less often at a centre.

However, as Barnes (1996) points out, the quality of such interactions and care are singularly the most important element in providing educare for babies and young children. Similar emphasis on the importance of physical contact and emotional closeness was evidenced by the Scandinavian questionnaires. One for instance stated that, "The knee is the best place to show feelings."

The key worker system is one means whereby emotional security can be provided. This was frequently commented upon in the English and Welsh questionnaires. For example, one stated, "Emphasis is placed on eye contact, cuddling and contact with the children on an individual basis" - it was stressed that this was even more important where English was not the child's first language. Similarly, although it was often not clear whether or not key worker systems operated in other countries, responses did emphasise close contact, sensitivity towards children's feelings, and continuity in care. As Elfer says, "Although we may not always be able to respond to children's emotional needs as quickly or as much as we would like we can know about these needs, rather than denying them" (1996: 33). By allocating major responsibility to specific adults for the emotional welfare of their key children, their awareness of these children's needs is more likely to be heightened.

#### **6. Opportunities for children to make friends with other children and spend time together on a regular basis**

Evidence from another Centre in the UK suggests that staff plan the day to allow for this so that if one of their staff is absent the children still have opportunities to get together with



their usual peers, thus whilst a different adult is present they will still have continuity of children. One of the centres involved in this research also planned in this way so that an adult's absence whilst meaning his or her key children would not see them, did not affect the children in other respects in that the routine would continue as normal but with a different adult in their place. This resulted in continuity of peers and of routine.

Scandinavian questionnaires were also interesting in this respect in that as children do not start school officially until the age of six years they are more likely to have siblings in their day care centres. Whilst responses indicated that it was usual practice to separate children into age groupings so that siblings would not be together, if a child was experiencing difficulty settling or was upset, the staff would let siblings be together in the same group as long as parents were happy about this. This Swedish response recognises the importance children have upon each other's happiness. Goldschmied and Selleck (1996) stress this even for very young babies.

One morning Jack arrived earlier than usual so that he was the first child there. Although he was with his mother and his younger sister he was obviously distressed. This was extremely unusual and out of character for Jack. Staff were immediately sympathetic towards him but he howled as soon as his mother let go of his hand. Despite adult efforts he would not be consoled, shrugging off physical contact. When William arrived he went straight up to Jack and said, "Don't be upset", at the same time putting his arm around him. This time Jack did not shrug off the physical contact, his crying subsided: his friend's efforts to comfort him succeeded where those of adults failed.

A two year old girl was seen asking about her friend who attended the centre but not for as many sessions as she did. At the age of two she was fully able to understand that she would see her friend tomorrow as she had done other days but that she would not see her today. Awareness is one thing, missing her friendship is quite another.

## **7. The need for appropriate personal qualities and professional qualifications for all staff**

The importance of this was recognised by all parents and staff at both establishments, and was mentioned in both interviews and in questionnaires. The importance was also highlighted from the international questionnaires. Many people, staff and parents, regarded the under threes as a particular specialism which not all staff were suited to despite possessing both personal and professional qualities which would suggest their suitability for this age group. (See Coward, in Abbott and Moylett (1997a) a publication based on this research). Even those who chose to work with this group mentioned the isolation which could result from working for long hours mainly with children in the early stages of acquiring language, and the need for adult conversation and stimulation as well as the company of babies was stressed. With the under threes and the under twos especially, additional qualities were seen

to be necessary such as being attuned to the non-verbal needs of these children, being very patient and being a good communicator with both adults and children. Arguably, these are all qualities which any educator of young children needs to possess. Most staff in the two centres studied here had nursery nursing qualifications although a few had teaching or other child care qualifications. England's system of professional training was very different from that operating in the Scandinavian countries, where pre-school teachers or pedagogues trained specifically for the relevant age group.

#### **8. The curriculum is planned for each unit with the needs of individual children taken into account and incorporated into the programme**

Staff plan the curriculum on a topic or theme basis incorporating particular skills the children need to develop or practise within this to meet individual needs, interests, and abilities. Both centres operate in this way, tailoring the curriculum to meet individual needs, personalities and learning styles. A parent commented favourably on this individual emphasis in the establishments planning. The issue of appropriate curriculum planning for under threes is a specific focus of the research and is discussed more fully in this report (see section by L. Abbott).

#### **Difficulties inherent in the operation of the key worker system**

(i) The key worker system cannot operate exclusively for the reasons outlined above, that is staff holidays, shift systems of working and staff turnover. Arguably, because of these practical reasons it is desirable that the system should operate but should do so flexibly so that in the event of a worker's absence neither child nor parent should feel bereft but should have another worker with whom they are familiar and to whom they can turn. In both establishments two or more key workers were usually present in a room. This was especially true at the beginning and end of sessions when parents were likely to come in and might want to chat to workers about their child. Occasionally, a parent might ask where their key worker was if they were not immediately visible, but if they were not available most parents were happy to either discuss the issue with another worker or leave it until their individual key worker returned. This showed that whilst some inevitable absences of staff are accepted by parents they value consistency and continuity where possible.

Both parents and staff were in favour of the key worker system and both sets of adults appreciated the need for this to operate flexibly. Interestingly, parents often thought it was good for their child to get to know two or more adults at the centre very well so that in the case of adult illness their child could cope better. In fact, parents often regarded all the key workers in their child's base room (this could be two, three or four workers depending on the centre and the child's age) as their key worker to some extent especially in the absence of their personal contact. Where only two key workers worked in the same room the key

workers themselves sometimes had to think which were their individual key children. The distinction might not be obvious on a day-to-day basis. Again this depends on the room as in some rooms the key worker always sits with their key children for meals, whereas in others, because of different arrangements for staff breaks, either of two key workers will be sitting with the children at these times. The major distinction for staff in both establishments is that for all their key children they will be the one who is responsible for writing and updating records of the child's progress and collecting information about observations of these children and discussing this information with staff and sharing it with parents.

(ii) In both of these centres the local authority's aim is to provide flexibility in terms of the places offered to children and to try to cater for as many children as possible to offer a valuable service to their parents. Whilst this means that large numbers of children and their parents benefit from the service it also means that most children attend for a limited time each week, for example two or three half-day sessions rather than for all five morning or afternoon sessions, or for a full week. This has implications for staff, children and parents. From the point of view of staff, if a child has been allocated a place because of behaviour problems which may stem in part from inconsistent treatment at home then it can be counterproductive for that child to attend as little as two half-day sessions a week, as they will just be beginning to benefit when they are at home for almost another week. Similarly, if the parent needs a break from their child to improve their relationship then a minimum number of sessions per week are needed. From the child's point of view if they develop friendships with their peers they cannot be sure they will see them on each occasion that they attend. Melhuish (1991) and Sheriff (1995) have both commented on this difficulty. However, as Penn (1995) points out, it is hard to see how it can be overcome as most authorities inevitably want to provide as wide a service as possible for the children and parents they are serving. Even if parents were made more aware of these dilemmas it is difficult to see how they could be resolved without an expansion of quality care for such young children to meet the demand.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations which can occur in the day to day operation of the key worker system it still appears to be a viable mechanism whereby one individual named person is responsible as the first point of contact for the parent, child, other members of staff and people from outside agencies, in the event of information being needed or support required. As one member of staff said,

"In my current role I'm not a key worker and I miss it. I miss the intimacy, the job satisfaction of being specially involved with a group of children and their parents. I wouldn't want to stay in this role permanently; I want to use my skills and training to work with parents as well - I want to be a key worker again."

# The contribution made by educarers to the social construction of identity

Brenda Griffin

## Research Focus and Methodology

The aim of this research was to investigate with practitioners their practices which were intended to support children's growing sense of self.

*The social and emotional development of children is deeply embedded in a sense of self and in the nurture and quality of relationships with others...*  
(Cowie and Pecherek, 1994: 69)

Such an investigation is necessarily a formative process, rather than a description of summative achievement, and so it is impossible to separate discretely the construction of knowledge from its content.

*One way to bridge the worlds of university researcher and public school practitioner is for the researcher authentically to engage in the practitioner world, not as the external imparter of knowledge, but as a participant in the shared construction of knowledge.*  
(Zajano and Edelsberg, 1993: 152)

I was engaged simultaneously in the process of collecting and analysing responses to the interview schedules/questionnaires from the UK and other countries and formulating my approaches to the two centres where I carried out my detailed fieldwork. I felt that here there was no substitute for a lengthy period of engagement with the centres and getting to know the adult workers and children in their particular environments. I spent approximately thirty hours over a period of several months, essentially as a non-participant observer, although in a nursery setting with very young children it is difficult not to participate and to remain too detached would damage the atmosphere where it is essential children should experience that their expectations of a certain quality of interaction are met consistently. Nevertheless, although I spent much time in discussions with staff and parents I was particularly able to observe the child-adult interactions.

My time was spent watching the interactions between staff and children, children and their peers, and staff with other adults including parents. In the later stages of my research I also engaged in considerable discussions with parents. Having become a familiar figure through meeting them as they brought or collected their children, I was able to talk to them in considerable depth at parents' evenings and meetings. One of the centres made available to me a collection of letters written by parents when their child had left or was about to leave the care of the nursery. In both sites the staff perceived the research project as a positive opportunity to challenge their practice.

The research methodology in respect of the detailed observations made had the advantage of richness in data collection but I acknowledge that such accounts are often subject to the criticisms of being biased, impressionistic or idiosyncratic through their inevitable subjectivity (Stake, 1978, Cohen and Manion, 1980).

## Research Questions

My overall aim was to investigate the following question:

- How can educators recognise, encourage and celebrate the individuality of each child in their care as they learn and develop?

In the interview schedules/questionnaires the relevant data for analysis was constituted chiefly by responses to these questions:

- What are your particular aims with regard to children under 3 years old?
- Why are these important to you?

In the two centres studied in detail, the process of developing the research questions was absolutely an intrinsic, entwined part of mutually constructing knowledge. Early and informal discussion with staff encouraged them to identify and articulate what they believed they were aiming to achieve with young children and how this was organised. We arrived jointly at a set of headings which was used over the coming weeks by members of staff to focus their thinking and structure their responses.

How do we ensure that children have the opportunity to experience:

- spontaneous expression
- esteem as an individual
- dignity and autonomy
- self-confidence
- belonging

- independent thought
- respect for their rights

Another important element in our discussions was played by the use of reflective questions taken from the New Zealand Early Years Curriculum Document Te Whariki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1993). There seemed to be a relationship between what staff believed they were doing and why, and the recommendations contained within the principles, aims and goals outlined in the guidance for practice given within Te Whariki.

The five goals are:

- Well being (the health and well being of the child is protected and nurtured)
- Belonging (children and their families feel a sense of belonging)
- Contribution (opportunities for learning are equitable and each child's contribution is valued)
- Communication (the languages and symbols of their own and other cultures are promoted and protected)
- Exploration (the child learns through active exploration of the environment)

It was the further discussion between staff and researchers which developed from sharing the analysis of the second set of questions that created richer descriptions of how all the principles, ideology and philosophy employed by staff translated into practice, i.e. what did this look like when it was happening?

*In empirical research, data on their own are not considered of much use per se. They assume significance only when used within descriptions, explanations or generalisations.*

*(Scott and Usher, 1996: 53)*

The discourse demonstrated a correlation between levels of discussion in both practical and philosophical terms and the levels of commitment to continuing professional development.

## **Responses to questionnaire - Transnational Perspectives**

*As members of the broader European early childhood community we are all involved with the same questions and the search for answers, it is however essential to recognise and consider that all experiences are context related and that we*

*examine early childhood provision within the context of a society and the values of that society.*  
(Griffin, 1997)

It seems to me that human relationship is high on the agenda as the most significant issue for parents when they are entrusting their children's most formative years to the care of others.

A significant distinction emerged between the responses to the questionnaire by UK respondents and those of the Scandinavian countries taking part was the position taken in answer to the questions:

- What are your particular aims with regard to children under 3 years?
- Why are these important to you?

There were major transitional variations in the aims which appeared to give some indication of the professional discipline and/or the type of training experienced by the respondents.

The following list of responses extracted from the UK questionnaire gives some indication of these variations.

*We provide curriculum areas.*

*Staff plan for children's individual needs by recording and organising play plans.*

*We offer a broad curriculum. What each child gains from it is different because of age and ability.*

*The younger children mix with older children. They need a high level of input from staff.*

*We offer a higher ratio of staff to children, enabling a closer relationship.*

*We provide play plans and room plans as a structure set by the staff teams for the day.*

*We offer pre-reading and pre-writing skills within a smaller group setting as a preparation.*

*To provide a stimulating and safe environment as well as ensuring happiness and adequate development for every child in our care.*

*We provide an environment which reflects the home, domestic situation.*

*The emphasis of care for under 3s is aimed at the social and emotional development of the child.*

Playgroups discussed issues of security in terms of children being safe from harm; they talked of the importance of a routine and how this 'progressed' children to a more structured environment (school); and of developing children to reach their 'full potential': this was described as 'intellectual, sensory, social and emotional'. Physical care was also an important consideration.

Childminders again discussed the importance of a routine and were specific about hygiene, diet and rest issues; 'learning right from wrong' and being prepared for the next stage (nursery or school), involving 'toys that are fun and educational'. Childminders felt they made a contribution to children's physical, intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social development by providing a 'happy, secure, safe, caring, comfortable, loving, stimulating and welcoming environment'.

Day nurseries/nursery centres responded in quite similar ways to the above but added to their answers the significance of a 'key worker' system to enable 'trusting' relationships to be formed and the need to reflect the cultural diversity of the UK within the provision. Some centres discussed very specific curricula, designed to give 'choice and first-hand experiences'.

When considering the Scandinavian responses to the questionnaire it is important to remember that colleagues in Sweden, Denmark and Finland are not under any pressure to adopt a National Early Years Curriculum. In Sweden, for instance, childcare programmes offer learning experiences under the headings: Nature, Culture and Society. These are 'intended to support children's growing sense of identity, comprehension of the environment, and ability to communicate with others' (Bergman 1993: 123).

In Denmark, government both at national and local authority level does not require curriculum content from childcare centres, so this is left entirely in the hands of centre staff. However, reference is commonly made to the Danish Welfare Commission's holistic policy on educare for the young written in 1981.

*The Child Welfare Commission (of Denmark)  
Long-term goals for a policy on the child (1981).*

*to provide a happy secure environment where they will develop to their maximum potential;*

*providing opportunities, experiences and materials to develop their physical, emotional, intellectual and language skills as fully as possible;*

*to respect the child as an individual in the family and in society;*



*to give the child a central position in the life of grown-ups;*

*to promote - in a wider sense - the physical conditions in which children grow up;*

*to promote equal opportunities, in the conditions of life of children, both in a material and in a cultural sense.*

*(Vilien 1993: 20)*

However, despite the apparent differences in policy emphasis, UK and Scandinavian centres tended to make similar statements about their aims for children under three. Some made reference to basic care while others gave emphasis to the environment and the programme. An amalgamation of Scandinavian comments suggests that it was important that little by little children could put clothes on and take them off unaided and that they could practice eating and toilet actions. A safe and warm atmosphere was also considered important to their work; they wanted to support the 'being' of children. In addition, they wanted to offer to all children multifarious experiences in music, drawing and physical education. One of the most central goals in their work seemed to be developing social skills. The belief was that these things helped the children to grow into balanced, independent people, who are eager to learn new things.

The Scandinavian centres emphasised the importance of an environment that was warm, with close relationships with other children and adults who would support individual children's development by offering regular programmes of short activities to develop concentration and confidence. It was believed that a child would be confident and well-balanced through such programmes.

Regular programmes, primary care, safety, a sense of security, a range of interesting and developing activities are all much the same as we have found in the UK responses. However, some interesting differences emerged as to why such aims were held and how they were interpreted in practice.

Beliefs about why we do what we do are the fuel that drives us to continue. The following are some of the beliefs extracted from the Scandinavian questionnaires:

*These factors help the child to grow in a healthy way; to receive healthy and good self-esteem and have a happy childhood in day care.*

*We want that each child should feel good enough.*

*We don't teach the children but they learn by playful methods.*

*We must read children's body language very well and make a good understanding of it.*

*That every child should reach a maximum development in their own time. That every child gets a good self-respect and is accepted for what s/he is.*

*That every child shall be able to develop good relations with both other children and adults.*

*They'll feel confident in the group, take consideration and accept that we are all different and unique and help each other.*

*...let them examine success... and let them try, try and try.*

*Security, self confidence and sociability. The child should feel 'good enough'.*

*Good relationships with the parents, a lot of tenderness and nearness. That children should have calm surroundings with toys that make it possible for them to discover and arouse their interest and curiosity.*

*The programme for smaller children is more based on tenderness, nearness and confirmation.*

*Together with parents, create harmonious children.*

*The children must feel confidence, peacefulness and joy. We have to support the self-esteem. We help children how to feel responsibility.*

*We want them to learn to respect each other and to be independent human beings.*

*We want them to have positive feelings to be in a group... to care for each other.*

*...give them activity which gives them mobility.*

*We give a child a feeling of safety and warmth - these things are important for the beginning of life.*

*We try to make them feel safe, that someone cares for them, we talk about feelings.*

*We want the children to be safe and harmonious.*

*Small children learn through their senses so we help them through feelings, tasting, exploring... little children need time, love and compassion.*

*We listen to children very carefully and try to understand their thoughts.*

A very particular ethos appears to exist in the Scandinavian centres. The focus of the provision or programmes offered would appear to be centred upon a 'child development' approach in an individualistic way. The responses suggest that the focus of attention is on nurturing a sense of self in each child that they might grow and develop at their own rate and in their own direction and that the adult role is to 'be with' the child whilst this is happening and to respond to their understanding of the child's needs at any given moment. The childcare workers seemed to show a commitment to the importance of group support and community but felt that this came from unique and individual contributions.

The UK responses seem to be more ambivalent, possibly reflecting the tension between a pre-school education model of early years provision and a child development model. As Bennett (1992: 19) says

*For the English speaker, the term pre-school education will seem to channel the young child towards cognitive development and away from family, social and cultural experience which are the bedrock of human experience.  
...the term early childhood development would seem to correspond more to contemporary understanding of how children develop and learn...*

However, the context of educate in the UK means that educators will probably be working with both models to some extent.

## **Detailed observational research**

### **Site 1 - A Private Day Nursery**

The nursery is housed within a large Victorian building which at various points in its history has undergone restoration and alteration work. There are various extensions built onto, and alongside, the main building, and some in the spacious grounds which surround it. Some of the more recent additions are portacabin and prefabricated. It is located on a busy, major arterial road, three miles from city centre. The surrounding housing is very varied and includes student accommodation. Locally, the area is considered to be residential but within 700 yards there is a busy 'student village'.

The nursery is part of a larger complex containing a residential training college for nursery nurse students - the students can use the nursery as a practical resource for their training. Children attend from a wide catchment area and the nursery services the needs of staff and students from the two nearby universities.

On entering the nursery there is a small reception area leading on the right to offices and staff rooms and on the left to the nursery rooms although one is housed in a portacabin adjacent to the main building. . There are stairs in the reception which lead to the training

college. All of the nursery rooms are at ground level. Each nursery room has a name. The children under three years are grouped in rooms as follows:

'Bluebird' children -	18 months - 3 years (equivalent to 8 whole-time children)
'Peter Pan' children -	18 months - 3 years (equivalent to 11 whole-time children)
'Alice' children -	6 months - 18 months (equivalent to 12 whole-time children)
'Buttercup' children -	6 months - 18 months (equivalent to 6 whole-time children)

At the time of the study the nursery was registered with Social Services for 51 places, of which 48 were whole-time equivalent (WTE) - taken by the 70 children on role.

The nursery rooms within the main building have high ceilings and large windows (with curtains) and there is free access between each of these which allows children freedom of movement and staff the opportunity for collaboration. There are two members of staff in each room at all times, in addition to floating members of the team who respond to need, students and middle managers who are also timetabled into the nursery room staffing rotas.

The children who are over three years are in the new prefabricated, purpose-designed unit in the nursery grounds.

The nursery is open from 7.30am to 6.00pm with 13 members of staff operating a shift system. Of the current 70 children on role a high proportion are under three years. Parents pay fees based upon the amount of time a child attends (part days, part weeks, full time). Staff qualifications range from National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) Level II through to qualified nursery nurses (NNEB). The nursery employs a teacher who, in addition to her work with the older children, has a staff development role. She works directly with the children aged over three.

The nursery centre is currently in the early stages of implementing a HighScope curriculum (the nursery manager was a participant of a one year training programme whilst the study was taking place). Otherwise definition of curriculum for under 3s is heavily influenced by the concept of 'heuristic play'.

*...heuristic play with objects. Put simply, it consists of, offering a group of children for a defined period of time in a controlled environment, a large number of different kinds of objects and receptacles with which they play freely without adult intervention.*

*(Goldschmied 1994 p.118)*

Nursery staff have a range of qualifications, the minimum being National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level III. There is a qualified teacher who works directly with children over three years. Even though the nursery has a limited staff development budget there is a commitment to the ideal by senior members of staff, therefore interesting and innovative

practices have been developed to enhance the development of staff and the service. The nursery manager will become a qualified HighScope trainer to the staff team. The nursery is an NVQ accreditation centre, particular request for specific training by staff is supported where possible (one team member is about to begin a part-time BA(Hons) degree in Early Childhood Studies and will carry the responsibility of dissemination to the nursery team).

## Site 2 - The Children's Centre

The centre was purpose built in 1991 and is funded by the City Councils, Children's Services Division of the Education Department. It is one of four similar centres in this large urban conurbation. It is run by a management committee made up of four parents, two members of centre staff, two elected members of the city council, an officer of the Education Department, the centre co-ordinator and one co-opted member. Parents' contribution to this committee is fully explored in the Handbook for Parents document.

The Children's Centres were developed with very clear fundamental principles:

- to ensure and encourage parental choice over the length and type of care they require.
- to involve parents/carers in decision making
- to provide services on a neighbourhood basis
- to offer a range of services
- to be a community resource
- to provide and develop anti-racist childcare
- to provide and develop anti-sexist child care
- to integrate children with special or specified needs

The housing in the neighbourhood served by the centre is council owned property which was undergoing radical upgrading at the time of the study. Most of the children attending the centre live in the local community. In addition to the role of day care and educational services to children under five the centre offers a range of other services to the local community, including a parent and toddler club, childminder support group, holiday play scheme and a book and toy library.

The entrance to the one storey building which houses the centre leads to a large reception area that has been designed with careful consideration to have a welcoming and inclusive

effect upon people entering, of whatever age and racial origin. The furniture and furnishings are of high quality throughout.

In the centre of the nursery area is a large communal space shared by all staff and children. Each group of children is then placed in rooms, either for the 'under threes' or 'over threes'. But it is important to add that children are placed or are moved on to the over threes rooms according to staff sensitivity to children's demonstrated needs rather than their chronological age. (This organisation has been reviewed since the study took place). Each of the nursery rooms, six in total, work in partnership with another adjoining room, these are referred to as units Green, Red and Gold. The two unit rooms are joined by a connecting room which houses toilet and changing facilities. Every nursery room has a full wall of window looking into its own unit garden/play area and a door giving access to it. This is an important feature of the centre as it gives great flexibility to staff in how they operate the outside provision.

The centre is open from 7.30am to 6.00pm. All staff are qualified childcare workers ranging from NVQ Level II playworker to MA in social work. The management team consists of a centre co-ordinator, assistant co-ordinator and a senior centre worker. The nursery places are subject to fees ranging from £7 to £55 dependent upon earnings, there are some free places available for families receiving income support.

The children attending the centre represent several racial groups and this is strongly reflected in the centre staffing and in the ethos of the work of the centre. Children and families who use the services and the guests who pass through can be in no doubt about the high value this establishment places upon the cultural diversity of the community it serves, the city it represents and to the contributions made and in the making to the history of the world by women and men from all continents especially black people. This centre sees itself as an agent of change in the complex area of self image and self esteem amongst young children who may not see themselves as appropriately reflected or recognised within the wider world.

Whilst the centre has a responsibility to implement policies of the city council it has also developed a range of in house policies with the involvement of all staff and in consultation with parents. It has a commitment to empowering parents through involvement.

This local authority Children's Centre implemented a HighScope curriculum six years ago, the intention of the local authority was that all staff in this centre would be fully trained in the approach and some staff would become HighScope trainers who would then deliver the training to the four other children's centres in the service. The extent to which this proposal was achieved has been limited by staff turnover at all levels. As a consequence, the range of understanding varies greatly: some have experienced full training by professional HighScope trainers and have six years of experience whilst others are still trying to get to grips with the principles and practice of the approach in a more natural absorption manner. In addition to this, the local authority provides a wide range of in-service opportunities to the centre staff

who access this according to need and interest. Whilst it is true that all the centre staff are qualified centre workers some are much more so than others. The amount of ongoing training opportunities taken up by staff reveals itself in the oral and written contributions made to the project and in the evidence of practice observed.

## Findings/Discussion

### I. Observation

In an attempt to develop a sense of belonging within a group or a new community children are admitted to both centres through a *gradual admission policy*. Children and an accompanying adult (most commonly the child's mother) have time to visit the centre initially for short periods in the day, gradually extending these and involving the parent spending longer periods of time away from their child inside or outside of the building. At this time parents are informed of all aspects of provision and policies. These continue to be discussed during regular liaison. Philosophically all staff believe that this time should be as long as is required by the child to feel comfortable and confident in the centre, however in reality it may be limited by the parents opportunity to devote the necessary time to this process. Working parents have expressed concern about the difficulties in gaining *employer support* for this.

Parents feel informed about the nursery structure, content, expectations and personnel. Parents are aware of who will care for their child and how this will happen. Parents know what their child's day will consist of and they will have the opportunity to take an active part in this by becoming involved via the partnership that is offered.

During this gradual admission process the child and parent will be becoming familiar with the *key worker* (see the section by Chris Marsh on this concept) i.e. the member of staff who will be responsible for the child. The extent to which both centres studied employed the keyworker approach was very similar. Both centres worked within small 'room' teams offering a secondary keyworker. This was believed to be in the best interest of children as it offered a continuity for all the children in the room/s (two groups - two key workers). It enabled staff to take breaks, have holidays, attend training etc. whilst at the same time a known and trusted adult would still be there.

*Adequate staffing* arrangements were vital to enable adults to carry out their responsibilities to children. Both centres had planned 'floating' staff members who were placed where they were needed on a daily basis, although sometimes staff shortages created circumstances which were frustrating and less than satisfactory based upon self-expectations. Staff were occasionally dependent upon and received support from students and members of the management team in order to prevent this occurring.

The need to work *collaboratively in teams* was believed to be essential in sustaining the structure necessary for the smooth running of the centres and the programmes they offered. *Support from colleagues* whilst a key worker was 'settling' a child and establishing a relationship with both parent and child is believed to be essential at this time. Being relieved by a 'partner' from the usual duties allowed the necessary time for this to be established.

The introduction to the nursery routines and to other members of staff was believed to be as important to the parents as it was to the child this was considered an initial step in establishing a *partnership with parents*. This system gave parents an insight into their child's day, perhaps allowing them to be part of it in an abstract way. It allowed parents some knowledge of the child's experience.

At this stage parents were also introduced to the systems of record keeping and encouraged to begin to contribute to this with personal details of their child i.e. likes, dislikes, preferences, comforts, special diets, other family members. Both centres studied attributed importance to key workers being available to parents at one or both ends of the day in order to share information. One of the centres also kept a running diary on each child containing contributions from staff and parents, this was felt to be vital where staff worked a shift system and may not talk to a parent everyday. The *ongoing exchange of* information kept staff well informed about the child's life outside of the centre and the parents informed about the child's life within it. (On the rare occasion when a child did not settle with a particular member of staff the child would move to another room and key worker and the process of settling would begin again.)

Each child in both centres had a *personal space* identified as their own by names, pictures and symbol, this included coat pegs, a box or basket in which to keep their personal belongings the spare clothes, bedding, comforters, toys and sleep mat where appropriate (children using cots had their name/symbol on this too). *Children always had access to their personal belongings* and could use a comforter at any time they wished, these took many forms ranging from teddies to dummies. Refusing children access was felt to cause unnecessary anxiety. Staff in the centres believed it was important for children to have a sense of *self reference* within a 'family room' and whilst the intimate relationship with a key worker was felt to be the most major contribution to this, other strategies were also in place. Children would have photographs of themselves, their extended family, friends and pets on display along with their own original creations.

Key workers would plan into each day *family group times*, including mealtimes. These were the times when children and staff demonstrated most strongly their confidence in and attachment to each other. Whilst these were in part routine group occasions they were the times when individual children were given space and time to talk and to listen, when they were encouraged and given the needed support to 'try' and when they received affirmation as an individual.



*A uniform approach to handling difficult behaviour* based upon a criticism of the action and not the child operated in both centres as did a no shouting policy. Reasoning, explaining and reassuring with a minimum of fuss and encouraging the children to think about the effect of their actions was quickly followed by a distraction and follow-up praise for positive behaviour. Both centres have a written 'Care and Control' policy which have been developed (alongside a range of other policy documentation) with parental participation. Where disagreement occurs with reference to any centre policy this is discussed away from the nursery rooms with the key worker, parent and centre manager in an attempt to arrive at a satisfactory decision. *Policy documents are monitored and appraised regularly.*

Children in a nursery setting belong to a special community and their presence makes a contribution to that community. Both centres recognise the importance of their role in encouraging and supporting children's contributions. Many activities and routines provided are shaped around the rights and needs of children to *value and respect their own and other contributions*. Opportunities are created for children to share thoughts and ideas and to put these into practice, to help, applauded and hug each other, to hold hands and do things together to care for and look after each other, to share materials and equipment, to enjoy their own and others successes or attempts and to witness adults behaving in the same way, staff with staff and staff with parents and staff with children. The *quality of relationships* between children is strongly influenced by those they observe. Many opportunities are created for children to learn from each other: equipment which requires two or more people to function effectively; materials that have to be shared in an orderly fashion e.g. a slide; mealtimes where both centres encourage children to serve their own meal taking what they wish to eat and leaving enough for everyone else waiting until everyone is served before beginning to eat.

Both centres are well equipped with play materials but conflict does arise where very young children have not yet learned to share, these occasions are handled sensitively by staff using the opportunity to explore the child's understanding of waiting, turn taking and the necessity of problem solving. Children are encouraged and helped to return materials to where they belong, to put things together, to learn where everything goes and to understand why.

Each of the centres has made a strong effort in curriculum process to *connect to the families and cultures* of each child; this provision was made in a range of ways and was at a particularly high level of development in one of the centres which serves a community made up largely of British/Caribbean British/African families. Materials throughout this centre reflected this and children were surrounded by familiar smells, sounds, tasks objects of art, games, pictures and much more. A great deal of care had been taken to ensure authenticity of materials rather than simply purchasing this from a catalogue or educational supplier.

Staff had developed strategies, systems and conditions where each child would receive *individual attention* in addition to a commitment to respond to children's changing needs and moods on a continuous basis. This is demonstrated most strongly at family group times, meal times, changing times, sleep times, or if a child is hurt or upset.

To encourage each child to feel a sense of security and well being staff placed great emphasis upon the *trusting bond* between them. This was developed through physical contact, lots of hugs and cuddles (unless unwanted) by being calm and really listening to children.

Staff must be available in order to *find out who a child is* and what their current needs are in particular their emotional needs. Trust will develop as the child realises that this adult looks after her/him well, that this adult is honest and keeps their word, and believes that this adult enjoys being with them and that the relationship with the family is good.

Whilst all staff valued a structure or routine to the day and believed it to be important for children to understand what was happening next as an aid to feeling secure, they also recognised the importance of flexibility in order to respond to need. Children were changed when needed and were never awakened from sleep because it was mealtime.

*Communication* is seen as central to children's growing sense of themselves and staff are aware of their role in understanding the message/languages of children. Staff in both centres are confident that they can accurately interpret the moods, wishes and needs of the children in their care, this stems from the close personal relationship created through time and interest staff can recognise different types of cries, e.g. hungry, tired, discomfort and the sometimes subtle changes in behaviour indicating tiredness or distress. Children's preferred way of communicating is encouraged and staff will 'give' children words without the expectation that the child will use them. It is considered respectful to accept what a child has to say and the chosen way to say it.

Staff are very aware of their own language including the non verbal and the powerful effect it may have upon a child taking care to avoid negative responses in words and deeds.

The individual preferences of children were accommodated in diet, sleep patterns, and *flexible implementation of the curriculum* (HighScope in one, heuristic play in the other). Staff felt each child should feel 'in control of their day'. There are times in both centres when pre-programmed activities are offered, although children were encouraged to participate rather than coerced. Staff felt committed to taking advantage of children's personal interests and endeavoured to support their learning in through and around this although constraints are sometimes felt in terms of space, materials or time.

Children were encouraged to *explore, experiment*, to try things out and discover what was possible. Free access was available to *play* materials and equipment as were new experiences to choose and enjoy. Children had opportunities to invent and test their own ideas with lots of adult interest and time for discussion reflection and analysis. Staff saw their role as that of an enabler sustaining effort or interest, joining in under child direction as a 'play-mate' they also recognised that there were many occasions when there was no active role for themselves other than that of unobtrusive observer. All staff were aware of their responsibility for children's *safety* but believed that this issue should not be used to create dependency or insecurity.

All staff considered it necessary to employ the range of strategies and opportunities discussed in order to create a relaxed, supportive and interesting environment in which children can safely express themselves confident in the knowledge that this is valued.

## 2. Analysis of Parental Comment

The major concern of all the parents I talked to was the happiness of their child; this came before curriculum content, training and qualifications held by staff or staff child ratios.

All felt it was *important that staff enjoyed 'my child'*. Value was given to the willingness of staff to 'chat' to parents about the day's events:

*...how well they know the children, I feel this approach is a good illustration of their professional shared-care approach which I find very reassuring.*

The *regular informal discussion*, in addition to the more *formal timetabled events* confirmed to parents that staff knew, understood and cared for each child. Parents wanted staff to *have a strong bond with their child*, to offer care as a mother would and felt that the *key worker system* serviced this very well -

*She is as proud of his achievements as I am.*

Several parents used the word *trust*:

*My child trusts the staff here so of course I do.*

At both sites all parents believed their child enjoyed the nursery and would talk freely about people and events and of how the staff were 'missed' at weekends, so close were the relationships. Parents were aware that their child had developed in skills knowledge and ability. However, most significantly and commonly referred to was the *growth in confidence* in every case. The *atmosphere of the nursery* was discussed in some detail in terms of 'happy', 'warm' and 'friendly'. Parents were very pleased with the environment and recognised the *team work* which contributed to this, 'There are always plenty of staff about, helping each other, plenty of capable hands.'

It was clearly of prime importance to parents that each child had *a positive and strong bond with at least one other adult* and that this adult would have genuine affection, interest and involvement with that child and as a result of that personal commitment would want and expect the best for that child in the same way that a parent would.

In discussions about what parents wanted their children to gain from the nursery experience there were once more common themes: confidence, independence and sociability,

*I want him to feel good about himself.*

*When I was looking for a nursery I watched the staff and how they interacted with children, I looked for happy children.*

*I want her to gain confidence.*

*... he feels good about himself.*

*His confidence has grown so rapidly he is a very assured child now.*

*Mostly I want him to gain in independence and be a happy sociable child.*

*...the children are happy.*

*It's important that the staff encourage children to be independent but that they also encourage sociability.*

The parents I consulted were very aware of the importance of their children's *emotional health and how it was inextricably linked to the relationship with the educator.*

# How adults define and provide a curriculum for the under threes

Lesley Abbott

## Research focus

One of the key questions for all those working with young children in out-of-home settings relates to the kinds of learning experiences they provide. It is therefore appropriate that a major focus of this research is on the curriculum and how it is defined by educators, parents and the children themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly. The importance of early learning experiences are highlighted in recent reports, Carnegie Corporation of New York (1994) and in government recommendations and requirements DfEE (1996b) and SCAA (1996).

*High quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children.*

*(Sylva, 1993)*

The usual dictionary definition of curriculum as 'a course of study' would seem at first sight to be inappropriate when talking about children under three. Indeed, this was the immediate response of many parents and educators when asked to define a curriculum for the under threes. Their response was in line with that of Wood (1988) who sees the role of those working with very young children as one of capturing the learning opportunity in situations of spontaneity. Edwards and Knight (1994: 154) provide a useful contrast between the role of the educator of older children and the view held by Wood. Their belief is that teachers of older children, rather than seizing the moment and exploiting the learning potential of immediate situations, have to 'recruit' children to tasks that will develop their understanding. Anyone observing the young children will readily acknowledge that 'recruitment' to learning is not an issue.

*Curriculum is not an attractive word. Whether heard through the ear as a sound, or seen through the eye as a shape on a page. It leaves an impression of something sharp and harsh.*

*(Schiller 1979: 93)*

Accordingly the immediate response of parents and educators can be to deny that the term

'curriculum' is relevant to these very young children:

*Curriculum is more to do with school.*

*It is a syllabus, play is more important here.*

*No, they don't have a curriculum, but they do seem to plan what is offered.*

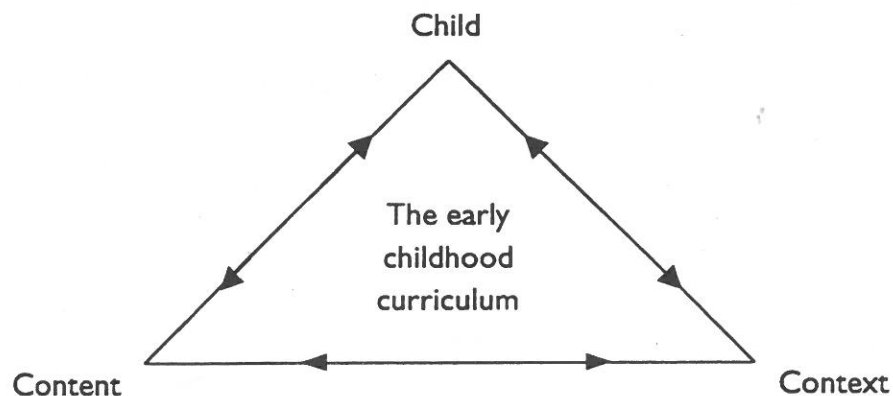
But others saw the curriculum in terms of the wider definitions offered by theorists as including all the experiences both planned and unplanned including interactions and relationships with materials and people:

*Oh yes we definitely have a curriculum here - it isn't formal, involving subjects, but it is more to do with play and all the learning activities we offer. It is planned so that we offer experiences that are broad, balanced and hopefully relevant to the needs of our children - even though they are so young.*

*(Educarer - Toddler Group)*

Bruce's (1987) definition of curriculum in terms of the interaction between the child, the context and the content, presented as a model in which the arrows pass freely between all components, would seem to be appropriate when talking about a curriculum for children under three:

### The three Cs of early childhood curriculum



What the child already knows  
What the child needs to know  
What the child wants to know more about

People, culture, race, gender, special educational needs, access, materials and physical environment outdoors, indoors, places, events

## Research Questions

Issues were defined as the exploration of:

- the ways in which specific provision is made for early learning experiences for children under three;
- ways in which adults, both parents and educators, define a curriculum for under threes.

## Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) assert that qualitative educational research makes use of a multiplicity of methods to enable rich interpretation. For this area of research strategies of data collection included the following:

- Detailed observations were made in two UK centres using participant and non-participant observation.
- Day visits were made to two Finnish centres.
- Information was gathered from semi-structured interviews by researchers in the other eight centres.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten parents of children under three in a parent-toddler group.
- Staff were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule.
- Parent and staff views were collected via diary and personal writing.
- Data from questionnaires were collated and analysed.

In line with an interpretive approach, rather than attempt to summarise all the data, I shall endeavour to convey a flavour of the good practice observed in vignettes and through the direct quotations of practitioners. I hope this approach preserves something of the immediacy of experience that is the world of the under threes.

## A Day Care Centre - Finland

The centre provides educare for 200 children between the ages of nought and seven years. They are grouped in ten houses situated on the same campus in the outskirts of Turku - 100 kilometres to the south of Helsinki.

The children are grouped according to age - the youngest children, nought to three years, are grouped together, although parents can request that siblings remain together. Four to five year olds and six to seven year olds are grouped. There are 46 women members of staff

under the leadership of a head of centre. Group sizes comprise approximately 12-15 children with three adults. The philosophy of the centre accepts that all adults, although differently trained, are equally important and that there is no hierarchical system in operation. The cleaners, cooks, pedagogues, social workers, teachers and nursery nurses all have special skills and talents and have something important to contribute to the lives of the children.

The centre is open each day from 6.30am until 6.00pm and operates a flexible system in order to meet the needs of parents. All children have a right to a place in the centre and all are treated equally, irrespective of race, gender, social background or special educational needs.

Children are admitted in order from the list of names although social need is a consideration. There is a sliding scale of payment and no one is denied a place through inability to pay. Flexible arrangements allow working parents to make full use of the facility.

*Sometimes it is better for a very young child to be at home - for others this is the best place.*

The centre has a clear equal opportunities policy and caters for children from a range of cultures including Russia, Iraq, Sweden and Mauritius. Child mentors help younger arrivals to settle in and learn the language where necessary.

Staff planning is considered both a professional requirement and duty and a social necessity, i.e. it is one way in which staff 'bonding' is ensured, this is acknowledged as a development from the Swedish concept of the importance of the group in planning. Meetings take place daily and weekly with evening meetings. Staff often meet and plan in the evening and then eat a meal together. With 46 staff, the head of the centre considers this a particularly important aspect of her role. There are ten 'houses' in which the children are grouped and whilst individual houses will plan together it is considered important that the whole staff come together on a regular basis.

Parents' involvement is central. A big book about each child is made at the centre and goes with them when they leave. Parents participate in compiling the book. Parents' meetings are very popular and use a variety of venues, even the local sauna!

Influences from both the Finnish culture and that of famous childcare practices from Reggio Emilia, Italy, are evidenced in the atmosphere where aesthetic experiences are given a quiet, strong emphasis. The ethos was on developing an appreciation of beauty for its own sake, not merely its learning potential. Absent were any of the frequent UK accountments of materials designed to 'teach': jigsaws, educational toys, large labels, and enormous displays of murals and children's work.



Instead were soft furnishings and a few beautifully mounted photographs older children had taken. Lighted candles flickered on every table and in corners. Table lamps shone in corners and alcoves providing shadows which became a focal point for discussion or careful observation by even the youngest child. Bright mobiles provided movement, hand-eye co-ordination was facilitated by judicious placing at levels at which children could feel and stroke, and even taste and smell. Mirrors of different shapes and heights in rooms and corridors provided opportunities for observation of similarities and differences.

Children were introduced to shape and colour through attractive displays of glass bottles filled with coloured water, set against the light, which constantly changed as educators moved them into different positions as they passed by. Cellophane shapes set out on tables lit from beneath, similar to those used in Reggio Emilia, allowed children to experiment, observe, control and share experiences of colour, density, shape and light.

I remember a visit by some Finnish educators to the UK. They were astonished at aspects of the environments of pre-school centres they saw, which were so different from any style of private home. The ubiquity of neon strip lighting, hard chairs and so on were quite shocking to them. They believed that the transition to new relationships made necessary by attending out-of-home settings is quite enough for a child to cope with - so why make the environment so alien as well? (It is interesting to note that many parents in the UK incorporate nursery-type features into the home - labels on objects, small desks and chairs etc. Could this be an effort to enable their children to cross between the settings as comfortably as possible?)

The everyday transitions were sometimes overly sharp in the view of the visitors too: at the Finnish day care centre described above, for example, parents could breakfast with their children before going on to work or at least enjoy a leisurely coffee. I even saw a young child brought very early to nursery still in pyjamas - the mother had obviously scooped her from bed into a car seat and then calmly dressed and breakfasted the child in the centre before leaving for work herself.

Rather than provide an example of a UK centre contrasting sharply with the Finnish day care centre, which would be easy to do, I choose to describe some aspects of a centre where the philosophy has many similarities.

## **A Private Nursery - UK**

This nursery is run in a private house owned by the manager who left her career in the state education system, where she was head of a primary school, disillusioned with the constraints of the system. Inspired by Scandinavian holistic ideas about child development and education, and also by the positive role the environment has the potential to play in a child's life experiences, she opened a nursery in a consciously homely rural environment.

Comfy settees, adult sized tables, real pictures on the wall, a well kept garden and sunny conservatory characterise a setting in which children are free to choose those activities which engage them and also not to choose as it suits them. The 'standard fare' of the nursery identified by Bruner (1980) as paint, glue, water, sand, domestic play, jigsaws, construction, is on offer indoors together with opportunities to engage in all these activities out of doors. The house is set in half an acre of land and opportunities abound for physical activity, exploration of the environment, picking flowers, watching birds and building dens. Imaginatively built log cabins and climbing frames are ideal for acquiring, practising and developing skills and for taking the indoors outside!

A sandpit which children are able to climb into provides a very different experience from that provided by the sandtray around which children are only able to stand. Observations were made of young babies sitting in the sand pit surrounded by a mixed age group of children. The under threes were learning from the older children who in turn were learning to be sensitive and caring when involving babies and younger children in their play. The sandtray though excludes the under threes from joining their older peers, since they cannot actively reach inside it without some kind of support. In addition wheeled toys, trucks, bikes and equipment offering the choice of group, pair or individual involvement are thoughtfully made available.

Reflecting her close observation of what children are choosing to do and belief in the importance of enabling choice where possible, the manager has ensured that children's privacy is safeguarded and provides opportunities to withdraw into a quiet corner. There is even an old dog kennel into which children can escape when the world gets too much for them or they simply want to exercise their right to be alone!

A feature of the nursery's style which had underlying similarities with the Finnish day care centre was the focus upon mealtimes. In both centres there is clearly the belief that food offers a holistic learning opportunity. In the Finnish centre were little bowls of forkfoods, finger foods and so on from which the children could pick and choose. In the UK nursery children's involvement was encouraged in food preparation. Part of the kitchen was freely accessible to them and I witnessed their interactions with the cook during soup preparation. They had been invited to smell, taste, feel, chop, slice and talk - without constant admonishments to be careful, keep away, stop touching!

At both centres mealtimes were valued sensory, social and motor experiences. In the Finnish centre infants of around eight months' old were seated in chairs that enabled them to sit right up at the table with the others; very unlike the usual UK highchairs for the very young which segregate them with their trays slightly away from the main eating arena. At lunch time in the UK nursery under and over threes sat together grouped around a table: a cowboy, a policewoman, an old lady, a bride, a sportswoman, a gardener, a business executive, a fire-fighter and two builders had wandered in from the garden and seated themselves at random having listened to a story and washed their hands on the way.

Two under threes holding hands had joined the little group after climbing out of the large sandpit, in which, barefoot they had experienced the texture of dry and damp sand on their toes. Together they had gone in search of their 'wellies' paired with brightly coloured pegs as they took them off. Unfortunately the excitement of the activity had taken over and they had managed to get the wellingtons mixed up, with the result that they arrived at lunch one child wearing two left wellies and the other two right ones! No one challenged, criticised or corrected them; no one said they couldn't have lunch with their hats on, they had more important things to do and after all what did it matter? The educator smiled and welcomed them and encouraging them to tell her about their morning continued with another exciting element in the curriculum.

Apart from circle times when children are encouraged, but never coerced, to come together to sing, talk or listen to a story, they are free to choose their own activities. Staff make a very positive move to encourage children to try a range of activities. This often results in groupings comprising under threes working and playing alongside older children. Storytime, for example, was part of the planned curriculum but it did not demand that all the children be there nor was it used, as so often happens, as an organisational strategy in order to allow staff to clear away for lunch, helpers to grab children to wash their hands or parents to collect them at the end of the session. All of which means that many children never hear the end of a story!

Some separation is provided for the very youngest children. A recently opened baby unit in a converted stable provides a calm and well planned environment in which children, parents and educators operate on a one to one or small group basis. This does not mean that older children never visit or that the 'babies' are excluded from any of the activities on offer to the older children. Indeed an observation was made of Oliver the youngest baby crawling along the footpath as he 'escaped' from the baby unit to join the noise coming from the big house. The important point is that he was not prevented from doing so!

There is a great emphasis on creative activity of all kinds and the philosophy of the head is apparent in the way she and her staff - many of whom she has trained herself, talk about the curriculum.

*Observation is very important to us in deciding what a child needs, what they are interested in and how we should take them forward.*

*Creativity is at the heart of children's learning, about themselves, their environment and people. I believe very strongly that the adult needs to be there with the child otherwise a lot of opportunities and information can be lost.*

*Children's paintings and drawings reflect the commitment to this area and from a very early age close observation is encouraged. Whether this is of daisies growing in the field, their own reflection in a mirror, or the nursery cat - attention to detail is important.*

## A Parent Toddler Group in a Combined Nursery Centre - UK

The words of a senior educator I interviewed at a Parent Toddler Group reveal thoughts on the curriculum and its contextualisation which have much in common with aspects of the philosophies described above: the emphasis on the 'homely' qualities of the environment and the opportunities for stimulating sensory experiences:

*A curriculum for children under three encompasses a wide range of options for children to learn, experiment, experience. It must ensure a gentle transition from home to nursery, incorporating familiar experiences, a patient caring attitude on the part of adults and unlimited opportunities to explore their new environment.*

The centre is funded by the LEA, Social Services and the local F.E. college and is open from 8.00am - 6.00pm closing early one day each week for staff development. An extended day operates for children of parents at the FE college. The centre itself has the equivalent of 190 places within the three to five age range in addition to a thriving parent/toddler group which meets for three sessions each week under the guidance of the Deputy Head of Care and the Senior Educator and accommodates approximately 20 under threes and their parents or carers. The centre is led by a headteacher and supported by a deputy head-teacher, teacher, deputy head of care, senior educator, ten educators, a non-teaching assistant, caretaker, domestic assistant, cook, kitchen assistant and secretary.

The aims of the toddler group are to welcome both children, parents and carers into the centre easing transition and meeting the needs of both parents and children. It is perhaps best described in a piece of writing by one of the participants:

*"Can we go in the next room, today?" asks my two year old daughter, after dropping her big sister off in the main nursery. "Yes," I reply and she grabs hold of the little boy that I mind and they run excitedly towards the large, inviting room. The "next room" is the parent and toddler group and is situated at the entrance of the nursery. It's a large room divided into two, one half for the children, the other for parents and carers, allowing adults to take time out from playing and helping their children, to have a hot drink and a chat, but still having sight of their children. There's a mass of activities on offer ranging from a craft area involving play-dough, painting, sand and water play, through a large toy kitchen, with wonderfully realistic food! There's a playpen for babies and baby toys. A quiet area with a bookshelf and even a boat for them to have adventures in! Drinks and biscuits are provided mid-morning, giving them a chance to sit and get their breaths back, sometimes followed by singing. After two hours it's time to go, reluctantly, but we'll be back next time for some more fun in the nice, friendly atmosphere. It's an ideal way to introduce toddlers to a nursery environment.*

*(Beth, mum and childminder)*

Additional resources and activities for the youngest children include 'soft areas' with large comfortable cushions, playpen, baby play station, additional rugs and carpets, soft toys, mirrors and sensory materials to appeal to sight, sound, taste and smell. Safety is a key issue and all equipment is selected with this important feature in mind. All other materials are accessible to very young children and displays are deliberately low to attract the eye of crawling babies.

An excellent example of staff responsiveness to children's needs was in response to the arrival of a newly born baby brought along by the parent with her two year old brother. The staff quickly realised that there was a gap in their provision for such a tiny baby - but when I returned only one day later it was to find a new baby basket with co-ordinated covers and attractive mobiles - and a very contented baby and parent.

Parents are made extremely welcome and they are encouraged to become involved with their children's activities although individual needs eg. to spend time with other adults, to study, talk, gain confidence, or learn are all acknowledged and provided for. Their ideas are also sought and used and the walls and noticeboards at adult height are used to help parents understand the learning potential of the activities on offer and particularly the role of play in early learning. Reference books are available on loan, together with a toy library for the children.

Parents definitely appreciated the Toddler Group:

*Since my daughter (two years six months) joined the toddler Group she has calmed down a great deal and also plays better with other children.*

*Ryan has learnt how to mix with other children and to share his toys, there are a lot of activities Ryan can do here that he couldn't enjoy at home.*

*I like the centre's 'mum and tots' because educarers work alongside the mums and help in the activities that are provided. My son Frankie loves it.*

*Pratima is learning to share and mix with other children at 'mums and tots' and seems to be more confident and sociable. She really enjoys coming here!*

*The Nursery is great for me to spend time with Abi and other children her age in a relaxed small group. There are lots of activities for her to do and plenty of help and care from the educarers.*

*I feel, since bringing Daniel and Matthew to playgroup, Daniel's communication and both their learning is improving greatly. They are both able to be creative and play at the same time.*

*I think that the idea of parent and toddler group is a very good idea. My son is happily occupied and he enjoys meeting other children of a similar age group. I also find the toddler group is convenient as it is within the nursery where my other son attends. I also feel that his co-ordination skills will improve because he has so many toys to play with.*

The fact that parents are informed and knowledgeable about the curriculum aims and content has clearly made a difference both in the way they talk about the curriculum and the degree to which they contribute. They are encouraged to express their views about the group and to become fully involved in its development. This they do willingly because they know that they are valued within the centre.

## **Implications for Practice**

At the heart of the different curricula in each of the three settings I have described is a belief that the curricula should be tailored to the holistic development of the individual child. There were no references to 'Baseline Assessment' or the notion of 'school readiness' which so often at present seems to be filtering to younger and younger age-groups. The growing number of young four year olds in reception classes partly as a result of the short-lived but influential nursery voucher initiative and the introduction of the 'Desirable Outcomes' is resulting in pressure on both parents and educators to concentrate on the more formal aspects of early learning. This it seems is no less true for the under threes in a substantial number of centres from whom questionnaires were returned.

A minority of curriculum definitions from parents and educarers reflected the growing concern with the 'basics':

*Our curriculum utilises the areas indoors and outdoors and is planned using the Curriculum headings per OFSTED Guidelines.*

*(Teacher - Community Nursery Centre)*

*She is getting set for school - learning her numbers, shapes and colours. She is singing and listening to stories.*

*(Mother - Kayleigh 2 years 10 months)*

*The nursery provides him with toys and activities he doesn't have at home - things that teach him about shapes and numbers and colours.*

*(Dad - Frankie 2 years 3 months)*

A heartening contrast, however, was offered by parents and educarers who placed the emotional and social needs and learning potential of early years settings high on their list of priorities for the under threes.

*He is learning that everything is not mine, mine, mine - he can now share and take turns*

*(Harry's mum - 2 years 0 months)*

*The curriculum is an individual thing for each child - children can choose not to do something just as easily as they can choose to do an activity. They can choose people too. We don't select their keyworker - they do!*

*(Private Nursery owner)*

*She is learning to be part of a group, accepting that I can leave her but I will return.*

*(Nadia's mum - 18 months)*

Little reference is made to the more formal aspirations, intentions, aims or purposes of early out-of-home educare in the responses of professionals in Scandinavia, particularly those from Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

*Day care is about becoming responsive, knowing yourself, being allowed to 'be', valued for yourself not because you are someone's son, daughter, mother or sister - we all need that however young or old we are.*

*(Educarer - Finland)*

*Independence, social awareness, emotional stability are high on our list of priorities. They will learn all the other things at school.*

*(Pedagogue - Day Care Centre - Denmark)*

Educare for the under threes is about being responsive to the needs of individual children and recognising that some of them are highly competent. The need to provide a curriculum that is broad, balanced and relevant is no less important for this age group than any other. The emotions, self esteem and intellect of under threes must be fostered alongside physical and social growth.

There are directly important implications of the findings of this research project which we believe could beneficially influence provision and practice:

1. Curriculum definitions relate to the level and type of training undertaken by adults. Teachers and educarers who had been, or were currently involved in, further professional training were more ready to acknowledge the existence of and to define, a curriculum for under threes. Greater emphasis on and experience with under threes should be included in all training programmes for Early Years staff.

2. Parents in centres where staff had involved parents in discussion about activities provided, who displayed curriculum plans and provided parents with written information

were able to define the curriculum for their children more readily than those who had little involvement. - Greater and more appropriate involvement of parents in their children's educare is required.

3. The level of involvement of parents in the curriculum experiences of their children was higher in centres where parents are viewed as the child's first educators. Training must focus more clearly on working with parents and carers in order to develop appropriate practice and to change attitudes which implicitly or even explicitly exclude parents.

4. Curriculum areas defined for children under three correspond closely with those identified for older children, i.e. creative areas including paint, clay, sand, water, collage. Physical and construction activities including block play, provision for fine and gross motor skill development, imaginative play - including dressing up and domestic play. Cognitive development - focusing on sorting, matching, discrimination, involving shape, sound, size and colour. Singing, including nursery rhymes, number games and finger play. However the promotion of social and communication skills development for the under threes was sometimes at the expense of other areas, especially where under threes were segregated from other age groups. Equal emphasis should be placed on appropriate provision for all aspects of learning within a holistic conception of development. Especially important is adult involvement in extending children's play.

5. The question of whether under threes should be segregated from children in the immediately older age group should be thought about carefully. We witnessed several occasions where younger children, when able to see what was on offer for the older children, made strenuous efforts to join them. If physical separation is necessary for whatever reason, can the effects of this be reduced for at least part of the day? Can strategies be developed for increasing the involvement of older children and parents in the activities of the under threes? The benefits will not only accrue to the younger children! We have seen positive examples of older children acting as role models and mentors in action.

6. We recognise that in terms of the environment for educare of the under threes many practitioners are working with considerable constraints. At the policy-making level our research has raised questions that could be considered at the initial design stages of provision. But any environment can and should be thought about in terms of its capacity for sensory and aesthetic stimulation. Comfort for users is another priority. At the Parent Toddler group discussed above, members of staff regularly try sitting on the floor to see for themselves the view from the perspective of under threes.

7. An initial evaluation of responses to the questionnaires reveals clear cross cultural differences in views about the curriculum. Responses from Sweden and Denmark indicate an emphasis on safety, sociability, health and welfare, while UK respondents refer more often to acquisition of basic skills. Staff must resist the downward pressure of a more formal curriculum whilst ensuring that individual needs are met. Training and professional support are highly significant in this respect.



## Concluding Comments

The newly published Excellence in Schools (DfEE 1997) highlights the government's intention to:

*conduct a thorough review of the National Curriculum ..... so that we will have a genuinely collaborative exercise in which all our partners in education will have the chance to participate.*

This will clearly have implications for the kind of curriculum experiences offered to children at the pre-school stage, in terms of Desirable Outcomes, and will inevitably have a 'knock-on' effect in relation to the curriculum for children under three. The DfEE claim in the section on 'Sound Beginnings' that the curriculum for the next century - and its associated assessment - will be guided by:

*Our vision of a curriculum reflecting a common framework and a common entitlement. The needs of children at different ages and different stages of their development ...*

and

*the needs, character and ethos of the individual school or centre*

The intention is to establish by the year 2002:

- high quality education for all four year olds whose parents want it
- an early years forum in every area planning childcare and education to meet local needs
- a network of early excellence centres to spread good practice
- effective assessment of children starting school

The achievement of these aims will have very clear implications for the kinds of adults required to work with our youngest children in out of home settings. The quality of the adults and their knowledge, skill and understanding of young children and of appropriate early years experiences are essential for work with the under threes and will have a significant impact upon future curriculum provision with this age group.

# The ways in which children's learning and development are assessed and the extent to which this influences provision

Janet Ackers

## Research Focus

In recent years, the issue of assessment has been the subject of an often heated debate. Statutory Assessment procedures linked with the National Curriculum have been imposed on teachers by the 1988 Education Reform Act, ensuring that all children in Year Two (six and seven years olds) are assessed via Teacher Assessment and Standard Assessment Tests and Tasks (SATs). Similar assessment procedures are also a statutory requirement for children in Year Six (ten and eleven year olds) and Year Nine (thirteen and fourteen year olds). These statutory requirements have brought with them much debate and it has been argued that they represent a very small part of the whole assessment process and present a narrow picture of a child's learning and development. as Drummond and Nutbrown (1992: 93) comment: 'There is much more to know about young children than their attainment in Maths, English and Science at the end of Key Stage One' Blenkin (1996) suggests that it is parents and politicians who possess a narrow and simplistic view of assessment and that they have : 'pressed continuously for a return to the assessment of a narrow range of basic skills through an equally narrow range of standardised tests.

In addition to statutory requirements at the end of key stages one, two and three, the National Framework for Baseline Assessment is now in place. From September 1998 it will be a statutory requirement for all maintained primary schools in England to use an accredited baseline assessment scheme with all children on entry to school in Reception or Year One (four and five year olds) SCAA (1997: 3). The main aims are:

- to provide information to help teachers plan effectively to meet children's individual learning needs; and
- to measure children's attainment, using one or more numerical outcomes which can be used in later value - added analyses of children's progress.

Clearly this will increase the downward pressure already felt by nursery staff and will impact upon their work with under 3s.

From September 1998 the statutory assessment process for children will begin as soon as they enter primary school. Some may argue that this requirement, like those for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3, presents a narrow picture of a child's learning and development and represents only part of the whole assessment process. Indeed, Drummond (1996) has questioned the value of baseline assessment schedules which she claims can restrict evidence of real learning.

Providers of group day-care and education for the under five's are currently assessed regarding the quality of their provision against the 'Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on entering Compulsory Education' (SCAA 1996). A large number of centres are also inspected by Social Services under the requirements of the 1989 Children Act. However, the government is proposing that these two inspection processes are merged to introduce common standards, drawing on 'the best of both frameworks - education and social services - to create a universal framework for registration and inspection.' (The Labour Party, 1997: 13)

It is no wonder then that Blenkin (1996) claims 'the early years curriculum is becoming more and more assessment led: and that Drummond *et al.* (1992: 7) comment that teachers of young children feel 'they are being pressured to adopt ways of working that are more appropriate for older children'. What effect then is this assessment led curriculum having on the very youngest children in group day care? If children are to be assessed on entry to school at four and five years of age what type of pressure will this put on educators of children younger?

### **So why should educators assess the learning and development of the children in their care, how should they do this and what should they assess?**

Gullo (1994: 4) states that assessment has been around for a long time and that it begins 'early in the lifetime of an individual'. Indeed, Bergen (1994) discusses the assessment of a child's medical well-being prior to birth, during birth and in the first few hours of an infants life. Many authors have argued the importance of assessment: for example

*Careful assessment and record keeping underpin all good educational practice. They are essential elements in securing effective continuity and progression; as the ESAC report on Achievement in Primary Schools made clear, the skills of diagnosing success are difficulties and fundamental to educators' work and vital to children's progress.*  
(DES, 1990: 16)

*One powerful reason for observing young children's development, and assessing what we see, is simple. Children's learning is so complex, rich, fascinating, varied*

*and variable, surprising, enthusiastic and stimulating, that to see it taking place, every day of the week, before one's very eyes, is one of the great rewards of the early years educator. The very process of observing and assessing is, in a sense its own justification. It can open our eyes to the astonishing capacity of young children to learn, and to the crucial importance of these first few years of our children's lives. but the process can do more than make us marvel at our children's powers - it can also help us understand what we see.*

*(Drummond and Nutbrown 1992: 88)*

Although there are a wide range of assessment methods which can be used with young children, for example see, Bergen (1994) Blenkin (1996) Gullo (1994), Blenkin and Kelly (1992), many authors stress the importance of observing children, for example, Drummond (1993), Drummond *et al.* (1992), Nutbrown (1994), Cohen *et al.* (1983). The crucial role which observation plays in the assessment of young children's learning and development is summed up as follows:

*Observation is an integral part of work with young children. It is essential to the continuous assessment of children in providing a comprehensive picture of the child's development, and to aid the planning of work to ensure the provision is appropriate and responding to the child's needs. It should be helpful rather than a burden and its importance recognised and acknowledged in terms of planned time, with opportunities made for staff to share their observations with each other.*

*(Sheffield City Council 1992)*

In answer to the question 'what should educarers assess?' Drummond and Nutbrown (1992: 93) have a simple answer 'children, and everything they do'. They expand on this further by saying that we should observe and assess children '...exploring, discovering, puzzling, dreaming, struggling with the world, taking their place in it, and making their mark on it'. A far cry, one might argue, from standardised scores in English, Maths and Science or a numerical outcome for attainments in Language, Literacy and Mathematics.

This is not the appropriate forum for an in-depth discussion of the why, what and how questions of assessment. The brief discussion included here merely acts as an aid in considering the current context of the assessment debate. It is an interest in this current context that has led the researcher to consider the issue of assessment with the very youngest children in group day care. The strand of the last research project in which the researcher was involved considered assessment and record keeping procedures for children aged between three and five years (Ackers 1995) which has led to an interest in assessment procedures with children under three. As already indicated, what effect are the current statutory assessment requirements for children over five years having on the very youngest children in our care? It has been argued that children in nurseries and reception classes have suffered the consequences of a 'top down' model of curriculum and assessment from the pressures of the National Curriculum.

Will the Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on entering compulsory education (SCAA, 1996) and the current Baseline Assessment requirements (SCAA, 1997) create similar pressures for children under three and their educators? It is in the context of these concerns that the researcher has developed her present research focus : The ways in which children's learning and development are assessed and the extent to which this influences provision.

The following underlying principles have informed the research:

- the need for the monitoring, recording and discussion of the progress and development of individual children (Balaguer *et al.*, 1991)
- systematic recording of children's achievements in all areas of development : cognitive, social, emotional, physical (DES, 1990)
- the involvement of the child in the process of assessment (David, 1990)
- child assessment cannot be isolated from the family because the child is an integral part of the family system (Turnbull *et al.*, 1984)
- the emphasis on what children can do as the starting point (Bruce, 1987)
- record keeping based on observation of children (Cohen *et al.*, 1983)
- the need for the key person to take responsibility for assessment, monitoring and record-keeping in relation to children in her/his small group (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994)
- consideration of the effects that assessment and evaluation have on the child (Gullo, 1994)
- the recognition of cultural diversity in the assessment process and the use of flexibility in selecting assessment procedures (Bergen, 1994)

## Research Questions

The aim of this strand of the research was to investigate the range of assessment procedures adopted by educators of children under three years, to explore the ways in which educators use the information gained from assessment and to consider appropriate strategies in order to provide continuity with the early years (three to five years) and Key Stage One.

The research questions related to this are:

- In what ways do educarers of children under three assess the learning and development of the children in their care?
- Are there any differences between the ways in which children under three years and those over three are assessed?
- Who is involved in the assessment of children under three years?
- In what ways do educarers use any information gained from these assessments?

## Methodology

The researcher operated within the bounds of the general methodology employed by the research team. In exploring answers to the research questions identified for this strand the researcher used two main sources for the collection of data.

- a) The answers to the following questions included on the 'questionnaires/interview schedules' distributed to a range of establishments (see section on Study Design).
  - How do you assess the learning and development of the children under three in your care?
  - Does this differ from the way in which you assess the older children in your establishment? If so, how?
  - Who else is involved in the assessment process?
  - What do you do with the information which you collect?
  - How do you use this information?
  
- b) A range of data collection techniques employed at two research sites (see below for detailed descriptions of these contexts), utilising qualitative and quantitative methods as follows:
  - The questionnaires/interview schedules (as above).
  - Non-participant observations recorded by field notes.
  - Interviews with staff (recorded by audio tape in some instances).
  - Questionnaire distributed to parents at Site One only.

- Informal discussions with children, parents and staff.
- Analysis of educarers' recorded planning and assessments.

In addition to finding out the facts about the assessment procedures at both research sites, the researcher was interested in exploring the perceptions of these procedures and of issues regarding assessment held by staff and parents and in observe how the procedures were put into practice.

Therefore, although a purely ethnographic approach was not adopted for this particular piece of research, the researchers' interest in ethnography influenced the way in which the research techniques were carried out. The three attributes of ethnographers as interviewers as stated by Cohen and Manion (1989: 310) were considered when the interview schedule was devised, when the interviews were carried out and with the timing of the interviews.

#### **Trust:**

There would have to be a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee that transcended the research, that promoted a bond of friendship, a feeling of togetherness and joint pursuit of a common mission rising above personal egos.

#### **Curiosity:**

There would have to be a desire to know, to learn people's views and perceptions of the facts, to hear their stories, discover their feelings. This is the motive force, and it has to be a burning one, that drives researchers to tackle and overcome the many difficulties involved in setting up and conducting successful interviews.

#### **Naturalness:**

As with observation one endeavours to be unobtrusive in order to witness events as they are, untainted by one's presence and actions, so in interviews the aim is to secure what is within the minds of interviewees, uncoloured and unaffected by the interviewer.

Due to the very different contexts of the two research sites used for this strand of the research, the researcher found a need to modify data collection techniques during the course of the project. Questions used for the structured interview for staff at site one needed to be changed for use at site two in line with the new context. The researcher also chose to use a more informal approach with parents at site two. Due to most of the parents at site one leaving their children at the nursery, many to go to work, a questionnaire was thought to be the most appropriate strategy for data collection in addition to informal discussion whenever possible. The questionnaire was distributed at a parents' evening by the researcher who also spent time in informal discussion with parents. The questionnaire was drawn up by the researcher in consultation with the nursery managers, as the managers were interested in using the questionnaire to ascertain parents' general views on the nursery. As all of the parents at Research Site two stayed with their child for the duration of the session informal discussion only was seen by the researcher to be appropriate.

## Description of Research Sites

### Site One - Privately Funded Day Nursery and Nursery School

This is one of two nurseries owned by two people. The co-owners also manage the nursery, each working on a part-time basis. (The term 'day nursery school' is preferred by them). The nursery is situated in the leafy suburbs of a major conurbation in North West England. The housing is a mix of terraced, semi-detached and detached properties, some of which are relatively large, i.e. four to six bedrooms, all appearing to be in a good state of repair, mostly owner-occupied with their own gardens. The area has a feeling of spaciousness and there are several parks within the vicinity of the nursery. Two 'village' centres are both within half a mile of the nursery and the local town centre is one mile away. This immediate environment constitutes the main catchment area of the nursery although there are some children, whose parents work in the area surrounding the nursery, who travel from further afield.

The nursery is housed in a large detached property, originally a family house. The main nursery rooms occupy two floors of the house: three ground floor rooms house the children under two and four first floor rooms house the two to five year olds. The nursery office and staff room are on the second floor of the property, the kitchen is on the ground floor and the cellars provide additional storage space for large equipment. Outside the property the front driveway is used for parking cars (staff and parents) whilst the sides and rear of the house provide garden space, grassed and paved, for the children to play.

An extended day and extended year is in operation at the nursery; it is open from 8.00am (earlier if necessary by special arrangement) until 6.00pm, all year except Christmas Day to New Year's Day inclusive and all bank holidays. The nursery has 60 places with 120 children on the roll and provides educare for children aged six weeks to five years. Children attend on a variety of full and part-time bases depending on their needs and those of their parents. In addition, the nursery provides an after school care service - *Après School* - which is held at a local primary school every school day afternoon from 3.00 pm to 6.00 pm and a pick-up service from other local schools is provided. *Après School* staff also provide holiday clubs during the summer and Easter vacations. There are 22 nursery workers who work with the children; most staff work full-time but some positions are part-time or job share. The total staffing at the nursery, including management, support and *Après School* staff consists of 35 people.

Table 4 on page 72 provides an overview of the number of children in each room at any one time, the number of staff in each room and their qualifications, with the staff/child ratio for each room. Please note that the ages of the children in each room is approximate; although age is the first criteria for a child moving from one room to another, other factors are also considered, e.g. numbers in each group, peer groups, changes in home circumstances, parental and child wishes.



Table 4

Structure of a Day Nursery and Nursery School

Name of room	Age of children	Number of children	Number of staff	Qualifications of staff	Staff/child ratio
Baby room	0-1	9	5 (1 jobshare)	registered childminder no qualification no qualification NNEB NVQ Level II trainee	1:2
Toy Box	1-2yr.3mths	9	3	NNEB BTec N.N. NVQ Level II	1:3
Chatterbox	1-2yr.3mths	8	3	BTec N.N. NVQ Level III NVQ Level III trainee	1:3
Paintpot	2yr.3mths - 3yr.6mths	8	3	NNEB NNEB NVQ Level II trainee	1:3
Flowerpot	2yr.3mths - 3yr.6mths	12	3	BTec N.N. NNEB NNEB (currently undertaking a BA Hons course)	1:4
Honeypot	3yr.6mths - 4yr.9mths	16	3	NNEB NNEB NVQ Level III	1:7

In addition, a nursery teacher (B.Ed.) withdraws small groups of children from the 'honeypot' room during the day into the 'Busy Bee Hive' room for 'pre-school' activities.

Table 5

Day Nursery Child's Assessment Chart

DAY NURSERY		
CHILD'S ASSESSMENT CHART		
CHILD'S NAME		
AGE		
ASSESSOR	ACHIEVEMENTS	COMMENTS
LARGE MOTOR DEVELOPMENT		
FINE MOTOR DEVELOPMENT		
LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT		
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT		
ACTION TO BE TAKEN		SIGNED
REVIEW DATE		SIGNED

The two owner/managers are qualified as follows:

- a. SRN, ScM, HV.
- b. Dip Ed (currently undertaking a B.A.(Hons) course)

There are five Aprés School staff with the following qualifications: BTec, NN, NNEB + DPQS, NVQ Level III trainee, PPA playleader, NNEB mature student. A range of support workers are employed at the nursery including: an office manager, cook and assistant cook, cleaner, caretaker and 'handyman'. The owner/managers have a commitment to staff development and training and encourage the nursery staff to attend courses. One-off day or half-day courses are funded by the nursery, longer award bearing courses are funded jointly by the nursery and the staff members but on successful completion of the course the staff member is refunded for their half of the fee. One of the owner/managers is a qualified NVQ assessor and assesses the NVQ trainees at the nursery.

The aims of the nursery as they appear in the Nursery Brochure are as follows:

- to provide high quality childcare in which the paramount objective is to have happy children;
- to value each child without stereotyping regardless of gender, race, religion, class or disability;
- to provide a wide range of stimulating activities allowing each child to develop at their own pace.

Nursery fees are charged per session, a session being: morning - 8.00am until 1.00pm, or afternoon - 1.00pm to 6.00pm. It is preferred that children attend for a minimum of two sessions. When a child starts the nursery the parent/s visit with the child in the preceding fortnight to meet with the nursery staff. Further visits are arranged as appropriate to each child and parent.

The nursery has a commitment to working with parents as the following extract from the Nursery Brochure illustrates:

*Parents are important people at the Nursery. We understand your need to be kept continually informed about your child's achievements, activities, and well-being at nursery. For this reason we encourage and welcome you into the nursery for a chat with the staff caring for your child before he or she goes home. In addition, we have periodic Open Evenings and a Newsletter.*

The nursery team are at present developing an observation and recording system in which keyworkers record brief daily observations and, when necessary, more detailed observations.

These observations are used to plan activities for the following week and to record summative comments on the child's 'Assessment Chart'. Comments are recorded at six monthly intervals under the following headings : large motor development, fine motor development, language development social development and action to be taken. (see Table 5 on page 73) The chart is shared with the child's parent/s at parents' evening; the parents are then invited to add their own comments. The nursery team are aiming to involve parents further in the assessment process and to introduce the involvement of the children, possibly via a record of achievement approach. Nursery managers are at present liaising with the educarers to develop their approach to assessment and the researcher has been involved in staff development sessions with the nursery team regarding this issue.

### **Site Two: Pre-Nursery Group and Parent and Toddler Group**

'Stepping Stones' and 'Learning through Play' are two groups for children under three and their parent/s held at an Infant School. The school is situated in an area which is mainly made up of local authority housing and is one of the largest of such estates in Britain. The estate is divided into six areas, the school being in one of these. The estate has its own shopping centre and is approximately three miles away from the local town centre. A motorway runs through the centre of the estate. The immediate environment is the main catchment area for the school and the two groups for children under three. Most of the children who attend these groups will go on to attend the infant school and then the junior school, which is in a separate building on the same site.

The groups are held in two adjoining rooms of the Infant School, which have been specially adapted for community use. One room has been adapted for use with children under three (including an outdoor play area) and the other has been adapted for use with adults. The school has a long established pattern of parental involvement and a whole-school commitment to working with parents. The school also welcomes the involvement of the local authority's Adult Education Services which funds the two groups and runs a number of accredited courses for parents that also take place here.

The Adult Education Service is registered, under the 1989 Children Act, to accommodate fifteen children on the nursery site, comprising two children under two and thirteen children two to five. Two educarers are employed to work with the groups: one adult education tutor whose qualifications comprise a basic adult education qualification plus City and Guilds 7307, and another educarer with the NNEB qualification. Generally, all of the parents whose children are attending the group session stay with their children for the duration of the session, for a short time each session one educarer and one parent (on a rota system) will take responsibility for the children whilst the remaining parents can discuss their child's learning with the adult education tutor. The groups aim to provide parents with information and strategies regarding their children's learning. Parents are encouraged to participate in play and 'early learning' activities and to spend 'high quality' time with their children. Sessions

are planned by the two educarers, who reassure parents of the important role that they play in the education of their own children, helping them to reach their full potential. The groups aim to change parental attitudes that children's learning begins at school.

Most of the children who attend the pre-nursery group and toddler group go on to attend the nursery class of the school. Indeed all of the parents who have their child's name on the nursery waiting list are invited to attend the pre-nursery group, with approximately seventy per cent of the parents taking up this opportunity. The children and their parents attend the pre-nursery group for ten weeks (twenty two hour sessions) prior to their entry to the nursery class. In a letter to parents who have their child's name on the nursery waiting list the group is described as aiming to '... provide a link from home to nursery, starting simple language and number activities, getting the children used to the building and making friends ... Whilst you can leave your child occasionally, the main aim of the group is to give your child the best possible start to their school life.'

Another aim of the group is to begin the profiling process, one of the assessment strategies used in the nursery class and the infant school. During the twenty pre-nursery sessions parents build up a file comprising annotated photographs of their child at play, samples of their child's 'work' eg paintings and drawings and evaluations of what their child has learned while engaged in activities at the group. In evaluating their child's learning parents are asked to consider the following areas: listening skills, sequencing, skills, memory skills, hand/eye co-ordination, vocabulary/talking skills and visual skills (see Table 6 page 77). The profile is taken to the nursery on admission and shared with nursery staff. The process is then continued in the nursery developing the involvement of the child in the process. When the parents have completed the ten week session of the pre-nursery group, they are encouraged to enrol on an accredited course (held at the school) entitled 'Play, Language and Learning', where they will participate in analysing a range of learning opportunities with their child in the nursery.

## **Findings**



The following findings have emerged from the analysis of data from the questionnaires/interview schedules distributed to a range of establishments and from a variety of techniques employed at the two research sites studied in the second phase of the project. The researcher would like to stress that these are the issues relating to the establishments concerned and are offered tentatively as issues which may also concern and be relevant to other establishments and educarers of the under threes.



Table 6

Parents evaluation of adult/child activity

**Parents evaluation of adult/child activity**

The name of our activity .....

Did you enjoy the activity?   

Did your child enjoy the activity?   

What do you think your child has learned through this activity?  
Please tick!

<b>Listening Skills:</b> - Learning the difference between sounds <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Hand/Eye Co-ordination:</b> - Using pencils/crayons scissors, etc. <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Sequencing Skills:</b> Being able to put things in a logical order <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Vocabulary/Talking Skills:</b> Did you encourage your child to speak during this activity? Did you ask questions and talk to your child? <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Memory Skills:</b> Are they able to remember what they have seen/done <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Visual Skills:</b> Learning to recognise differences: e.g. matching games. <input type="checkbox"/>

Your comments

1. Close observation of children, and listening and interacting with children at play seem to be key methods of assessment of children under three

The following statements have been made by a variety of educarers in a range of establishments which illustrate this point.

*It is important to record, it tells you more about children, sitting down to observe makes sure that you are aware of what's going on.*

*(Nursery officer in a Private Day Nursery)*

*I assess the children by talking to parents, watching what children do, listening to what they say, noticing how they behave, asking questions, observing children interacting with people and things, being aware of a child's location, non-verbal communication and body language, emotional and physical well being, evaluating their play.*

*(Playgroup Worker)*

*We do this (assess) through sensitive observations - watching, listening and interacting with the children. We make time to analyse these observations to enable us to assess what skills, knowledge, attitudes and understandings these demonstrate. This helps us to decide where the next step ought to be taken for that child.*

*(Nursery Officer, Community Nursery Centre)*

*We assess by individual observations which are written in long hand, they show particular play patterns which the child is using. We plan activities according to the observation - certain activities are adult supported and observations are written down. Observation books are located in each area which enables adults to enter any observations when a child is involved in a free play activity where choices are made available.*

*(Nursery Officer, Community Nursery Centre)*

*On a weekly basis, I observe the change in their development: how they use toys shows their development, confidence and competence. (Childminder)*

*Every day we talk to children on what they have learnt in the day. If they do not learn today they do not think tomorrow. (Finish Childcare Worker)*

*We do observations very often and one teacher is responsible for three or four children.*

*(Swedish Childcare Worker)*

*We observe all the time. I can tell you what my children can do even though I have not written information down. That is why keyworkers are good, because you notice more.*

*(Nursery Officer, Private Day Nursery)*

*It's nice to know that detailed observations are being made.*

*(Parent of a child at a Private Day Nursery)*

## **2. Observations and assessments of children under three are used for a range of purposes**

The following comments illustrate the range of uses put to observations and assessment of children under three. The reasons for the uses suggested would appear in many instances to be contextually dependant.

*We use this information to begin an IEP (Individual Educational Programme).*

*(Hospital)*

*Children are assessed after three months when a first review is held with parents and other professionals. Thereafter a 'work programme' is drawn up for the child, identifying areas which may require further input/encouragement and reviews are held no more than six monthly.*

*(Family Support Centre)*

*For forward planning to locate if children need further help.*

*(Playgroup)*

*Further development of children especially in area of need.*

*(Day nursery)*

*To record onto children's developmental records and to inform future planning.*

*(Private Day Nursery)*

*To share with parents and sometimes share concerns with the nursery staff in school.*

*(Pre-Nursery Group)*

*As a basis for planning, in case conferences, a discussion point for other professionals, and transition documents for the receiving school.*

*(Community Nursery Centre)*



*Simply for my own use for future reference for re-occurring problems. These are discussed with the child's parent if needs be.*

*(Childminder)*

*We use it to make our work better and it helps us to work with the children.*

*(Finish Childcare Centre)*

*For the best interest of the child.*

*(Swedish Childcare Centre)*

### **3. Partnership with Parents in assessing young children's development is often seen as essential**

Many establishments listed parents as being involved in the assessment process although the ways in which parents were involved often differed. In answer to the question 'What do you do with the (assessment) information which you collect?' parents featured in many of the answers, for example:

*We pass it on to parents.*

*(Day Nursery)*

*At keyworkers and parents meetings we discuss what has been written and parents are asked to sign the form and then it is stored in a file.*

*(Community Nursery Centre)*

*I talk with parents daily about their children's activities.*

*(Childminder)*

*You tell the parents about their child's new skills and development.*

*(Finish Childcare Worker)*

*We discuss this with parents and compare it with earlier investigations.*

*(Swedish Childcare worker)*

*Share with parents at parents evening.*

*(Private Day Nursery)*

*Share with parents by informal feedback and parents build up their own file on their child at the group.*

*(Pre Nursery Group)*

The latter two comments made by the manager and Adult Education Tutor respectively of the two research sites are illuminated further in the following descriptions of events I witnessed:

### **An evening at site one**

The wine and orange juice flowed and the two hosts were continuously on hand for a chat or to provide a range of delicious snacks and canapés. Guests were standing in pairs and small groups deep in conversation. The ideal party? Not in this instance but it was, in the opinion of most of the parents there, the ideal parents' evening! It was in this informal atmosphere that parents and educarers discussed the progress and development of the children and looked at their assessment chart, met and talked to other parents and educarers, familiarised themselves with rooms in the nursery other than the one in which their child was placed, looked at drawings and paintings etc. completed by their child and looked at or played with equipment and activities available to their child at the nursery. One parent felt that the benefits of the parents' evening should be 'spelt out' to parents and went on to say 'I didn't realise how good they were until tonight. I only stayed half an hour before; tonight I stayed two hours! Another parent and her partner shared that they 'hadn't had such a good time in ages, we're making the most of it and we're going for a meal after this, it's excellent!' Other parents felt that it was useful to talk to staff about their child in a 'less hurried atmosphere' that it was 'a great opportunity to hear about your own child' and that it was useful to talk to other parents and meet the staff in the room their child was to go to next.

### **The final session - site two**

It is the final 'formal' session for the pre-nursery group (before the day trip to the seaside and the 'farewell party'). Parents have been playing with their children and putting the finishing touches to their child's 'profile' and it is now time to evaluate their child's learning during the twenty sessions of the group. Parents make themselves a cup of tea or coffee and sit down on an easy chair in the community room. The Adult Education tutor chats informally to individual parents then gives them all an evaluation sheet containing the following questions:

- Have you and your child enjoyed Stepping Stones?
  
- Do you think your child has learnt more:  
language?  
about number?  
social skills?  
to concentrate on an activity?  
any other skills?
  
- Has he/she gained any confidence?

- Have you any suggestions to improve Stepping Stones?

The tutor talks through the sheet reminding parents of their earlier discussions regarding language, number and social skills and adds "Think back to how the children were at the beginning of the group and how they are now!" The tutor talks to the parents as they fill in the evaluation and parents also help each other and make suggestions:

*"I think your Roy's much better at concentrating now, he couldn't stay with anything for two minutes before".*

*"Your Lee isn't as shy now is he? He'll talk to the adults whereas he wouldn't before."*

*"My Lisa's communicating more. She's opened out more". "What do you mean by opened out?" responded the tutor, 'she's made a huge step in everything she's done!"*

As the parents complete their evaluations they hand the sheet to the tutor who promises to photocopy them, so that she can have them in her file, and return them to parents to put in their child's profile.

Almost all parents at both sites supported the idea that they should be fully involved in the assessment process.

*Home and nursery need to work together.  
(Parent, Site One)*

*Doing the profile has made me think about what I'm doing with Lisa.  
(Parent, Site Two)*

However, two parents at Site One felt that parents have no or little part to play in the assessment process:

*No, I want an independent view.*

*No, unless there are any problems that need to be addressed. Otherwise the nursery staff are experienced in child development and I respect that.*

**4. A Multi-professional approach is considered important where very young children are concerned**

The following people were all cited as being involved in the assessment process in a range of establishments.

*Play therapists and Parents.  
(Hospital)*

*Medical staff - doctors, nurses, physiotherapist, occupational therapist and parents.  
(Hospital)*

*Parents, pre-school support workers, other professionals as appropriate.  
(Family Support Centre)*

*Key Workers, colleagues, management committee, parents/carers, health visitors, speech therapists, docks, psychologists, audiologists.  
(Day Nursery)*

*Management team, centre workers, social workers, parents, health visitors - we have an open channel of communication.  
(Children's Centre)*

*Speech therapist, educational psychologists, community paediatrician, clinical psychologists.  
(Community Nursery Centre)*

*The staff in the group, kindergarten teachers and Children's Nurses.  
(Finnish Childcare Centre)*

**5. There is often no difference between the assessment and recording of learning and development with the under threes in comparison with over threes**

Two thirds of the answers from the questionnaire/structured interview schedule question 'Does this differ from the way in which you assess the older children. If so how?' indicated that there was no difference in assessment procedures between the under threes and the over threes. Often the answer to this question was simply 'no' although one day nursery did offer the following reason:

We use the same because of the lack of training of staff to do anything more sophisticated!

Some establishments indicated a slight difference in procedure:

*It is done in the same way but a little less formal than the over threes.  
(Community Nursery Centre)*

*The methods are quite the same as the methods for older children. The objects for assessing are different.  
(Finnish Childcare Centre)*

Following are some of the responses by the minority who were conscious that they did assess the under threes differently:

*Much more focused assessments (with the over threes)  
(Playgroup attached to a Nursery Centre).*

*Nowadays we are aiming that children over three years old learn to assess their development by themselves.  
(Finnish Childcare Centre)*

*Older children's aims are different as they need to know more because they are soon going to school.  
(Finnish Childcare Centre)*

*With older children we usually have individual talks and 'children's interviews'. So we may know what they have learnt and what they think about situations.  
(Swedish Childcare Centre)*

*It is easier with older children as they have a richer language.  
(Swedish Childcare Centre)*

## **Discussion and implications for practice**

It would seem that the sentiments of Drummond (1993), Drummond *et al.* (1992) Nutbrown (1994) and Cohen *et al.* (1983) regarding the importance of observing children are echoed in the practice of a range of providers of educare under three. However important observation and assessment is, it is not without its problems. Time to record and analyse observations is an issue which arose many times during the interviews with educarers at site one, with one nursery officer commenting 'we are all so busy, always on the go all of the time, there is no time to write observations'. Reflection is an absolutely essential element of assessment:

*Educators need time to reflect on the meaning of their observations, time to select and record information. They need time to talk about their observations with*

*colleagues and parents and time to put their insights to work in building richer and more fulfilling curriculum for young children.*

*(Drummond and Nutbrown (1992: 97))*

If we are to see observation and assessment as a priority in the educare of young children then perhaps as educarers we need to consider strategies for making time to record, analyse, discuss and share our observations. A whole establishment approach and philosophy towards observation and assessment may help here, where educarers share common goals and can work together to develop strategies for time management. Indeed this has been put into practice in site two where there is a whole school approach to profiling which begins in the pre-nursery group. The approach to observation-based assessment is being discussed during team meetings and staff development sessions at site one with a view to developing a nursery philosophy and policy. The following questions may help practitioners in developing an assessment philosophy:

*Why do you assess in early childhood settings?*

*What will you do with the information collected during the evaluation process?*

*How are the assessment procedures linked to the curriculum content and implementation strategies?*

*What should the information collected during the assessment process tell about the curriculum?*

*When should assessment take place?*

*What is it that will be specifically assessed?*

*What decisions about the child will be made a result of the information gathered?*

*What decision about the curriculum will be made as a result of the information gathered?*

*(Gullo 1994: 89)*

Perhaps in the light of the previous discussions the following question should be added to this list:

- How will the team make time to record, analyse and discuss their observations and assessments?

Some of the questions suggested by Gullo (1994) should also be helpful to practitioners in considering how they use their observations and assessments and if this use could be

developed in any way. The findings of this research strand suggest that a range of uses are put to observations and assessments but that these did differ according to the context. So what influences this? The purpose of the educare setting, the philosophy of the establishment, the level of training and support for educarers or perhaps the individual child?

The level of training and support for educarers also appeared to be an issue in some instances with regard to the similarities between assessment procedures used with the under threes and the over threes. One nursery officer from a day nursery did confess that 'we use the same because of the lack of training of staff to do anything more sophisticated'. A nursery officer from a children's centre also commented 'we do not assess because we are not trained for that'. Local authority record keeping and assessment procedures also seem to be used increasingly with children under three, even when they are not specifically designed for this age group. Is this connected with the training and support issue? The fact that this seemed to be more apparent in Local Education Authority settings adds another interesting dimension to the issue. To what extent is this an echo of the 'top down model' of curriculum and assessment discussed in the introduction to this strand of the research?

Some settings did discuss the differences in assessment procedures between the under and over threes, which seem to be linked with perceived differences between the two groups of children. Older children's assessments were more formal in order to prepare them for school (Finland) and in some instances this was because of the differences in language development (Sweden). The latter point was also made by the majority of the parents in the pre-nursery group at site two when the researcher asked if the children were consulted when the parents completed the activity evaluation sheets, in particular the section entitled "Did your child enjoy the activity?" "No, they wouldn't understand the words" was one reply, and "They're too young" another. Most parents judged if a child had enjoyed an activity by "their facial expressions, their actions and when they talk about it at home". It was thought that the children would be able to contribute more to their profiles when they were in the nursery and the infant school.

A further issue to consider where assessment procedures are different is continuity and progression. To what extent are the two procedures complementary, one building on the other to provide some continuity for the child and the parent/s. Again this would suggest the need for a policy and philosophy regarding assessment which could allow for continuity and progression in methods used within a setting, whilst meeting the specific needs of the youngest children.

The importance of parents in the assessment process was stressed by a large number of educarers involved in the study, with parents being involved in a variety of ways, from merely the receivers of information developing their own assessments of their child's learning. If parents are to make a valid contribution to the assessment process the following issues should be considered:

- The quality of relationships between parents and educarers.
- Parental understanding of the assessment procedures in use in the educare setting.
- Support for parents where necessary

The quality of relationships with educarers was in evidence at site one, as indicated by the following comments made by parents:

*Staff are very approachable and co-operative and they listen.*

*They pay attention to what you say then they act on it.*

*I ask questions each day - staff are always available to talk.*

In terms of parental understanding of assessment procedures used and support for parents, parents at site two had received 'input' from the Adult Education Tutor on the profiling process in use in the school during the early sessions of the group and continued support from the tutor in subsequent sessions. Support took the form of discussions regarding children's learning, writing comments for parents on the evaluation sheets, (if necessary) keeping written responses to a minimum, discussing concerns and offering encouragement. In the words of a Finish Childcare Worker: "Practitioners need to understand children and their parents".

Again practitioners may need to evaluate and review their practice in relation to the involvement of parents in the assessment process, and the following questions are suggested in aiding this process.

*What strategies do you use to involve the parent/carer in the assessment process?*

*Are there any ways in which you can build upon this practice?*

*To what extent does it allow the parent/carer to make a valid contribution?*

*In what ways do you consult parents when changing or refining the assessment process?*

*What rights do you feel parents should have in the assessment process?*

*(Ackers 1994: 74)*

In addition to the involvement of parents, it was found that a range of professionals were often involved in the assessment process. The Children Act (1989) called for increased collaboration between health, education and social services departments, a sentiment echoed



by Bergen (1994), and Drummond and Nutbrown (1992) with regard to assessments of children. Perhaps such collaboration would enable educators to build up a more realistic picture of the child, her/his learning, development and needs - a picture of the 'whole' child. Once more educators may need to review their practice in relation to this issue, for example:

- To what extent are all of the professionals involved with the child able to contribute to the assessment process?
- To what extent are the channels of communication open between different professionals and departments? What can be done to improve this?
- Are assessments of the child made by different professionals shared? How and when?

To conclude it must be said that in all of this we must not forget who the assessment process is primarily for - the children: to aid their learning and development; to help us to understand them; to help us to interact with them; to help us to meet their needs if we can. In the words of a childminder when asked on the questionnaire/interview schedule if she had any other comments:

*A lot of small children are ignored until they are over three years old. At three years old it is thought they will start to learn and need educational toys. It is what has occurred from a very early age that is important.*

We must make sure that we take this into account in our assessments of young children.

# Early Years Provision and 'Equal Opportunities'

Natalie Grant-Mullings

As a research student attached to this project, I have been in the privileged position of having visited all the UK centres in which the research team have been working. I have also been involved in collating and analysing data from questionnaires from around the world. I have been concerned both to examine policy and practice and to talk with parents and educarers about what they think about 'Equal Opportunities' and how to improve or support developing programmes. I have been influenced by ethnographic and various approaches in psychology, investigating personal accounts of development, policy, people and their situations. This approach was used to collect rich and detailed conversational discourse. The research techniques were qualitative in nature, involving: questionnaires, interviews and participant observation.

As a mother of a five year old who attended a setting which I believed provided excellent facilities with regards to 'Equal Opportunities', I am concerned about the well being of all children, more specifically, I advocate that the culture of children in our community should be acknowledged and reflected in resources and interactions in Early Years Centres. The early years are a time when a child's personality is developing. This is therefore a crucial time for children to learn positive attitudes and respect for diversity in the community. 'Equal Opportunities' is not just about treating children equally as it also includes acknowledgement and celebration of their individual differences.

## Research Methodology

### 1. Structured Questionnaires

Following staff training sessions on 'Equal Opportunities', in some of the centres questionnaires were constructed. I collected information and ideas regarding staff training and evaluation of the training sessions. Questions were asked about the amount of prior training in this area, and other training since qualifying, together with the support needs of all practitioners with particular reference to 'Equal Opportunities'.

## 2. Interviews

I conducted interviews with managers and co-ordinators of Early Years Centres and with parents. Questions concentrated on their knowledge and definition of 'Equal Opportunities'. During a parents evening and also by special arrangement, parents were questioned about the general ethos of their child's Early Years Centre.

## 3. Participant-Observation

The degree of my involvement within the settings, staff and parents meetings varied. In some meetings, I spoke very little and at other times, I shared my views and answered any questions posed. Attending such sessions gave me the opportunity as a researcher new to the area, to become familiar with early years in general and the requirements of professionals. Non-participant observation focused on resources, such as; the design of rooms and main building, books, posters, jigsaws, foods, paints, dolls, display boards, windows and natural sunlight and any other observable identifiers with regard to the ethos and policy around the issue of 'Equal Opportunities'.

One of the major characteristics of Early Years provision in general is its diversity. This was no less true in terms of policy, provision, practice and definitions of 'Equal Opportunities'. My own definition encompasses care and education within a supportive and accepting environment. 'Equal Opportunities' also involves knowledgeable and sensitive adults being available for children and having access to appropriate training and resources.

The Children Act (1989) is the first piece of legislation on the care and education of children which refers specifically to catering for children's religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The Commission for Racial Equality have produced a useful booklet 'From Cradle to School' (CRE, 1996) which has been used in some of the centres to inform practice and to help staff reach decisions in writing policy statements. National bodies responsible for the care and education of young children such as The National Children's Bureau (NCB) and The National Child Minding Association (NCMA) have produced policy statements emphasising strong commitments to 'Equality of Opportunity'. The implementation of a written policy by the NCMA corresponds closely with my own beliefs. The NCMA subcommittee on equal opportunities policy statement states that:

*good quality child care involves valuing each child equally and affirming the positive value of different skin colour, cultural and family background. It involves giving children a realistic picture of the world they live in and correcting the distortions and prejudices about the world.*

*(NCMA 1991)*

## Research Questions

I aimed to observe:

- How practitioners define 'Equal Opportunities'.
- The kinds of policies and practices in different settings for children under three.
- Ways in which parents are involved in their child's early experiences.

## Defining 'Equal Opportunities' - Practitioners views

The question was posed to Early Years practitioners, 'What does the term 'Equal Opportunities' mean to you? Here are a few of their responses.

*Allowing children equal rights to play...no matter what the gender and culture of the child.*

*Everyone is treated equally regardless of sex, 'race', gender and disability and are not discriminated against in any way.*

*Everybody has the same opportunities regardless of age, gender and origin.  
(Educarers in a day nursery)*

The statements above talk about treating children the same 'no matter' or 'regardless' of a child's culture, age, ability, gender and origin. These views, in my opinion, reflect that children are viewed not as individuals, respected in their own rights but rather as a collective, larger group.

It is easy for practitioners to view children in a similar way but children are individual and do not share the same needs. Many of the accounts seem idealistic rather than practical with reference to 'Equal Opportunities'. The statements from practitioners are about children having the right to mutual respect from adults, for example:

*Bringing up children in an environment that does not discriminate between culture, gender and ability.*

*... children having the same opportunities to have different experiences.*

*Being non judgmental and non value laden, treating all children with equal respect.*

*That everyone is treated equally and no assumptions are made regarding gender, culture and age.*

*(Educators day nursery)*

Clearly, attitude change is important on the part of educators. As advocates of children we have to respect each child's learning style. Each child is different, This is true for children sharing a family, culture and community.

*All children should be treated with consideration. Each child should be respected with regards to their religion, culture, gender and ability.*

*(Co-ordinator in a day nursery)*

*...all children will be treated with equal respect and consideration inside this establishment... that this is not the case outside when these very same children walk out of here.*

*(Co-ordinator in a Children's Centre)*

The term 'Equal Opportunities' has become so widely used and as the above definitions illustrate, it means different things to different people. This problem poses serious difficulties when attempting to develop a consistency in policy and practice. However, both observations and interviews with staff and parents revealed positive developments in this field.

In one of the centres visited the process of developing an 'Equal Opportunities' policy was achieved through discussion and consultation over a period of time, which involved the whole team. The process in this particular centre is recounted elsewhere (Adams 1994). The staff got together in small groups and talked about their views and definitions of 'Equal Opportunities'. Together, staff went to in-service courses and read articles, research findings and documents in this field. The Head also discussed the effect of bringing in new resources (books, puzzles, posters etc.) which involved the staff in discussions about images and stereotypes. All the staff contributed to raising awareness of 'Equal Opportunities' issues.

The energy spent by all the staff brainstorming, drafting and re-drafting of policy statements indicates their degree of commitment to this area and the efforts made to reach a consensus, so that all staff could feel a sense of 'ownership' of the policy.

Adams (1994) summarises the process of policy development as one which involved:

- discussion and consultation
- in-service training
- access to information about 'Equal Opportunities'
- support from senior managers
- positive staff attitudes
- a whole team approach

- investment in resources
- creating time for debate and discussion

Parents in this particular centre were fully involved in the process and in discussions about the choice of resources, materials and activities to support the implementation of the policy. Their views were valued and suggestions acted upon.

*Here she can use whatever she wants... it is not just the girls playing with dolls and the boys with trucks.*

*They have positive images and display boards here that are cross-cultural. They show a true representation of what the real world looks like. You see pictures with children who have hearing aids and children who are not able-bodied. This place portrays images of how it is rather than white middle-class families.*

Adams (1994) confirms that:

*Developing an equal opportunities policy is complex and challenging, requiring commitment and enthusiasm. There are no short cuts and success depends upon on staff and parents becoming convinced of the need to adopt anti-discriminatory practices.*

## Findings and Implications for Practice

Staff development is needed, providing *open channels of communication* as a basis for positive developments within Centres. Commitment from management in the development of policy statements and a shared philosophy is crucial. Full involvement of all practitioners contributes towards effective communication channels, when enthusiasm comes from the top. This top-down approach is common in most Centres but parents also have the power to instigate a working party at their child's Centre. The comments from parents are illustrated below:

*I like the whole concept of 'Equal Opportunities' in the centre: the facilities, staff, their attitudes and resources. I do voluntary work with children and a lot of people hold this place in high regard.*

*I had a choice and chose here. It has a good reputation and I like the images and pictures they have on the walls. They depict all cultures and colours. So I am happy that he can see reflections of himself when he comes here.*

*Management that is committed to 'Equality' issues in combination with a team-spirit of co-operation, as Co-ordinators/Managers, Assistant Co-ordinators and Senior Centre Workers*

play a vital role in supporting the needs of their colleagues on child development issues. A comment from a senior manager of a Children's Centre raises important questions with regard to staff development.

*I do not know whether the workers here are committed to 'Equal Opportunities' for themselves or whether it is because of my own commitments. My philosophy is not new to the staff because they know what I stand for and what I expect. This information is shared at the start of their employment, that is on the day of their interview.*

*Open minded staff* who are willing to learn and have available a *net-work system of support* so their points of view can be listened to. A *comprehensive library* or access to information that contains up-to-date literature on child development and 'Equal Opportunities'.

*Sensitive staff* who are able to use their initiative to meet the needs of the very young, who may not be able to articulate their feelings. Observations at Centres highlight that sensitive communication is important.

The importance of a key-worker system allows for trusting relationships between adult and child. Resources need to be carefully chosen in order to reflect and value the child's culture and *encourage children to feel a range of emotions* through carefully planned play activities.

*Keyworkers have more time and in the four months that he has come here they have changed my son. His speech has improved, coming here has turned him around and he has really changed for the good.*  
(A parent)

Relationships: are important as indicated in the following example:

Lela is relatively quiet child who has been in the nursery for seven months. Only until recently have the staff got her name right, for most of the time they have called her Lala. She told the staff that her daddy says her name is Lela and not Lala. English is a second language so that might shed light on the fact that she does not talk much but uses facial expressions often. Ena her key-worker mentioned that she has recently begun talking more these days (maybe because they have got her name right! )

Management and other staff have opportunities to increase awareness which may include *in-service and off site training*. Importance is placed on training and on-going support, not just 'one-off' in-service days. Staff need time to reflect, if attitudes are to be changed.

*We need to be more specific when we talk about training because all the training in the world will not be sufficient alone to eradicate negative attitudes. Training alone is not the answer. Too much training for some could be counter-productive.*  
(Centre Co-ordinator)

When I attended an Equal Opportunities training day at a Centre I asked practitioners to write down the last time they had been involved in training in this area. Responses varied tremendously. At one extreme, some practitioners had their last training on 'Equal Opportunities' three years ago and at the other extreme this was the only second training in 'Equal Opportunities' in over twenty eight years!

*This is my first day of training in 'Equal Opportunities' since 1969 and I have also taken further qualifications but training did not deal with 'Equal Opportunities'*

*I have had no other training in 'Equal Opportunities' and I qualified in 1976.  
(Educators day nursery)*

These comments illustrate the changes that have occurred over time. At one time there was no perceived need for training in this area, as these issues were not considered important for practitioners working with the under threes. 'Equal Opportunities' were also lacking from initial training programmes of staff questioned. There was little opportunity for staff in some centres to consider their views and attitudes and to share them with the group. There are clear implications here for both initial and in-service training.

*Parents* are encouraged to actively participate in Early Years Centres and are members of *Management Committees* such as Festivals and 'Equal Opportunities' Working Parties. Regular appraisal of methods adopted to invite and welcome parents into Centres, need to be evaluated so improvements can be made accordingly. One establishment realising the need to improve its parental partnership had taken steps towards changing the situation. At the Centre a parent was invited to talk with early years practitioners on a topic concerning Rastafarism, during a celebrations month.

*Specific parents are consulted on issues that concern us as staff, things we need to know about. One particular parent was invited to come to our developmental meetings. She gave us practical advice and talked to us about her religion.  
(Centre Co-ordinator)*

The advice and knowledge gained was then incorporated into curricula activities. In conversation with the Co-ordinator, we began to discuss ways in which parents may share their knowledge and their children's festival and theme work.

*...children are teaching their parents the information they learn here. Parents felt they did not know some of the topics we were covering so we decided on a leaflet.*

Time is a key issue for many parents who realise that in this area particularly, more time is needed to talk to staff.



*There needs to be more time with keyworkers and parents talking together. With me it is a case of dashing in and giving my daughter to her keyworker every day. I do have a desire to have more time to communicate.*

*(A parent)*

I observed excellent use made of *display boards* to share information with working parents as well as *news letters* that targeted a wider audience in the community. This gave parents and children a feeling of belonging and supported them in sharing in their child's early educate experiences.

*...the displays are very nice, just now my son held my hand to show me one of the boards. He said Dad look at this. The boards give the children a sense of belonging and involvement.*

*There is a piece of work out there now and I stopped to look at it and was pleased and I said to myself this is what I like to see our children's work neatly displayed.*

*I think the display boards and visual imagery are great! My son feels proud of himself. Then he will say...oh mummy look what I have done.*

*(Parents at a Children's Centre)*

Early Years Centre are becoming *community bases* for people to use outside of the centre; such as parent play groups, after and before-school clubs, parent training, language courses for those who speak English as a second language. All of which help to promote a community spirit. One Centre provides a variety of opportunities for the community to use:

- Community drop-in groups
- Parents and Toddler and Childminders Support Groups
- Sessional groups
- After-School Club (Children are collected from local schools)
- Play Schemes (every holiday 5-11 years old)
- Community classes after hours; choirs, prayer meetings, keep fit, rehearsals etc.
- Social Services meetings
- Children Service's meetings
- Children's Bureau reviews
- Nursery managers meetings

Curricula activities are *structured* differently for different age groups and maturity as well as ensuring time for *free play*. Some Centres avoid or omit topics because of feelings that children under three are limited developmentally. Practitioners need to be aware of a child's 'zone of proximal development' (Moll, 1990) that is, what they are capable of when working with contingent assistance by an adult or more capable peer. Activities, materials, resources and displays which value children and avoid stereotypical images were available in the some centres showing a clear 'Equal Opportunities' practice.

The Children Act (1989) states that:

*Children have a right to an environment which facilitates their development*  
(6:28)

The Act considers children's rights in terms of their developing sense of identity, including the right to individuality, respect, dignity and freedom from discrimination. Although Siraj-Blatchford (1992: 110) considers The Children Act (1989) as 'an exciting move towards equality' and the 'first piece of legislation on the care of children which refers specifically to catering for children' from a variety of backgrounds. Smedley (1996) observes that legislation needs to be brought to life by people and not serve only as paper exercises.

The people in the life of a child below the age of three, whether parent or guardian, nursery nurse or teacher, childminder or family friend, exert a powerful influence on a child's developing self. Early years research indicates that from birth, children are learning the values of the social groups in which they live (Lloyd 1987). Drummond *et al.* (1992:9) recommend that educarers need to ask themselves 'why they do what they do', in order to uncover the value positions they represent. They argue that the principle of 'the loving use of power' applies here as throughout early childhood and is non-negotiable.

Any attempt to define 'Equality of Opportunity' must be made against an understanding of what is meant by 'inequality'. By definition this refers to lack of access to opportunity for sections within society. The built in assumption being that access may be increased via 'Equal Opportunities' policy and practice - but this is dependent ultimately on the people responsible for its implementation. There is no getting away from the fact that the understanding, commitment and attitudes of educarers is crucial in providing opportunity in this area. We are back to people again! The adults who work with, care for, educate and are responsible for children under three years old and on whom the responsibility for 'Equal Opportunities' rests, have been the focus of this research project.

## Drawing the Threads Together

Each section in this report is capable of standing alone as a research focus on a specific aspect of concern and interest for all those involved in the lives of our youngest children in out-of-home settings.

Each section draws together research findings and raises questions about ways in which practice might change or develop in the light of the subsequent discussion. It is not the intention here to repeat those implications but rather to reflect on those recurring themes and issues which each of the sections has highlighted in different ways.

At the outset we state that this research project developed from an earlier one in which the focus was on factors influencing the quality of provision for three to five year olds. One of the most significant findings of that research relates to the appropriateness of the training received by the adult who is responsible for them.

Throughout this report we have been concerned with the quality of interactions between adults and children have been significant. In researching the role of the key worker, whilst acknowledging some of the problems in adopting this system, Chris Marsh points to the ways in which sensitive and informed adults have had a significant effect on the earliest experiences of children in group day care. She highlights the training received by the workers and observes the ways in which one key worker, studying for a degree in Early Childhood Studies, relates her study to her practice. Both staff and parents acknowledge the importance of appropriate qualifications and the need for sensitivity in relationships.

As the Early Childhood Forum recognises:

*Those who work with our youngest children, right from birth, need a range of underpinning knowledge and relevant experience with babies, young children, their families and other workers in order to be considered fit to have the privilege of fostering the talents of our most precious natural resource.*  
(Early Childhood Forum, 1995)

Training has been a continuing strand throughout this research. As Table 3 on page 20 indicates staff qualifications vary with evidence of both vocational, competence-based training and award-bearing courses. Appropriate training will become increasingly important in the light of government policy and recommendations.

The Labour Party document, *Early Excellence* (1996), recommended the development of 'multi-professional centres' staffed by workers with appropriate qualifications such as 'the new BEd (Hons) degree in Early Childhood Education as offered at the Manchester Metropolitan University and Suffolk College (1996: 14).'

On the other hand, Gordon Brown in his first budget speech promised that:

*From this budget forwards child care will no longer be seen as an afterthought... we will encourage voluntary organisations to take on and train young people and help them into careers as child care assistants.*  
(Brown, 1997)

Whereas we agree with the principle of accessibility in training in the area of childcare, we wish this to be integrated into a 'climbing frame' of qualifications whereby the aim is to ultimately achieve a well-qualified workforce; educarers having the opportunity to develop further during their career, or at least undergo elements of training (see Abbott, 1996; Pugh, 1996).

Recent recommendations highlight the need for teachers to be involved in the educare of under threes with significant implications for the initial and continuing professional development of teachers.

This research highlights the need to safeguard early years training - particularly in the light of the Chancellor's 'promise' quoted on page 12.

The Children Act (1989) emphasises the need to ensure quality in day care services, and the role of training in providing staff with appropriate skills knowledge and competence. Given the number of existing staff who are not formally qualified, and the need for further training amongst those who are, the resources required for training will be considerable.

The newly formed Early Years Forums with cross-sector representation must lobby hard for appropriate training to be made available for all workers. Funding allocations for training must be wisely used and, since decisions will be made at local authority level, those working with the under threes must ensure that their voice is heard.

Peter Moss, writing in the *Times Education Supplement* (4.4.97) prior to the General Election, refers to the publication by the Labour Party of the document, *Early Excellence*, as the 'Birth of a big idea'. His initial response is one of optimism and hope for the future. He writes:

*Early excellence seems to mark a turning point. Labour seems to turn its back on tinkering with the current tired, dysfunctional and outdated approach to early years education, marked by compartmentalisation, inflexibility, incoherence and inequality. It seems to take a radical new direction towards "an integrated and coherent early years service" long advocated by many in the early years field, already adopted by a number of local authorities and the basis for the most successful early years services in the rest of Europe.*

He goes on to explore those issues which should be addressed in order to turn the vision into a reality. He advocates an Early Years Service Act defining the remit of the Service and setting up a single system of standards and regulation.

He argues that staffing and training need urgent attention - Early Excellence rightly refers to "inadequate qualifications for the task in hand" - an issue reinforced by this project.

The issue of funding is crucial to any successful early years development and as Moss states:

*The early years service needs a coherent, equitable, assured and adequate funding base, not least because of the chronic under-resourcing of existing services.*

All of these issues have important implications for the place of, and provision for, the under threes within this Service. Coherence with the three to five stage is an issue which has never been fully addressed. Findings and implications of this project have relevance for the development of any new Service in which the educare of the under threes is addressed.

At the time of writing, the White Paper - Excellence in Schools, DfEE (1997) has just been published. Section 2 - A Sound Beginning - addresses early years issues and highlights for the first time the need 'to lay the foundations by getting integrated early years education and childcare and primary education, right'. In acknowledging that a new approach is needed in order to achieve the goals outlined in Early Excellence - the White Paper states that 'Collaboration and Partnership are needed.' These two words have permeated this research and clearly will become increasingly important as the developments proceed.

The term professional was used in many discussions by staff:

*it's important to be professional in dealing with parents.*

*we have a professional responsibility to provide an appropriate curriculum.*

*trained professionals are needed to work with the under threes.*

Ball (1994), in the Report of the RSA Early Learning Inquiry, offers food for thought when he states:

*to be professional is to do more than display a range of competences.*

What the 'more' looks like permeates this report and challenges us to reflect carefully on our practice with the under threes.

A challenge comes from a private nursery owner who claims that the majority of her staff are trained by her - indeed she claims in an interview that sometimes

*Professional as a concept can mess up a lot of positive things.*

What did she mean? Could overuse of the term lead to feelings of inadequacy on the part of staff? Does professionalism always result from training? What evidence, in the 'vignettes' provided in this report, is there of adults being professional in their dealings with other staff, children and parents?

There is evidence throughout the report that appropriate provision, whether in terms of curriculum, assessment procedures, opportunities for interaction with adults or support for parents lies at the heart of successful out-of-home care for children under three. This then begs the questions - what do we mean by 'appropriate' and how do we judge what is successful?

The term 'fitness for purpose' is one which is perhaps over-used in educational circles, but it is an important one in relation to this project. Penn (1997) in her comparison of nurseries in Italy, Spain and the UK argues that:

*nurseries, whatever the circumstances in which they operate, are places where children spend their time, and it is by their effect on individual children that they must ultimately be judged.*

*(Penn, 1997: 116)*

There was no attempt in this study to compare nurseries - each centre in which the research was conducted was quite different from any of the others even though they might be called by the same name, eg. children's centre, private nursery. It could be argued that because most of the centres in which the researchers spent their time were known to us, either because staff had trained in the university or they had supported our students in training, they were more likely than those studied by Penn to be staffed by educators who were reflective and analytical.

Although there was evidence in responses to questionnaires from the UK that there was an over-reliance on 'a watered down version of child development which draws intimately on traditions of nursery nurse training' (Penn, 1997: 121); particularly in relation to questions about the curriculum, this was rarely the case in the centres visited. Staff were thoughtful

and articulate, often challenging the 'received wisdom' and changing practice as a result of the challenges of research and theory. At one centre explored in this project, a manager was stimulated to consider her curriculum practice in the light of theories about 'schemas' in young children's activities (see Athey, 1990). She has written about this in one of the publications associated with this study (Coward, 1997).

Decisions about what constitutes appropriate practice and what is deemed to be successful are open to criticism on the grounds of subjectivity. However, as a team we believe that a combined experience of many years working with young children, their parents and educators in a variety of contexts, settings, roles and cultures and of engaging in professional dialogue and development with and for educators, provides a strong base for construction of a theory of appropriateness and quality.

Applying a constructivist perspective and utilising qualitative research methods enabled the researchers 'to break free of the assumptions and methods that continue to constrain our understandings of children and the contexts in which they live' (Hatch, 1995).

'Quality', 'appropriateness' and 'successful' would all be words we would apply to a Finnish day care centre. The researcher arrived at the centre at 8.00am as parents and children were starting off the day together - all parents spent time in the centre with their children, talking with the keyworker and helping them settle in. The coffee pot was bubbling and parents confidently helped themselves to a cup before saying goodbye to their child and going off to work.

Seated on a comfortable settee was a parent with her two year old child still in her pyjamas having breakfast together. When they had finished the mother took her daughter to the bathroom and helped her wash and dress in a leisurely and unpressured manner. When the little girl had decided what she was going to do first, talking happily, waved her mother off to work.

Contrast that with the often frantic arrival at many nurseries of fraught parent and tearful child, often without breakfast, which frequently sets the tone for both of them for the rest of the day.

What would prevent that happening in centres in this country? But then perhaps it does! It certainly might in a childminder's home! Our is only a glimpse into the diversity of provision for under threes but nevertheless those glimpses, together with data gathered via questionnaire and interview, provide interesting snapshots of what life is like for many under threes.

Evidence of downward pressure is worrying in terms of curriculum and assessment. The introduction of the Desirable Outcomes (SCAA, 1996) and Baseline Assessment (SCAA, 1997) are not helping staff whose lack of training and confidence force them to 'deliver' the curriculum often in formal ways, what they consider to be 'the curriculum for young children'.

Any simplistic wholesale importation of ideas, without reflective critique that involves personalised consideration of the resultant interactions between individual adults and individual children, is bound to fail at least some of the time (see the section by N. Grant-Mullings).

A formalised curriculum for children under three should be resisted - indeed for children over this age it is inappropriate. All young children need time to play, to reflect, to grow and develop; these for them are the basics.

Assessment of young children is an integral part of the educare process, but the younger the child the less tangible evidence of learning and development is available. Skill is needed in observing, recording and interpreting young children's behaviour and this will only be acquired as a result of appropriate training and in partnership with parents and carers. Although the aim of this research project has been to examine the role of the adult and their effect on the lives of young children, it has been hard to ignore the effects of children on children.

Chris Marsh points to the importance of the group in providing the continuity which may well be missing when staff are forced to work a shift system. It is the relationship between child and child rather than adult and child which then becomes significant in this respect. This raises a question about the degree to which opportunities for the group to operate in a powerful way are discussed, analysed and put into practice in our educare centres.

Witness the joy of the baby 'escaping' from the baby unit to answer the call of the group! Or the six year old in Finland acting as a mentor for a second language learner. (see the section by L. Abbott). It must not be felt that the adult keyworker, for example, can or should fulfil all the young child's needs for human relationships in the educare setting. It is interesting to consider the views of Penn (1997) - who believes that in nurseries in the UK 'individualism dominates practice'. She points to one nursery where 'staff had even invented a verb to describe the process, one-to-oneing!' (Penn, 1997: 125) The significance of children slightly older than the under threes as role models, playmates, even 'teachers' in the out-of-home setting is an interesting concept and worthy of a future research project!

In discussing the Macrosystem in relation to daycare in Italy, Spain and France, Penn quotes Arthur Miller: 'You can't understand anything unless you understand its relation to its context' (Penn, 1997: 14). Politics, policy and commitment are important at both macro and micro levels. In seeking the views of educarers in other countries we realised that these factors were highly significant. A national policy and commitment to young children is necessary for all countries, as is an entitlement to high quality, appropriate provision but when it is actually in place the lives of young children can change.

Penn praises practice in Reggio Emilia in Italy, as does Drummond (1997), advocating that we learn from other educators. In this research Griffin examines the approach in New



Zealand with reference to the child's developing sense of self. The early years curriculum framework, Te Whariki (New Zealand Minister of Education, 1993), in which the Maori title refers to traditional woven mats of many patterns and designs. The early childhood curriculum is likened to this concept in which the principles, aims and goals defined in the document are woven together in the same way as the mat. The aims on which the whole framework is based provide a common starting point, so that, however diverse the provision, generally each centre is able to create its own distinctive pattern. Drummond (1997) outlines the principles on which the curriculum is based as:

- Well being of the child.
- Belonging: children and their families feel a sense of belonging.
- Contribution: opportunities for learning are equitable and each child's contribution is valued.
- Communication: the languages and symbols of children's own and other cultures are promoted and protected.
- Exploration: the child learns through active exploration of the environment.

The research team would endorse these principles as underpinning the curriculum in centres where children were perceived to be experiencing quality education. For example, two settings in which the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia pre-schools had influenced provision and practice were in very different settings and locations, nevertheless these principles prevailed. The Reggio Emilia pre-schools in Italy whose stress on creative activity and development and a belief in 'the hundred languages of children' are now world famous.

*No way. The hundred is there.*

*The child  
is made of one hundred.  
The child has  
a hundred languages  
a hundred hands  
a hundred thoughts  
a hundred ways of thinking  
of playing, of speaking.  
A hundred always a hundred  
ways of listening  
of marveling of loving  
a hundred joys  
for singing and understanding  
a hundred worlds  
to discover  
a hundred worlds*

*to invent  
a hundred worlds  
to dream.  
The child has  
a hundred languages  
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)  
but they steal ninety-nine.  
The school and the culture  
separate the head from the body.  
They tell the child:  
to think without hands  
to do without head  
to listen and not to speak  
to understand without joy  
to love and to marvel  
only at Easter and Christmas.  
They tell the child:  
to discover the world already there  
and of the hundred  
they steal ninety-nine.  
They tell the child:  
that work and play  
reality and fantasy  
science and imagination  
sky and earth  
reason and dream  
are things  
that do not belong together*

*And thus they tell the child  
that the hundred is not there.  
The child says:  
No way. The hundred is there.*

*Loris Malaguzzi*

*(translated by Lella Gandini)*

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It was interesting that as this report was being written the travelling exhibition of children's art 'The 100 Languages of Children' opened in the UK. The title reflects the belief that 'children speak 100 languages, 99 of which are ignored in school.'

In a lecture given to accompany the exhibitions in 1997 Mary-Jane Drummond shared her own views with regard to the curriculum

*"Children's powers, their powers to do, to feel, to think to know and understand, to represent and express, constitute for me, the most appropriate starting point for thinking about an early years curriculum."*

The title of this research project 'Shaping the Future - Educare of the Under Threes, Identifying Need and Opportunity' was chosen because, as a team, we recognise the importance of the very earliest experiences of children in laying the foundation, not only for later learning, but for emotional and social growth, self esteem, the ability to form relationships and attitudes and to speak the hundred languages. In her postscript - Making Changes in the UK, Penn (1997) makes a plea for 'a more rational, more considered, more joyful service for young children'. In our view some of the centres in our study were providing that kind of service. Regrettably, we know that in certain cases recent reductions in funding have curtailed some of the good practices we observed.

However at a national level the present climate, with regard to the future development of services for young children and their families, is more hopeful than it has been for many years.

Penn asks is it 'Utopia? Or within our grasp?' As we approach the millennium we must ensure that these aims are achieved and that 'a more joyful service' becomes a reality. Above all, we must safeguard the right of our youngest children to use their 100 languages and to ensure that each one is nurtured and respected.

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