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**EARLY YEARS TEACHERS:**  
**THEIR LIVES, WORK AND CAREERS**

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Analysis of the fourteen teachers' autobiographical narratives highlights the significance of historical, autobiographical, and contemporary time for the way in which early years teachers understand and experience their work in the 1990's. Furthermore, these themes are shown to interweave throughout teachers' lives and careers.

This account provides another story to add to those we already have about teachers of young children and one, which unlike most existing research about primary teachers, does not treat teachers as an homogeneous group.

## **Abstract**

This study argues that time is a significant factor for the ways in which early years education is conceptualised and experienced. Three time scales are shown to be important. Firstly, the historical background to early years teaching is examined. In particular, I argue that the way in which women have come to be seen as the most appropriate teachers of young children has implications for how early years teaching is perceived and experienced in the 1990's.

Secondly, the life history approach adopted by this study highlights the importance of early years teachers' own histories. The biographical accounts of fourteen early years teachers show how past experiences influence teachers' perceptions, understandings and experiences of their work.

Thirdly, the particular time period, contemporary time, in which teachers live and work is shown to influence the way in which early years teachers perceive and experience their work. Of particular importance here are the recent educational reforms and the ways in which early years teachers have responded to them. I examine the role that early years teachers construct for themselves, a role shaped by the responsibility of being children's first school educators, and argue that for many teachers this role conflicts with current educational reforms.

## Acknowledgements

An acknowledgement is an admission. It makes explicit what is tacit, or sometimes denied, in every scholarly monologue: *none of us knows alone* (Grumet, 1988, p.x, my emphasis).

Madeleine Grumet is absolutely right and I am grateful to the numerous colleagues and friends who have influenced my thinking over many years. My thanks to them. I am particularly grateful to the fourteen teachers who shared their stories with me and made this thesis possible. Thanks go to Pat Sikes, my supervisor, for her careful tutoring and constant support over the last five years, and to Ken, without his support this thesis could not have been written. Thanks also to Anne Baker, Annette Peake and Aileen Withington for their helpful comments on my earlier drafts.

## PART ONE

### Background to the study

## Introduction

We still know comparatively little about how teachers experience and organise their work situation. We know little about their ideological and pedagogical commitments, how these are influenced and formed, and what effects they have upon teachers' work in schools and upon their occupational satisfactions. In short, our understanding of the culture and politics of the workplace, *from the teacher's perspective*, is still at an elementary level (Lawn and Grace, 1987, p.viii, their emphasis).

The aim of this dissertation is to provide an account of what it is to be an early years teacher in the 1990's from the teacher's perspective. It employs biography and autobiography to explore the lives, work and careers of early years teachers, the ways in which they conceptualise and experience their work. I have chosen to focus on early years teachers for two reasons. Firstly, having been an early years teacher for twenty years I have an interest in, and commitment to, this sector of the education service. In 1993 I resigned my teaching post when I found my own educational values compromised by the educational reforms which followed the 1988 Education Reform Act. This research arose from my decision to leave teaching and the desire to better



understand my own experiences as an early years teacher and the experiences of others who teach young children.

Secondly, much of the research on teachers has focused on secondary teachers and little is known specifically about early years teachers. Almost ten years ago Nias claimed that ‘with very few exceptions, books and articles published in the last 20 years in England, North America and Australia have been about secondary schools. Primary teachers have been given little opportunity to speak for themselves’ (1989, p.1). There is, as I shall argue in detail later, a hierarchy within the education service. The status of teachers tends to rise with the increasing age of their students resulting in teachers of the youngest children being accorded lower status. This hierarchy is reflected in the balance of research on teachers to date. While the neglect of primary teachers is now being redressed by writers such as Pollard (1985), Nias (1989), Cortazzi (1991) and Campbell et al (1992), their studies generally omit the experiences of teachers working in nursery classes.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to represent primary teachers as an homogeneous group which results in few distinctions being drawn between, for example, men and women teachers, and teachers of older and younger children and influences such as race, class, age, sexual orientation and religion are rarely foregrounded. My own experience indicates that infant and junior teachers sometimes have different educational philosophies and practices, different values and motivations. These

differences are often exacerbated by working in separate departments and may be thrown into sharp relief when such departments are required to amalgamate.

Recent publications in the early years field are wide ranging in their discussion of both early years policy and practice (see for example; Nutbrown, 1995, Hurst, 1991 and Pugh, 1996) but rarely are the perceptions, experiences and understandings of practising teachers the focus of such discussions. One notable exception is the 'Principles into Practice' project (Blenkin and Kelly, 1997) which, as part of its data gathering strategy, set out to elicit the views of practitioners on what might constitute quality provision in the early years. It shows practitioners' (teachers and other adults working with young children) stories to be 'narratives of self-identity and culture which ask 'Who are we?', 'How did we get here', 'Where are we going?' and 'What are our shared beliefs?'' (p.61).

Evans et al (1994) researched infant teachers, however the study's focus on the impact of the National Curriculum presents a somewhat limited picture of the 'meaning of infant teachers' work'. The last decade has seen major changes to the education system in England and Wales, resulting from the Education Reform Act of 1988, and recent research into primary teaching has understandably focused upon these reforms (see, for example, Campbell et al, 1992 and Pollard et al, 1994), reforms which have taken little account of teachers' perspectives and the effects such changes might have upon teachers and their work. My aim, whilst acknowledging the significant impact the introduction of the National Curriculum and other reforms are having upon early years

education, is to provide a more comprehensive picture of early years teachers and their work and to argue that to disregard the views and experiences of teachers when planning for educational reform is to risk the successful implementation of such reforms.

Early years teachers' ideologies, the roles they envisage for themselves, their attitudes towards early years education, the differing emphases they place on care and education, their motives for entering the profession, their career patterns and the ways they experience their work are all under researched. This study looks at how early years teaching is theorised and how it is experienced. It highlights the way early years teachers are positioned, relative to other teachers, as an inferior group and examines the reasons for their low status. Implicit in these positionings are unacknowledged inequalities of power, inequalities which mean that the voices of early years teachers are not often heard.

In order to understand how early years teachers perceive and experience their work at the end of the 20th century it is necessary to take account of both the contemporary context in which teachers work and the historical background to early years teaching. Early years teaching has a history which influences the way in which the teaching of young children is constructed, perceived and experienced today. In this research I examine the development of a cultural stereotype which presumes that the care and education of young children is a low status task demanding qualities traditionally

associated with women. I trace how such associations have come about and consider the implications of constructing early years education in this way.

In addition, because teachers live and work within particular social, economic, demographic, cultural and political contexts, I have taken into account contemporary contexts; contexts which combine and interact with personal/biographical factors in teachers' lives to influence the way in which early years teaching is both conceptualised and experienced. The professional identities of early years teachers are formed within these contexts. Their understandings of themselves and their work are influenced by their own experiences and by the perceptions and expectations others have of them.

Set alongside these theoretical accounts are the subjective experiences of fourteen early years teachers whose stories provide insights into the real life experiences of early years teachers. My aim has been to 'credibly depict the integration of the micro and the macro domains of social life at a particular historical time' (Sikes, 1997, p.15).

### Defining early years

The term 'early years' does not have a universally agreed definition. Sometimes it is used to refer to children from 2 to 8 years of age, while for others it refers only to pre-school children. In this research 'early years' includes children aged from 3 to 7 years, nursery and infant children, and their teachers.

## The organisation of this dissertation

In Chapter 1 I use my own life history to explore how and why I came to this research and I examine my own perceptions, and experiences of early years teaching. My aims here are to acknowledge explicitly my role in the research process and to use my own experiences to inform the research.

Chapter 2 begins by providing a justification for the life history method which was used for the collection and the analysis of data in this research and discusses symbolic interactionism, the theoretical framework underpinning this research. The second half of the chapter describes and evaluates what I actually did in terms of gathering and analysing the data and in writing up the research. Details of the fourteen early years teachers who participated in this research are provided at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature pertinent to this study and provides both an historical and a contemporary context in which to set the subsequent analyses. Dominant conceptualisations and ideologies of early years teaching are examined. The review is of necessity wide-ranging because I have chosen not to focus upon one specific area of early years teachers' work but to provide a comprehensive account which indicates the complexity and interrelationships between different aspects of their lives and work. In addition, because there is little written specifically about early years teachers much of the review draws upon the literature relating to primary teachers and teaching, and about women teachers in particular. The chapter begins with an examination of the low status of early years work and explores reasons to account for this. I then move on to

explore the historical background to early years teaching and its implications for teachers today and outline a history which I and other early years teachers have inherited. The final section examines the contemporary context in which early years teachers work including political, organisational, social, economic and demographic factors. During the 1980's a succession of Education Acts changed considerably the nature of schools and their relationships with the outside world. Parents were given more rights and responsibilities, including the opportunity to serve on the governing body of their child's school. The 1988 Education Reform Act in particular, brought in radical changes by introducing for the first time a National Curriculum, the testing of children at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16, and local management of schools with schools taking greater control of their budgets.

I have chosen to reverse the more usual arrangement of providing a review of the literature before an account of the chosen methodology for two reasons. Firstly, as I make use of my own life history in Chapter 1 it seems appropriate to follow it with a consideration of this particular methodology. Secondly, as Chapter 3 considers the historical and contemporary contexts in which early years teachers work it is best placed immediately before the teachers' own stories of early years teaching. This makes it easier to situate teachers' individual subjective experiences within a broader frame of reference.

Chapter 4 explores how and why the fourteen individuals who participated in this study came to be early years teachers. While for some people teaching results from a long

held ambition, for many others the decision to teach is a more pragmatic one. In this section I examine people's motives for becoming teachers and their routes into early years teaching before moving on to discuss issues relating to career development.

Chapter 5 is concerned with perceptions of early years teaching. It opens with the experiences early years teachers have of other people's perceptions of the work they do and explores how they respond to these experiences. The second half of the chapter focuses on early years teachers' own perceptions of their work and the role they envisage for themselves. Teachers' aims are identified, relationships between aims are analysed, and teachers' understandings of their role situated within the current educational context.

Chapter 6 Teachers of young children often cite the contact they have with the children they teach as their primary source of job satisfaction. This chapter looks in more detail at the satisfactions of early years teaching for its practitioners.

The study concludes by drawing together the various strands that have emerged throughout the research to argue that early years teachers perceive and experience their work in a particular way. However, the teachers' stories show that while there is a common discourse and a common experience of teaching young children each individual understands and experiences their work in a unique way influenced by historical, biographical and contextual factors.

## **My Story**

Researchers using ethnographic and biographical approaches often include reflexive accounts describing how they came to their topics and giving some personal details in order to situate themselves in relation to their work. This chapter examines how I came to this research and provides information which I hope will be helpful to the reader in positioning the researcher in relation to the study. This research originates from my own experiences as an early years teacher. My experiences are central to it and therefore I believe it is important for them to be explicitly written into this research. In the following account I consider my experiences of becoming and being an early years teacher before finally leaving in 1993. My attempts to acknowledge the part I played in this research is based on my belief that research is never a neutral affair and therefore it is important to make the researcher's role as visible to the reader as possible. Such information may be valuable to indicate 'where the researcher is coming from' and for making potential biases apparent. It is with this intent that I include my own story and not for reasons of self-publicity, or what Mary Maynard terms 'vanity ethnography'



(cited by Sikes, 1997). As Connelly and Clandinin (1994) argue, texts written as if the researcher had no autobiographical presence result in ‘deception about the epistemological status of the research. Such a study lacks validity’ (p.4049). Furthermore, I would be uncomfortable writing an account about early years teachers which did not include myself. I do not want to distance myself from other early years teachers and be guilty of what Fine (1994) describes as ‘othering’. It is for these reasons I include the following account.

### ‘Moving up a class’

In many ways my story is now a familiar one. The story of a girl from a working class background who moved away from that culture through grammar school and college and the story of the dislocation and alienation that such a move entailed. The story may be a familiar one now but at the time I had no explicit understanding of why I felt as I did and that many others experienced similar upheavals. Such illuminations came much later but the experience had a profound effect upon how I saw the world and reacted to it.

I was the first one in my family to pass the 11+ and go on to grammar school. My success was not greeted with much acclaim or celebration, that was not the way we did things in our household. We were brought up to believe ‘blowing your own trumpet’ was immodest and as my elder sister had failed and gone to the secondary modern school it would have been insensitive to make much of my success. So not for me the new bike or watch as a reward. The following year my brother failed the 11+. John and

I had both attended the same primary school, often walking there and back together with our friends. But now in the mornings he went to the secondary modern school, along with many of my old friends who had also failed the examination, and I went a different route, to the grammar school. I remember we dressed for school differently. John's school had a more relaxed attitude towards dress than mine and he wore a more casual uniform of grey trousers and shirt and tie. Mine was the traditional gym slip with gold sash tied around the waist and a blazer displaying the school badge. I felt it made me seem superior and I hated that. We also had to wear a felt hat with a turned up brim and gold braiding when no other local schools expected their pupils to wear a hat. Maybe the fact that my school hat seemed to represent the idea of superiority I so much disliked explains why I once hurled it into the canal and ended up with a week's detention for turning up without it the next day. The school uniform presented other problems for my family. I remember the times we spent worrying about how expensive it all was. While any pair of grey trousers and white shirt sufficed for my brother's school all the items in my uniform (including the hockey stick) were supposed to be bought from the official outfitters. But such items were costly and we could not afford to buy everything there. I used to worry whether anyone would spot the difference between my Woolworth's navy blazer and the required one. Such experiences probably go a long way to explain my continued opposition to school uniform and all that it represents to me, and to my support of comprehensive education.

While my parents did not discourage my educational attempts neither did they encourage them. For them education was an irrelevance. They had both left school at

fourteen with no qualifications and never understood or connected with education. They took little interest in my schooling and rarely asked me about how I was getting on. I used to think I was alone in experiencing such parental indifference until I read Steedman's (1986) account of her schooling:

What happened at school was my own business, no questions ever asked, no encouragement ever given. (p. 36)

However, while I was not encouraged in my educational efforts neither was I discouraged. My success at school must have been quietly noticed for I was not pushed to leave school as early as possible and get a job. I stayed on at school to do O levels and A levels and then in 1970 went to teacher training college in Leicester.

These experiences influenced me greatly. Firstly, they opened up a gap between me and my family. With no experience themselves of grammar school life or of higher education, it was difficult for my parents to relate to my experiences. And I found it difficult to fit into 'academia'. Many of my college friends had parents and brothers and sisters who had experienced higher education and so were able to share their experiences of college life. I felt that I did not fit in and as a result usually felt anxious and inadequate. Not only did I feel uncomfortable at college but also at home too. I found it difficult to reconcile my two worlds and felt guilty about my feelings towards home. Walkerdine (1985) captures the predicament well:

I felt, in the old place, as in the new, that if I opened my mouth it would be to say the wrong thing. Yet I desired so much, so very much to produce utterances which, if said in one context, would not lead to rejection in the other (p.64).

However, while education had resulted in me feeling adrift between two cultures my experiences also left me with a passion for education. It had opened doors for me, enabled me to 'better' myself and as such I wanted this for other children too. This was my main reason for going into teaching. I saw education as the solution for social inequalities and was unaware then of the ways in which schools operate to replicate the structural inequalities of society. As a teenager I had been keen to change society and saw teaching as a way to fulfil my aims. I was in the first cohort of eighteen year olds to vote, was a member of the National Union of Students in the 6th form of school and joined the Labour Party shortly after starting to teach. I was also a member of CND. When, in 1970, I decided to train as a teacher I was motivated by one particular ambition. I saw in teaching an opportunity to put into practice my socialist principles and, with an idealist's view of bringing greater equality into society, I accepted a place at teacher training college. I also had the offer of a place at university to study food science but teaching won easily. My desire to put something back into society seemed more achievable through a career in teaching. I guess, looking back, teaching also offered a very traditional choice for a woman, one that was supported and not questioned by those around me. It was also, of course, very familiar work. I had spent

many years observing first hand what teachers do whereas I had little idea about what a food scientist might do all day!

I was keen that education should provide for others the route to advancement (as I saw it then) that it had for me, a way of releasing so much wasted talent. Like Carolyn Steedman, I saw teaching as a way of being a socialist :

I don't care anymore about sounding pretentious, so now I tell people who ask at parties why I did it for such a very long time, that it did seem a way of being a socialist in everyday life (Steedman 1992, p.61).

So what did this mean in practice? How did my experiences of family, school and class influence my teaching? I was keen for the children to achieve academically of course but there was more to it than that. The way in which they achieved was important, the means was as important as the end. I wanted to 'model' in my classroom a caring, tolerant, and fair community. I saw my job as preparing the children to be members of society and as such they needed more than just an academic curriculum; they also needed to be able to get on with others, work with others, be tolerant and learn to settle differences without recourse to violence. Some would argue that the role of a teacher is to address children's academic needs, but I saw it much more broadly than that (and still do). Neither do I see that it is feasible when one is spending so many hours each day living as a community in the classroom to ignore the issue of how such a community should operate. I wanted the school to operate as democratically as possible.

The children had rights and one of these was to be involved in decisions about their learning. The curriculum was to be negotiated with the children making decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions. Children were involved in the assessment process and in developing classroom rules and ways of working together. Utopian perhaps, but for many years I was lucky to work in a school with like-minded colleagues who pursued such aims. I was also fortunate in that the head of the school had a very democratic management style. Significantly, I was also teaching at a time when 'the general mood of optimism meant that new ideas were welcomed and tried and teachers had scope and resources for experimentation' (Evetts, 1990, p.18). Having trained in Leicester in the early 70's I was much influenced by the 'progressive' policies being tried in Leicestershire, Oxfordshire and the West Riding, by the Plowden Report (1967) and by writers such as Rogers (1969) and Neill (1962). Additionally, a large part of my teaching career was spent in a school and local authority both of whom advocated and supported the approaches indicated above. Thus, the kind of teacher I became was profoundly influenced by my childhood experiences which left me with a desire to see a fairer and more democratic schooling experience for children. These biographical influences were then strengthened by the context in which I initially found myself teaching. Both in terms of the local school in which I was working, and the national educational context, I found the values I wanted to pursue supported and encouraged.

Of course, at the beginning, many of my ideas were not articulated clearly, they were implicit rather than explicit, but the basic aims were there. I never really considered working with older children and I wonder now if this didn't have something to do with

feeling that I might have greater influence with the younger children. I could get in early and introduce them to the kind of classroom community I envisaged. It's hard to be sure now but there's certainly very little opportunity at secondary level with forty minute classes to develop as a class teacher the kind of community model I was aiming for, what Steedman (1992) described as 'my little socialist republic'.

From around 1985 onwards my educational philosophy and preferred ways of working began to conflict more and more with the educational views of others, usually those in more powerful positions than myself, such as headteachers and Government. It is interesting to examine some of these conflicts because they seem to result from a clash between what Spender (1982) describes as 'men's ways of seeing education' and my own conceptualisation of education. De Lyon and Widdowson Mignuiolo (1989) point out that it is men who shape and influence education, women are rarely the profession's decision makers. Grumet (1988), Arnot and Weiner (1987), and Spender (1982) all argue that schooling is based on men's ways of knowing about the world, thus we have a schooling system based upon men's definitions of how it should be. Such a male paradigm of schooling denies women's experiences, women's ways of seeing the world. For example, the splitting up of knowledge into separate discrete subjects can be interpreted as being based upon men's understandings and that women generally take a more integrated, holistic view. Similarly, age segregated classes and competition in learning are seen as being based on men's definitions of schooling, a view of education which also leads to the 'emotional' being excluded from education (Grumet, 1988).

During the late 1970's and early 80's, I, and my women colleagues, supported by the male head, had chosen to work with mixed age classes. We saw this way of organising as providing considerable social, emotional and academic advantages to children. The older children provided role models for the younger children for their learning and for how the classroom operated. The younger children learned from, and alongside, the older children, while the older children had the opportunity to develop their own understandings and gain in self-confidence. We were also keen to encourage children to pursue learning through their own interests and in ways which integrated subjects and we rejected competitive stars, charts and certificates in favour of encouraging children to gain intrinsic pleasure from their work.

Then the headteacher retired to be followed by three other heads, all male and all junior trained, and in each case I found my educational philosophy at odds with theirs. They wanted single year classes, timetabled periods of work, gold stars and class achievement charts on the wall. Not only did we have differing philosophies but I also it difficult to work with their autocratic, hierarchical style of management. In 1988 the Education Reform Act imposed a National Curriculum on both primary and secondary schools. Its stated aim was to improve standards in schools with the introduction of a 'broad and balanced' curriculum and new assessment arrangements. However, the educational philosophy and value systems on which the National Curriculum was based were not made explicit. As Kelly points out:



- - - the 1988 Education Act is the first such Act to offer no statement of its philosophy or its underlying ideals, beyond the rather bland claim that its concern is to raise educational standards; a claim, which is not very helpful since it is accompanied by no definition of what it takes educational standards to be (1990, p.46).

Kelly identifies three major features of the National Curriculum's underlying ideology: its instrumentalism, its commercialism and its elitism. Instrumental because education was now seen as being a preparation for adult life and employment to be planned according to the needs of adulthood rather than of childhood. It is worth remembering that the concerns over education which culminated in the 1988 Act coincided with growing concern over Britain's economic position in world markets. Commercial because of the application of business principles and practices to education. Accountability, value for money and league tables became the language of education and resulted in the third feature, elitism. The introduction of league tables meant schools were, in effect, in competition with each other and as Kelly (1990) so bluntly points out:

Properly competitive farmers do not feed up the runts of any litter, they certainly do not offer them the same level of care and provision they give to the sturdy products (p.51).

The value systems of the new National Curriculum were not ones I shared and I found myself in disagreement with large parts of Government policy. It seemed to me that I had set out with broad, ambitious aims only to be reduced to a mere technician required to deliver a predetermined, static body of knowledge. The hours we had spent developing methods of assessment which were descriptive, diagnostic and designed to involve children and build confidence and self-esteem were to be replaced by tests and a view of education which saw learning as a hierarchical ladder which children neatly ascended.

It is plain to anyone who has any direct experience of early years education in the UK that the advent of the National Curriculum has had the effect of turning it on its head. The direction of its development has been reversed; the advances it had made towards establishing a new and sophisticated form of curriculum have been discounted and arrested; and those teachers in the sector who continue to adhere to the values and ideals implicit in the approaches which have been displaced are struggling against all odds to maintain those values and ideals in a context which is not only incompatible but also hostile to them (Kelly, 1994, p.1).

My values, those of democracy, equality and co-operation, seemed to be irreconcilable with the new vision of education, my preferred ways of working difficult to maintain in the current educational climate. So, after 20 years in the classroom, I left. It is those

experiences that led to this piece of research, to a desire to find out how other early years teachers perceive and experience their work.

## **Methodology**

Most forms of research have an element of theory behind them. This supplies coherence and often links with the particular methodologies which guide empirical work (Pollard, 1985, p.x).

This research project is informed by symbolic interactionism and uses life history method to research early years teachers. The following account explores the methodological approaches adopted by the researcher and their relevance to this particular field of study.

### Life history

I have already indicated how I came to this research through my own biographical experiences. My experiences as an early years teacher for almost twenty years, and, more specifically, those experiences that culminated in me leaving teaching, led me to ask what being a teacher of young children means to those involved in the job. How did my experiences compare to those of other early years teachers? Did they see their work in similar ways to me and, if not, what were their stories like? How had they come to be

early years teachers, and why did they want to work with young children, if indeed they did? What did they see the job as being about? What was it like to be an early years teacher in the 1990's? In order to answer these questions I needed an approach that would enable me to explore individual early years teachers' perceptions of their work, both past and present, and one that included both professional and personal aspects of teachers' lives. A methodology which would gain access to early years teachers' experiences, understandings and interpretations was essential, one which would allow me to explore what being an early years teacher means to people. Using life histories, my aim has been to research teachers' lives from their perspectives and, if I'm honest, I was hoping not only to better understand the lives and work of early years teachers but also to better understand my own experiences. As Moustakis (1990) remarks 'the self of the researcher is present throughout the process, and while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self awareness and self knowledge' (cited by Sikes, 1997, p.15).

I chose life history as the most appropriate methodology for this research because its narrative and biographical approach is well suited to studying the subjective meanings and interpretations people give to their experiences. It has also enabled me to acknowledge and to use my own personal knowledge and experience as evidenced in the chapter exploring my own biography.

Central to this research is my belief that meanings and interpretations people give to their lives and experiences are valid data for research purposes. Unlike positivist

approaches which seek 'truth' in the objective and observable and distrust subjectivity, narrative/biographical approaches value the meanings and interpretations people give to their own lives. Life history acknowledges both the importance of individual, subjective interpretations of experience and the influence of social context upon these interpretations. The meanings these early years teachers give to their work are not individual constructions, but developed through shared and negotiated understandings with others. In other words, this research takes the stance that the meanings and understandings people have of their lives are socially constructed, a symbolic interactionist view of the world.

### Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is founded on the belief that people act on the basis of meanings and understandings which they develop through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). Through symbolic interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, individuals develop a concept of 'self' as they interpret the responses of other people to their own actions. In other words, we learn about who we are through others; our identities are personal and social constructions. Being identified as an 'early years teacher' carries with it certain expectations and means the individual will be perceived and treated in particular ways by other people. (The historical and contemporary discourses of what it is to be a teacher of young children are explored in Chapter 3.) It is through these interactions that we come to know about ourselves. We become aware how others perceive us and this awareness informs how we see ourselves. These expectations and resulting social interactions will of course differ according to how we are identified. For

example, being identified as a 'secondary teacher', a 'PE teacher', or a 'supply teacher' will have particular meanings for people. Being identified by others as an 'early years teacher' has implications for the individual, as does identifying oneself in such a way. Using life histories enabled me to explore what being an 'early years teacher' meant to the individuals in this research and how they experienced other people's expectations of them.

#### The advantages of life history for this study.

Life history has several advantages as a methodology. It acknowledges the importance of biography in the way individuals live their lives. Studies by Bullough et al (1991) and Casey (1993) illustrate the influence of biography, both personal and professional, for teachers' role identities, the ways they think about themselves as teachers and the ways they work in classrooms. By talking at length with teachers about both their personal and professional biographies, I was able to explore individual teachers' routes into, and reasons for entering, early years teaching and the ways in which their previous life experiences contributed to their understandings about teachers and teaching. As Hargreaves (1997) reminds us,

Teachers teach in the way that they do not just because of the skills they have or have not learned. The ways they teach are also grounded in their backgrounds, their biographies, in the kinds of teachers they have become (p.xi).

I felt it was important to include teachers' professional and personal biographies because teachers' lives, both in and out of school, have an important effect upon how they see themselves as teachers and how they teach. As Goodson (1992a) writes, 'it remains clear that, in the accounts they give about life in schools, teachers constantly refer to personal and biographical factors. From their point of view, it would seem that professional practices are embedded in wider life concerns' (p.16).

Interviews also focused on teachers' current experiences, and current perceptions of their work and their careers. Life history's subjective nature makes it well suited for exploring teachers' subjectivities, their perceptions, ideals and beliefs. Nias' work (1989) with primary teachers shows that 'the self' is a crucial element in the way teachers construe the nature of their job. Teachers invest themselves in their work, they bring who they are as people to their teaching. Successive interviews with the participating teachers using a life history approach enabled me to research these teachers as people, to explore their experiences and to acknowledge the importance of both professional and personal elements of their lives.

Another important attribute of life history is its ability to illuminate the situational constraints individuals are living and working within, 'to throw into sharp relief a range of structural constraints that shape the construction of any life' (Sparkes, 1994, p.165). However, I am not taking a 'deterministic' approach here. Individuals are not passive, they do make choices and negotiate their own paths through life, but it is important to recognise they do so within existing frameworks. As Plummer (1995) reminds us, 'we



human beings are social world-makers though we do not make our social worlds in conditions of our own choosing' (p.20). Research into people's lives therefore needs to take into account the context in which those lives are lived. To this end, I have related the teachers' accounts in this study to societal influences, for example, political, economic, and cultural factors, and to an historical framework. Life history, as Beynon points out, is able to 'ground the individual life in both the context of lived experience as well as within the broader social and economic system in which s\he lives' (Beynon, 1985, p.164). Faraday and Plummer (1979) also point out the potential in life histories for highlighting the context in which lives are lived:

When one conducts a life history interview the findings become alive in terms of historical processes and structural constraints. People do not wander round the world in a timeless, structureless limbo. They themselves acknowledge the importance of historical factors (cited in Burgess, 1985, p.145).

For example, several teachers in this research entered teaching when teaching jobs were not easily available. The time of their qualifying as teachers was significant. The scarcity of teaching posts led some teachers to accept jobs teaching an age range they had not intended, or indeed trained, to work with.

Hargreaves (1994) argues that contextual information is vital to avoid 'a retreat to personal emotions and interpersonal processes - - - at the cost of addressing important

moral, social and political purposes outside the personal domain' (p.74). Therefore, while I have focused in depth upon individual teachers' experiences, their stories are also situated within the wider social contexts in which they are living and working. This is particularly important as much of my analysis revolves around the position of women in our society and the gendered nature of teaching. Goodson (1995) writes that life histories, as compared to life stories, provide cultural and political analysis so that 'stories can be located and seen as the social constructions they are, fully impregnated by their location within power structures and social milieux' (p.98). To this end, I have provided both an historical and contemporary context for this research which includes a consideration of the dominant ideologies and discourses of early years teaching, and of women teachers. This research explores 'not only the stories of lives but the contexts of lives' (Goodson 1992b, p.244), and recognises that personal experiences relate to historical and structural phenomena.

A further attribute of life history relates to the type of interview it employs. The open-ended, conversational approach used provided opportunities for the teachers to contribute to a developing agenda. As Bullough et al (1991) note:

It is a responsive methodology, avoiding rigid data-gathering strategies, just as it avoids interpretations made in advance of data-gathering; strategies and interpretations evolve together in response to shifting researcher understandings (p. 12).

Whilst my preparatory reading, discussions, and experience of being an early years teacher sensitised me to many of the issues in this field and indicated possible themes to discuss, the methodology was suitably flexible to seek out and value areas of importance raised by teachers. Additionally, the interviews provided not only data but also the teacher's own interpretations of that data. Because teachers' own understandings of their experiences are central to the research, such interpretations were duly taken account of in the ongoing analysis of data.

Life histories are elicited not simply for the information that can be extracted: the interpretations which are an integral part of the narratives are considered to be equally, and possibly more, valuable components (Casey, 1993, p.188).

In summary, the main attributes of the life history method in this study was its capacity: to acknowledge the importance of biography, to recognise the significance of personal and professional elements of people's lives, and to acknowledge the historical and social circumstances in which individual lives are lived. It provided valuable data on what being an early years teacher means to these fourteen teachers.

#### An alternative account

The above account is a reasoned, dispassionate justification for the appropriateness of life history as a research method in my chosen area. However, there is another parallel story to be told and one which I include for the following reason. Throughout this

research I have chosen to both include and account for myself, to 'write myself in'. My attempts to acknowledge the part played by me in the research is based on my belief that research is never neutral and therefore it is important to make the researcher's role as visible to the reader as possible. As Polkinghorne (1995) reminds us,

Researchers engaged in narrative analysis need to be attuned to their contributions to the constructive aspects of their research and to acknowledge these in their write-ups (p.19).

However, achieving an appropriate balance between the author's voice and the voices of those participating in the research can be problematical. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) warn,

We see a strong tendency among scholars to reflect on their work and their place in it rather than to do the work - - - As a result, and despite the espoused goal of encouraging other voices to be heard, the loudest voice is that of the author (p.131).

With the above caveat in mind I intend to continue 'writing myself in' because it seems particularly important that I, as a 'new' researcher, am aware of my role in the process and a thesis is an appropriate place to reflect upon it.

Looking back, it is perhaps not surprising that from the early days of the taught research methods course which I attended I felt drawn towards the potential for life history work. As well as being persuaded by the ‘intellectual’ arguments for life history work I also found that many of its features resonated with my own personal experiences. As a classroom teacher I had often reflected upon my own school experiences and compared them with those of the children I was teaching. I was well aware that my own childhood and school experiences had shaped me as a teacher. I needed no persuading about the importance of biography. As a teacher I had valued the individuality of the children I taught. Life history appealed to me because it offered the opportunity to look for commonalities and differences whilst at the same time respecting the uniqueness of individuals. I was also drawn to the way in which life history could reflect the complexity and untidiness of lived experience. In my own teaching career I had rejected reductionist approaches in favour of those which provided for more detail, more flexibility. For example, in the area of assessment I was totally opposed to the practice in the National Curriculum Statutory Assessments of reducing a child’s achievements to a number. I had worked over many years to develop with colleagues evaluation and recording practices which provided rich, detailed descriptions of each child’s progress based upon observation. No wonder the ‘thick’ description of life history struck a chord in me.

Additionally, the idea of working with teachers’ stories echoed the way in which I had worked in the classroom. As a teacher of young children much of my work with them involved stories; listening to them, telling them, reading them and writing them. The

children I worked with often made sense of their world through stories. Books with themes of sibling rivalry, grief and celebrations helped them to make sense of their own experiences. I told the children stories about my own life, about places I'd been, things I had done, and the children would often relate their own experiences in narrative form, embellishing the main points for the audience's benefit. Stories were the medium through which I extensively worked in the classroom and so, in many ways, I was already predisposed to such a research strategy. As this study involved the collection and analysis of teacher's stories about themselves and their work the following section considers the place of stories both in everyday life and in research in particular.

### Stories

Traditionally, stories are associated with fictional accounts but the division we make between fiction and non-fiction is simplistic and unhelpful. As Thomas (1995) argues, 'it seems likely that inside most non-narrative discourses there is a story struggling to get out' (p.3) and, equally, that within each narrative 'there stalks the ghost of non-narrative discourse' (Rosen, 1987, p.12). The stories I collected from teachers are accounts of their lives, stories about events and happenings in their pasts and presents. Such stories are the essence of life history research. They are also the way we make sense of our world on a day to day basis. Through storytelling, described by Hardy (1975) as a 'primary act of mind', we communicate, interpret and give meaning to our experiences and 'so powerful is the impulse to tell stories (that) there is a sense in which *we are told by our stories*' (Thomas, 1988, p.3, my emphasis). As Plummer notes:

All the time we are telling stories about our pasts, our presents and our futures - - - We are constantly writing the story of the world around us - - - and everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and making meaning - giving sense to ourselves and the world around us (Plummer, 1995, p.20).

So I asked early years teachers to tell me about themselves, to talk about how they came to be teachers, what their work meant to them, what they liked about the job, and their aspirations for the future. Importantly, their stories were more than descriptions of events and ideas, but were interpretations which reflected the teachers' perspectives on their lives and work. However, using people's stories about their lives is not totally straightforward. As we tell stories about ourselves we may embellish them, adapt them for different audiences, forget things and sometimes even lie. It is important to recognise that teachers' stories, like anyone else's, tell us how the teller sees and makes sense of the world, not how the world really is. As Maynard reminds us 'there is no such thing as 'raw' or authentic experience which is unmediated by interpretation' (1994, p.6). Our memories are selective and as we tell our life stories we revisit experiences and rework them. Thus our stories are not fixed, they evolve and as Plummer (1988) notes, 'self story telling is a ceaseless, empirically grounded process of shifting truth' (cited by Measor and Sikes, 1992, p.212). The early years teachers interviewed may indeed tell a different story at a different time or under different circumstances, but in my view this in no way invalidates their stories, stories told at a particular time in their lives and set in a broader context. As Sikes (1997) writes:

The purpose of using stories is not to offer 'objective truths', but rather to present very specific and contextualised personal truths which are, in themselves, understood through detailed contextual interpretation (p.19).

Not only do people tell different stories to different audiences and at different times but they also have 'rehearsed' stories, ones which are told in almost identical fashion on different occasions. This was apparent in the interviews I had with teachers where they would sometimes return to, and talk about an event not only in the same detail but often using the same language. As Frame (1994) so eloquently explains, such stories often have particular meaning for us:

I may have polished this shell of memory with the application of time but only because it is constantly with me, not because I have varnished it for display (p17).

Of course, people being people, there were also instances where people contradicted what they had said on previous occasions. Follow up interviews enabled such contradictions to be further probed. Where such contradictions remained unresolved the reader's attention has been drawn to them. Such contradictions do not negate life history research but reveal one of its strengths, its ability to reflect the 'untidiness' of our lives rather than presenting a 'tidy' version. Discussing the relationship of narrative to experience Bruner (1984) writes:



A life lived is what actually happens. A life experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts and meaning known to the person whose life it is - - - A life as told, as life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context (cited by Goodson, 1992b, p.236).

Refining this model to distinguish between life stories and life histories Goodson further divides the 'life as told' into two categories: the 'life as told' by the person who lived and experienced the life (the life story) and the 'life as told' when the life story teller and another researcher collaborate to produce a life history. Good life history, according to Goodson, requires as little disjunction as possible between life as lived and experienced, and life as reported and rendered in text. The relationship between the story told by the person who lived it and the story told by the researcher is considered next.

### Stories and interpretations.

It is important to note that there may be, indeed almost certainly are, other ways to interpret these teachers' stories. The one given here is my interpretation of their accounts. As Thomas (1995) points out, the interpreter's account, with its choices of what to leave out and what to retain, is like having 'a review of a play or a novel which one hasn't yet seen or read and, in many cases, may never see' (p.171). According to Thomas, this leaves the reader little option but to 'go with the flow' of the interpretation presented. However, selection occurs in all research accounts, the entirety of the

empirical text/data, is not made available to the reader. While such selection is an inevitable part of the research process it seems the researcher's integrity is more readily accepted in some methodologies, particularly quantitative, than in others. By providing contextual detail for both the respondents and myself, my aim has been to enable the reader to see the context for this particular interpretation, and to get a feel for the 'trustworthiness' of the interpretation (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, cited by Hatch and Wisniewski., 1995).

### Verification

It is all too easy to undervalue narratives of personal experience in cultures which have become obsessed with narrowly scientific notions about proof, evidence and absolute truth (Blenkin and Kelly, 1997, p.60).

Such qualitative research as this is sometimes labelled subjective and unscientific, in contrast to quantitative research with its objective and 'scientific' status. However, as discussed above, it is the subjective nature of life history research which is its strength as it provides an insight into how individuals perceive, interpret, understand and present their experiences. As Emihovich (1995) points out, 'stories do not pretend to be objective because they deal with emotions, the irrational part of behaviour' (p.40). How then should such research be verified? The checks and balances appropriate for verifying quantitative research are inappropriate and not transferable to research using

narrative/biographical approaches (Bruner, 1985). Bruner describes two modes of cognition, two ways in which we know about the world. He uses the terms paradigmatic cognition for the traditional, scientific mode of knowing, and narrative cognition for storied knowing and argues that they provide ‘distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality - - - They differ radically in their procedures for verification’ (p.11). Thus, the criteria used to evaluate quantitative research with its ‘objective’ data are not transferable to the subjective data in this research. Tests of reliability and validity are unhelpful when it is the subjective meanings, understandings, and interpretations people give to their lives that are under investigation. However, it is not enough to simply reject these criteria as inappropriate to life history work without considering how we might ensure a rigorous approach to narrative/biographical research. As Sparkes points out:

Both (life history and narrative) reject orthodox foundational views of validity and reliability; but, at the end of the day, we still have to pass judgement (cited by Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995, p.129).

Several writers have suggested criteria that might be used in evaluating narrative and life history research. Grumet (1988) writes that ‘fidelity rather than truth is the measure of these tales’, truth being what happens in a situation and fidelity what it means to the person telling the tale (p.26). Thus, an account is ‘believable when it can be credited with conveying, convincingly, that the events occurred and were felt in ways the

narrator is asserting' (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p.25). Relating fidelity to art Blumenfeld-Jones argues:

To assign believability, audiences must experience a congruence with their own experiences of similar, parallel, or analogous situations. They do not have to derive the same meaning as the artist's original meaning (p.31).

I am reminded of the first time I spoke about my research and told 'my story' to a group of colleagues at the university. A fellow PhD student, herself a teacher of young children, commented that many of her experiences echoed my own; she felt she could identify with the story I was telling. My aim has been to tell the stories of the fourteen teachers involved in this research in a 'believable' way, both to them and to others who may read this account.

### What I did

I interviewed fourteen early years teachers working in nursery schools, infant schools, and infant/junior schools. Initially, I had some difficulty in defining the age range covered by the term 'early years'. 'Early years' is used to refer to children of a variety of age groups including children aged from three to five years, birth to five years, five to seven years or more broadly to include children from birth to eight years old. I finally decided to focus on teachers working with the youngest children, nursery and reception teachers. However, as I began interviewing I found that, whilst at the time of interview

the teachers were teaching nursery or reception age children, almost all had had experience teaching other ages too. Later, when I had the opportunity to include three teachers who were currently teaching Year 1, I did so as they also had experience of teaching younger children. I purposefully included two male early years teachers because as work with young children is seen as most appropriate for women in our society I felt it was important to include their stories. I began by interviewing a student teacher in their final year of training from my university and an early years teacher I had been on a course with. They in turn introduced me to other early years teachers, as did colleagues and friends who knew of my research, and so the group of participants snowballed. There was no intention to make a representative sample, with such a small number of informants this would have been impossible anyway. My prime concern was to find early years teachers who were willing to share their experience and who were able to articulate their thoughts. It is vital for life history work to have informants who are prepared to talk at some length about themselves and willing to reflect upon their lives. However, I aimed to include teachers with a range of different experiences and to this end the teachers interviewed included both men and women, newly qualified teachers and those with longer experience, teachers from nursery and primary schools serving a variety of neighbourhoods. Mati is black British and was born in the Caribbean, the other participants are white British.

Initial contact was made in person or over the telephone and possible participants were given details of the research and what their involvement would entail. I always offered them some time to reflect and consider whether they wished to take part. They were

assured of confidentiality and told of their right to withdraw from the project at any time. All decided to continue. I then negotiated a venue for interviews, the informant choosing where was most convenient for them. Most took place in the informants' homes, a few in schools, a few at the university, and one at a teachers' centre.

### The Researcher and the Researched: The Relationship

Much has been written of the power relationships that research entails for its participants, both for researcher and researched, and many of these issues are complex and defy simplistic answers. Positions may be held from the one extreme of regarding all research as benign to the other of labelling all research as 'rape' research (Lather, 1986). Other writers have claimed that through research it is possible to 'empower' people. Opie (1992) argues that there are at least three ways in which an individual may be empowered through participation in a research project. Firstly, through their contribution to making visible a social issue; secondly, the therapeutic effect of being able to reflect on and re-evaluate their experience; and, thirdly, the generally subversive outcome these two effects may generate (cited by Maynard, 1994). Maynard is sceptical of such claims because even if the consciousness of an individual or group is raised there may be no way the participants can act. Troyna takes a similar position described by Sikes as:

Barry's position is that all research is potentially exploitative and that, in any event, claims for the 'empowering' or emancipatory properties of any research, within whatever paradigm and regardless of the methods used,

are at best grandiose and naive, at worst, disingenuous and deceitful (Sikes, Troyna and Goodson 1996, p 36).

Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) are also concerned about the way in which the concept of 'empowerment' is used by some feminist researchers:

They reflect either an arrogance of viewpoint or failure to think through what our 'power' consists of. A well designed and carefully constructed study can result in reflecting differently on experience, and where researchers have 'done their homework' it is often possible to refer participants to resources they might benefit from. But participating in a research project is unlikely, in the vast majority of cases, to transform the conditions of women's lives (p 36/37).

It is clear what I, the researcher, stood to gain from the research process, but what of my interviewees? My aim was nothing so ambitious as thinking I could 'give them a voice', but I hoped that talking with me about their experiences and reflecting upon their lives would be worthwhile for them. Certainly, several teachers commented on how they enjoyed having the opportunity to talk at length about themselves in a non-judgemental situation and often they would choose to continue with the conversation after the designated, agreed time period. However, encouraging people to reflect upon their experiences is not unproblematic. What of the consequences if, through reflection and consciousness-raising, participants begin to question the path they have taken or the

restraints society imposes upon them? They might be in a position to make changes but alternatively they might experience the frustration of being in a situation where action is impossible. I am not aware that my work created any such situations, but it is essential for researchers to be aware of the implications of their methodology.

Many of the features of life history research are those which may also be found in what some would describe as feminist methodologies: the valuing of personal experience, the recognition of the need for researchers to be reflexive, an emphasis on non-hierarchical relationships with participants, and the acknowledgement of the subjective. Narrative and biographical approaches are often adopted by feminists and whilst I did not consciously or deliberately decide upon life history because of its feminist associations I value, and advocate, the elements of life history work discussed above.

### Interviewing

The approach (life history) uses qualitative techniques, in particular the unstructured or semi-structured interview, which are designed to provide individuals with the opportunity of telling their own stories in their own ways. This facilitates the reconstruction and interpretation of subjectively meaningful features and critical episodes in an individual's life. The basic concern of the life history approach is the presentation of experience from the perspective of the subject or subjects themselves (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989, p186).



While some writers refer to unstructured interviews I have deliberately chosen to use the term ‘conversational’ instead as both researcher and interviewee come to the process with some kind of structure and the word ‘unstructured’ can be used pejoratively. While the conversational interview allows greater freedom and flexibility it does not mean it is a casual technique. Such interviews require careful preparation, not least careful consideration of the role the researcher is to play; the degree to which they will enter the conversation. As Burgess (1982) points out, the conversational interview is not just a conversation, it is a conversation *with a purpose* (my emphasis).

### Reciprocity

A strength of the conversational interview is that it enables participants to both raise issues and talk about experiences from their own perspective. Furthermore, the researcher, by offering ideas and speaking of experiences from their own lives, can aim to reduce the distance between the researcher and the respondent. As the conversation becomes more shared it is likely that participants will feel more comfortable to discuss personal issues and, as Bertaux notes, ‘the data gathered will then become a mutually-shared knowledge rooted in the intersubjectivity of the interaction’ (cited by Measor and Sikes, 1992, p.215). This makes such self-disclosure by researchers sound very manipulative. Fundamentally, I saw conversational interviews as providing the most effective way of seeing teaching from the teachers’ point of view. But it was not quite that straightforward. As I considered my role as an interviewer I experienced tensions regarding the degree of involvement I had in the interviews. I wanted to

respond honestly to teachers' comments and questions as one would in a conversation, but I knew that it was possible that my comments might alienate a participant and jeopardise the interview. For example, if a respondent learned that I was antagonistic to a particular idea because of comments I had made they might be less likely to reveal their own advocacy of it. Of course, it could be argued that it might actually prompt the respondent to defend a particular idea more strongly than they might have done in a more 'neutral' setting. I found I had to make such judgements on the basis of each interview and the expectations of each respondent and the degree to which I participated in each interview differed.

The characteristics of the interviewer may also influence the interview process:

What the interviewer is influences and may determine the kind of data he or she receives. There are a number of factors; age, gender, and ethnicity are probably the most significant (Pryce, 1979, cited in Burgess, 1985, p.74).

The fact that in all but two cases I was of the same sex as the respondents and in all but one the same ethnic background could be seen as an advantage for interviewing. Additionally, I had a good understanding of early years work which I could share with the teachers. However, while not wishing to underplay these important factors I feel that in my research a more significant factor influenced the interviews. Some teachers seemed to be able to talk to me about themselves, both professionally and personally,

much more easily than others. This was no doubt a reflection of their own personalities and of the interplay between our two characters. Thus, there were differences in the degree to which individual teachers felt able to discuss their lives and variations in the degree of rapport achieved. Usually an invitation from me to talk about a time in their lives would result in lengthy and detailed accounts from teachers, but there were differences which were noticeable on the transcripts. Sometimes there would be pages of a teacher talking at length about themselves with little intervention from me whilst in other transcripts more of me would be evident. The teachers' own understandings of what constitutes an interview no doubt influenced this situation. Thus the extent to which individual teachers were prepared to share personal information obviously differed but being able to talk to the participants over a number of sessions using a conversational approach to interviewing was an advantage.

### Issues of power

Such conversational, open-ended interviews are often viewed as more democratic than more structured methods of researching, the division of power between the researcher and the researched becoming more equal. In most research the researcher, being the one who most often initiates the work, chooses the methods and analyses and writes up the research, can be viewed as being more powerful than research participants. However, the power balances, and imbalances, in research are more complex than this suggests. At times research participants can be very powerful. For example, participants exercise a great deal of control at the beginning of research projects when they are deciding whether to take part or not, and throughout the research when they might decide to

terminate their involvement with the research. In addition, interviewees have something the researcher wants and they exercise power in deciding the extent to which they will share that information. While successive, conversational interviews may enable participants to feel more comfortable about sharing information, thus enhancing data collection, there is the possibility that participants may reveal more than they had intended. While it is impossible to 'unsay' what has been said I did offer all the teachers in my research the opportunity to withdraw anything they had said at any time. I was never asked to do this though teachers often returned to issues we had discussed to elaborate on what they had said and to ensure I had fully understood their meanings.

#### To tape record or not?

Structured interviews which use pre-coded categories allow the researcher to record replies in written form reasonably quickly and easily. However, the very flexibility and freedom entailed in unstructured interviews makes such written recording problematical since replies are likely to be lengthy and complex. For this reason I decided to tape record the interviews, where teachers agreed, rather than to try and make notes during the interview or immediately afterwards. The notes I did keep related to the conduct of the interview; how I felt it had gone, any points not evident in the recording which I wanted to record. I also felt that note taking during the interview could prove distracting and/or disconcerting to interviewees since it would be only natural for them to speculate on its content. Interviewees were also told that the tape recorder could be turned off at any point they wished.

There was another reason for feeling it was important to tape record. In informal, conversational interviews the interviewer plays a more active role therefore I felt it was important to have my contributions recorded too in order to consider the role of the interviewer in the process. It would also have been difficult to concentrate on what the participants were saying, to ask for more detail where appropriate, to return to an earlier point, to respond to questions asked, while at the same time making a written account of the interview.

The initial introduction of the tape recorder inevitably introduced a degree of 'formality' to the situation which I would have preferred not to have been there. However, as the interviews usually continued for an hour, or longer, the respondents soon seemed to forget its presence. I used the longest tapes available so as to avoid, wherever possible, having to turn the tape over and so draw attention back to the tape recorder again. I'm sure taking notes would also have introduced a degree of formality to the situation, one which would have taken longer to overcome. On balance, I felt the benefits of taping strongly outweighed the drawbacks.

It is important to note that before tape recording began, and indeed afterwards, conversations took place. At the beginning it was often 'small talk' about the weather, my journey and events that had happened that day. Often, at the end of sessions when the tape recorder had been switched off, teachers would ask me more about the research and about what other teachers had said. Occasionally as I was going through the front

door interesting material would be forthcoming. If I felt it would be useful I asked the teacher if, though unrecorded, I might use it.

All informants gave their permission to be tape recorded. The interviews were then transcribed with the exception of one, the very first, where the poor quality of the recording made this impossible. (I quickly learned the importance of good, reliable equipment.) In this case I made notes of the interview and sent it to the teacher for validation. Successive interviews enabled issues to be returned to for elaboration or clarification as well as enabling new areas to be discussed.

In total 96 hours of taped interview were collected which required approximately 300 hours to transcribe.

### Analysis and writing up

The large amount of time needed for transcribing had the advantage of allowing me to become very familiar with the data. Ongoing analysis throughout the interview period (Easter 1996 - August 1997) identified emerging themes and issues to be discussed in future interviews. The transcripts were coded using themes arising from the interview data. The interviews followed a common pattern beginning with an account of how the respondents came to be teachers and early years teachers in particular and how their careers had developed. I had identified two further areas that I wished to talk about with the teachers; how they saw their work, and how they experienced their work. These issues tended to arise naturally in our conversations but where they did not I introduced them into the dialogue at whatever point seemed most appropriate. Each teacher's story

developed from 'the gathered data involving recursive movements from the data to an emerging thematic plot' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.16). The 'emerging plot' was developed as new data was found to either support or challenge the ongoing analysis.

Researchers have differed in the degree to which they have edited, ordered and reassembled narrative material. - - - On the one hand, there are 'naturalistic' first person life histories where most of the actual published life history is in the words of the individual subject, perhaps with a brief introduction by the researcher, providing background detail and context and possibly a conclusion. Second, there are thematically edited first person life histories where the words of the subject are retained intact, but where the researcher has presented them in terms of a series of themes, topics or headings, usually in a chapter by chapter form. Third, there are what might be described as interpreted and edited life stories where the influence of the researcher is most marked since the researcher sifts, distils, edits and interprets the words of the subject and, although retaining the feel and authenticity of the subject's words, presents a written version of the life story, sometimes making use of extensive first person accounts to tie the researcher's text together (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989, p.187/188).

My approach identified categories in the interview data and used these themes as an organisational structure for writing up the research.

I have intentionally made extensive use of the spoken comments of my participants in telling their stories. Their words are reproduced as they said them and no attempt has been made to make them fit the requirements of written language. Of course, it is impossible to 'reproduce' exactly the spoken word in written form. Any transcript of speech loses, for example, the pauses, hesitations, inflexions, emphases and intonations which are a feature of the spoken word. I have retained teachers' original words because a 'tidied up' version would lose something of the individuality and authentic feel of the original transcripts. Therefore, it is important that readers bear in mind the differences between spoken language and written language, and particularly written language such as this thesis which has gone through several drafts, and take into account that the quotations from teachers were originally spoken and not written. During conversations we all from time to time hesitate, lose the thread and repeat ourselves. When written down this may reflect negatively upon the speakers making them appear less than eloquent at times. This is certainly not my intention. As Skeggs (1994) notes:

I became aware of how, when interspersing the young women's spoken comments into my academic writing, they were made to sound authentic and simple. This juxtaposition, which is about the distinction between written and oral communication, reproduced the divisions between us (p.86).

The spoken language included in this thesis should be considered in the light of the linguistic conventions that apply to speech, not those applicable to written language.



(Quotations from the fourteen participating teachers are italicised, other quotations are not.)

In life history the interviewee is seen as a subject creating her/his own history and interpretation of it, rather than as an object of research. In our conversations teachers frequently offered their own interpretations of events and experiences. For example, Karen's account of a change of job to work with a pre-school team came with her interpretation of why it appealed to her:

*- - - and of course the other lovely thing about that job was that it was working not just with children but with families and so in a sense all my old latent desires of working in a social work sense if you like, of working in families and so on and being a family support worker were all part of that job. (Karen)*

Occasionally, and equally valuable, a teacher would comment that they found it difficult to interpret some experience or emotion. For example, when I talked with Karen about why she enjoyed working with young children she replied:

*I just, I don't know, I don't think that I've ever articulated that but I just quite like young children. (Karen)*

While I valued and took account of the teachers' own interpretations it is important to point out that the final interpretation is my own. Several teachers accepted the offer to receive and comment upon transcripts of interviews. Whilst I had indicated that I would welcome any comments relating to the interviews and their work the feedback on the transcripts was limited to teachers responding to verify the contents. I also sent a summary of my developing analysis to those teachers who indicated an interest. Again the response was to confirm the accuracy of the picture of early years teaching I was painting. I feel from my discussions with teachers that this was because they identified with the account I was giving. However, it must be noted that these teachers already had great demands upon their time which may have influenced the degree to which they were able to respond.

#### Interviewee Profiles ( at the time of the interviews)

##### **Mati**

Early years trained. 14 years teaching experience: 2 years nursery, 1 year with Minority Group Support Service, 1 year with Year1\ reception, 9 years with nursery\reception. Currently a nursery teacher. Aged 36.

##### **Helen**

Junior (Key Stage 2) trained. 17 years teaching experience: 2 years with Year 2, 1 year with reception, 2 years teaching juniors, 1 year supply teaching 3-11 year olds. Moved

to independent sector; 6 years teaching Year 1. Currently deputy principal/head of lower school teaching reception children. Aged 43.

### **Judith**

Junior (Key Stage 2) trained. 13 years teaching experience: 1 term teaching juniors, 2 terms teaching infants, 5 years teaching infants, 2 years as a mathematics advisory teacher, 5 years teaching infants. Currently teaching reception and deputy head of recently amalgamated infant and junior school. Aged 44. Previous careers in hairdressing and secretarial work.

### **Diane**

Early years trained. 17 years teaching experience: 12 years as a nursery teacher (1 in private nursery), 1 year supply teaching (mainly nursery but some reception, infant and junior), 4 years as a tutor on nursery nurse training course. Currently deputy head of inner city nursery centre teaching nursery children. Aged 42.

### **Dave**

Early years trained. Newly qualified, reception teacher. Aged 22.

### **Susan**

Early years trained. 20 years teaching experience with nursery/infants: 6 years teaching full time, 14 years part-time. Currently job sharing a Year 2 class. Also teaches a child care course for adults. Aged 43.

**Karen**

Secondary trained. 19 years experience: 2 years secondary teaching, 2 years home teaching (part-time with secondary children), 5 years with the pre-school service, 10 years as a nursery teacher. Currently teaching nursery children. Aged 45.

**Alison**

Primary trained. 20 years teaching experience, mostly with reception but had recently changed to teach in the nursery. Aged 48. Previous career working in art museums.

**Anne**

Early years trained. 23 years teaching experience, mostly nursery and reception with some experience of Year 1. Currently teaching reception. Aged 44.

**Sheila**

Early years trained. 6 years full time teaching experience with infants (reception, Year 1 and Year 2). Currently working part time following birth of her first baby. At time of interview had just left full time reception position to work across infants providing curriculum support time for other teachers. Aged 28.

**Pauline**

Junior (Key Stage 2) trained. 32 years teaching experience. Moved to present school 9 years ago: first 8 years teaching nursery; now in reception. In Spring 1997 applied for early retirement. Aged 52.

**Carol**

Early years trained. 5 years teaching experience. Currently job sharing a Year 1 class.

Aged 38. Previous careers as a dietician and in adult education

**Paul**

Secondary trained. 7 years teaching experience, currently teaching part-time as a reception teacher. Aged 29.

**Marie**

Early years trained. 3 years teaching experience with Year 1 children. Aged 36.

Previous careers in graphics and nursing and work as an educational assistant in schools.

### **Early Years Teaching: Historical and Contemporary Contexts**

This chapter provides an historical and contemporary context for the teachers' stories that follow. Their accounts of what it is like to be an early years teacher in the 1990's and the ways in which they conceptualise and experience their work need to be considered in the light of these past and present contexts. I begin by considering the low status attributed to early years teaching and early years teachers and examine the reasons which account for this situation. I then discuss the historical background of early years education and its implications for early years teachers today before finally addressing the current context in which early years teachers work in the 1990's.

#### The status of early years teaching and its practitioners.

In teaching, women are, and always have been, engaged in those areas of teaching which are of lesser status. As Deem (1978) notes:

Since the nineteenth century women teachers have traditionally engaged in teaching at a lower level and with younger pupils than have men

teachers, - - - they have been differentially rewarded financially and in terms of status, as compared to their male colleagues (p.109).

The position of men in teaching is markedly different:

In each branch of teaching men tend to rise to the higher positions, and the higher status of the area the more marked is the male dominance (Bradley, 1989, p.203).

While men are more likely to be found teaching older children they are also more likely than women to hold positions of power. While the teaching profession continues to attract more women than men, women teachers are rarely the profession's decision makers and in teacher training, school management and local education administration women are continually marginalised (De Lyon and Widdowson-Migniuolo, 1989).

In the professional hierarchy of teaching, the status of early years teaching, and early years teachers, is low, based on the notion that 'the older and more able the pupils, the greater the skill required of the teachers' (Aspinwall and Drummond, 1989, p.13).

Pascal and Bertram's (1993) comparative study of early childhood education in Europe found that working with young children was viewed as a low status activity in all the countries they studied. They report:

Teachers of young children generally had less training, less pay and less visibility than teachers of other age phases. Indeed, it was often hard to identify someone at senior level who had responsibility for, or even an interest in, the education of young children (p.51).

I have identified four main reasons to account for the low status of early years education and its teachers. Whilst they are presented here separately, for ease of presentation and as a framework for comprehension, they are closely interrelated.

#### Early years teaching is women's work

Firstly, early years education is work done mostly by women and women's work has traditionally been accorded less status than men's work. Almost all early years teachers are women and as Murgatroyd (1982) points out, women's work is considered somehow inferior or of less status simply because it is women who do it (cited in Acker 1989). Smedley (1994) makes the same association, arguing that 'while primary education is a women's domain and culture, as such it is low in people's reckoning' (p.45/46).

#### The clients

Secondly, early years teachers work with young children. On the whole, professionals who work with children rank lower than those who work with adults (Little, 1993) and 'public disdain exists for people who want to spend the day with young children' (Biklen, 1985, p.215). Smith (1994) details the roles and responsibilities of the nursery teacher and goes on to make the point that if nursery teachers had similar levels of



responsibility in industry or commerce, but were dealing with large groups of adults rather than children, then their salaries and status would be much higher.

### Early years teaching is conceptualised as unintellectual

Thirdly, the status of teachers across the world tends to rise with the increasing age of those taught (Little, 1993). This results from the view that teaching young children, because it is often seen as little more than an extension of mothering, is less intellectually demanding than work with older students. Teaching older children, work deemed more intellectual, is highly regarded by society and accorded greater status. Steedman (1988) highlights the way in which conceptualising teaching as mothering denies the intellectual demands of such work:

The precise virtue of the mother made conscious is that she doesn't have to be very clever: feeling, intuition, sympathy and empathy is all (p.160).

Often personal characteristics, rather than intellectual capability or professional competence, are considered to be of great importance for teachers of young children. McLean's (1991) study of early childhood texts of the 1970's and 1980's found an emphasis, for teachers of young children, on personal characteristics such as patience, friendliness, compassion, empathy, happiness and a sense of humour (cited in Smedley, 1996). The characteristics seen as being desirable for teachers working with young children are the very same attributes that our culture assigns to women. Skelton (1987) shows that Department of Education specifications, expectations of staff in training

institutions, and the perceptions of student teachers all emphasise so-called 'female' qualities as being necessary for primary teachers (cited by Aspinwall and Drummond, 1989).

There is a general perception that young children are 'easier' to teach. The former Conservative Government's proposal for a 'mum's army' to teach young children required only one-year, non-graduate training in comparison to the four year, graduate training currently existing for teachers of both young and older children. The proposal was later withdrawn because of the opposition it received; however, it indicated the Government of the day's belief that such a limited preparation was sufficient for those about to teach young children. When John Patten (1993), the Minister for Education at the time, outlined these proposals for nursery and Key Stage 1 teachers he described their job as 'more straight forward' than that of teaching older children.

Such limited perceptions of the demands of early years teaching are not restricted to Conservative governments. The belief that almost anyone can teach young children is reflected and perpetuated in a recent popular film, *Kindergarten Kop*. While there are many films featuring teachers of older children, *Kindergarten Kop* was exceptional for being set in an American elementary school. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a body builder and star of the Terminator films, plays John Kimble, a kindergarten teacher. Gamman and Marshment (1989) argue that men and women are offered society's dominant definitions of themselves through popular culture (cited in Weber and Mitchell, 1995). In the case of this film an untrained person with no experience is supposedly able to

substitute for the children's teacher. While real life teachers of young children are trained, qualified professionals, Kimble is able to walk into the classroom and take over.

While there is a general perception that young children are 'easier' to teach, those involved in early years education have long argued that because the early years are so formative the 'teachers of young children should, logically, be the elite of an elite profession' (Abbott, 1972, cited by Drummond in N.F.E.R., 1987, p.50). More recently, the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) pointed out that early years teaching is a 'demanding and a complex task' (para.146) and argued that its practitioners should be given appropriate status. (The ways in which early years teachers experience the perceptions others have of their work is examined in Chapter 5.)

I have argued that teaching older children is accorded higher status than teaching younger children and that it is generally regarded by society as being more intellectually demanding. Central to this (misguided) belief is the way in which we view knowledge. In contrast to teachers of older children who specialise in particular subject areas, teachers of young children are generalists teaching across a range of curriculum areas. Their knowledge and understanding of early childhood development is not regarded as a specialism nor valued as highly as specialist subject knowledge. (The ways in which academic knowledge are conceptualised are considered in more detail on pages 96-98.) Gammage (1995) points out that many people believe that the training of early years teachers 'lacks the prestige of a purer discipline' (p.99).

The recent introduction of the National Curriculum with its subject base has further strengthened the status of subject knowledge and, as a consequence, is likely to have further marginalised early years teachers. It is important to recognise that the terms 'specialist' and 'generalist' are not value-free. As Thornton (1995) argues, 'in current educational discourse the status and professional ability of early years teachers has been effectively undermined by the appropriation of the label 'specialist' to refer only to subject specialists (p.5).

#### Early years teaching and its association with caring

Fourthly, work involving caring and nurturing is not highly valued in our society. One only has to look at the position of mothers and those working with the elderly, to see how work involving caring is undervalued.

Care's absence from our core social and political values reflects many choices society has made about what to honour (Tronto, 1993, cited by Thompson, 1997, p.35).

The teaching of young children, because it is strongly associated with a caring, nurturing role, is undervalued and accorded low status. Care is a 'central but devalued aspect of human life. ... Because our society does not notice the importance of care and the moral quality of its practice, we devalue the work and contributions of women and other disempowered groups who care in this society' ( Tronto, 1993, cited by Thompson 1997, p.35).

A further element of this commitment to care for children is the lack of consideration early years teachers often accord to themselves. Campbell et al (1992) highlight what they see as the 'over-conscientiousness' of many primary teachers. Their study of the effects of the introduction of the National Curriculum, and its assessment, highlighted the long working hours and stress many primary teachers experience and argued that this resulted from teachers' desire to do a good job for the children even if it was at the expense of themselves. Similarly, Nias (1995) shows that teachers' moral commitment to care for children often results in them neglecting their own well being, failing to see and respond to the early physical and emotional symptoms of stress. Nias suggests that the gendered nature of primary teaching and the formation historically of primary teachers' identities upon a conception of motherhood may explain this. This concern with the children rather than with themselves may go some way to explain early years teachers' lack of challenge over uninformed views about their work and stereotypical ideas about their roles. However, Siraj-Blatchford (1993) points out that 'while many early years teachers may have resigned themselves to not having a powerful voice, many are also angry about their increasingly muted status' (p.22).

Thus, the attributes traditionally associated both with women, and work with young children are those that are valued less highly by society. In combination they mean that early years teaching, and its teachers, are attributed low status and are marginalized because 'women, children and the family dwell in the ontological basement outside and underneath the political structure' (Steedman 1988, p.89). The low status of early years teachers is a reflection of the position of women and children in our society.

### The historical dimension

Early years teaching has a history which influences how that work is conceptualised today, both by its practitioners and others. The following account examines the historical background of early years teaching, its implications for how early years teachers are perceived today, and explores the development of a cultural stereotype which presumes that the care and education of young children is a low status task demanding qualities possessed by women alone. Such a stereotype has implications for how early years teachers view and experience their work and for the expectations and perceptions that other people have of them and the work they do. I argue that the current discourse of what it is to be a teacher of young children has its origins in the early development of nursery/infant education in Britain. Current perceptions of early years teachers, and their perceptions of themselves, are rooted in this historical background, and particularly in the history of women's working lives during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rapid expansion of public education during this time resulted in increasing numbers of women joining the teaching profession. However, then as now, women teachers were not to be found equally distributed throughout all sectors of education. As teaching became 'feminised' (Bradley, 1989) women teachers became increasingly associated with the teaching of younger children and early years teaching came to be seen as women's work.

### The feminisation of teaching

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the balance between men and women in the teaching profession changed radically. As public education expanded

more and more women were recruited and increasingly teaching became the province of women. According to Tropp's study (1952) of the teaching profession, the majority of teachers in the first half of the nineteenth century were men, however by 1851 the Census records twice as many women teachers as men [71,966 to 34,378] (Bradley, 1989). Holcombe (1973) calculates that between 1875 and 1914 women's employment in elementary teaching expanded by an amazing 862%. Whereas teaching had once been the province of men, now women came increasingly to dominate the profession. Clarke (1985) ascribes this striking reversal of figures not only to the economic necessity to recruit large numbers of teachers but also to certain societal shifts that were taking place at the time. In the latter part of the nineteenth century many middle class, single women moved into teaching and nursing as such work came to be seen as acceptable for middle class women. Prior to this, women teachers had come largely from the working classes as teaching was considered inappropriate for middle class women. Hellerstein et al (1981) argue that elementary school teaching was seen as compatible with the domestic destiny ascribed to women in Victorian ideology; for young women teaching was viewed as an apprenticeship to motherhood (women being expected to give up teaching on marriage). The middle class teacher could serve as a 'mother to her pupils, a model of Christian behaviour, and her house will be an example of domestic comfort and efficiency' (Widdowson, 1983, p.31). Teaching and nursing came to be viewed as suitable work for women because they were seen as 'carrying the domestic world into the public' and as such posed little threat to the existing social order (Vicinus 1985, p.15). This is important because it was the *extension* of women's private role into the public area which made their move into the workplace socially

acceptable. Teaching provided an independent income for many women as it came to be considered suitable employment for the middle classes and a step up for working class women (Widdowson, 1983). Thus, most of the earliest recruits to expanding public education system were women who 'came from backgrounds which offered women little chance of independence or of intellectual growth' (Miller, 1992, p.4). Miller goes on to argue that for this reason 'many of these women came to engage in 'political and cultural activities and were often responsible for the liberalising of pedagogy and for a broadening of the curriculum (Miller, 1992, p.4). There are echoes here of my own experiences as discussed in Chapter 1.

However, while the construction of teaching as an extension of women's private role enabled many women to move into the workplace, it was also problematic because 'it was tied in with an unintellectual view of the work and a view of teaching as essentially a domestic task' (Smedley 1996, p.16). As Vicinus points out:

In the long run an ideology based upon women's innate nature had benefits and liabilities that could not be foreseen during the early struggles to gain respect for single women's work (1985, p.15).

Conceptualising teaching as an extension of women's private role in the home, a role as a carer and a role employing her 'natural' abilities, created a problematic legacy for women teachers, especially for those working with the youngest children. Conceptualising teaching as 'natural' or 'instinctive' makes it possible to argue that its



practitioners require less training, less pay, and merit less status than others in work requiring specialist skills.

### Teaching of young children = women teachers?

While the expansion of elementary education in this country resulted in more and more women joining the teaching profession, they were not to be found equally distributed with men. Then, as now, the younger the children the more likely they were to be taught by women. Furthermore, men have always dominated the more powerful positions. Today women are more likely than men to be the teachers of young children and their roles are more frequently aligned to class teaching than the management of schools (Grant, 1989). Women teachers are rarely the profession's decision makers and in teacher training, school management and local education administration women are continually marginalised (De Lyon and Widdowson-Migniuolo, 1989).

The expansion of women's employment in teaching, however, placed them firmly within the lower ranks of the developing educational hierarchy (Bradley, 1989, p.207).

The rapid expansion of elementary education led not only to increasing numbers of women in teaching but also to their greater representation as teachers of the younger children. A clear pattern of segregation was developing according to the sex of the teacher. In elementary schools, infants' departments were staffed by women; women were permitted to teach boys up to Standard III, but higher classes for boys were taken

entirely by men (Bradley, 1989). The important thing about this pattern of employment is that it was linked to a view of differentiated capacities of men and women, a view which lingers on today. The Plowden Report (CACE, 1965) pointed out that the belief that women are better suited than men to work with younger children also influenced the allocation of classes within primary schools. It reported that 90% of teachers of first year juniors (now Year 3) were women as compared with 55% of the teachers of fourth year juniors (now Year 6). This could also be interpreted as representing the view that men are the most appropriate teachers of older children.

The Plowden Report further reported that there were only '97 *brave* men out of a total of 33,000 teachers' in infant schools (p.313, my emphasis), the choice of adjective denoting how unusual such a situation was thought to be. Thirty years later the percentage of men teaching in infant schools has increased only slightly. Statistics for January 1994 show women making up just under 98% (19,767) of qualified teachers working full time in infant schools, with 425 men making up just over 2% (DFE, 1994, cited in Smedley 1996). More recent statistics do not differentiate between teachers working at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2; however, they do show the numbers of men and women teachers in maintained nursery schools. In 1996 3.3% of nursery teacher were men (50) and 96.7% were women (1,460). These figures are provisional but show no significant differences to earlier years (DFEE, 1996) .

Men and women teachers are not equally distributed throughout schools and this arises from two views of the nature of the teaching task, views which have been present since

the beginnings of public schooling, assigning men and women different attributes as teachers which are in turn linked to ideas about male and female characteristics. These views were particularly strong in nineteenth century Britain but still persist today as exemplified in the concentration of women in nursery/infant teaching and the domination of men in the university sector. One of these views emphasises the link between teaching and child care and child bearing, seen as a female duty, and the other view of teaching was concerned with the acquisition and passing on of specialised knowledge, the male domain. Women became associated with the teaching of younger children because it was, and still is, thought that men and women possess different qualities and that those of women are most appropriate for early years teaching. Men have traditionally been regarded as the most appropriate teachers for older children, especially boys, and women for all young children. The following comments from an Education Officer for London County Council in 1919 illustrates attitudes towards men and women teachers at the time :

Men could not take the place of women in an infants' department or girls' school, nor could a woman look after the boys' organised games or bring the same experience as could men in the training of the boy's character which was as essential as the teaching of knowledge (1919 Report on Women in Industry, cited in Bradley, 1989, p.208).

The teaching unions too have played their part in perpetuating the notions of differing capabilities of men and women teachers. The National Association of Schoolmasters

(NAS) throughout the 1930's sought to protect the jobs of their male membership by arguing that men should be the family's wage earner. They campaigned against equal pay for women and against women teaching boys over seven (Oram, 1983) and in doing so suggested that women were not as capable as men teachers and best suited for teaching the youngest children. A report on Equal Pay (1945) illustrates this continued segregation of teaching role with women monopolising the teaching of young children:

For the very young children of either sex, woman, quo woman, is the best teacher, even though men of higher teaching qualifications may be available (cited in Bradley, 1989, p.211).

These historical connections between gender and job continue today. As Deem (1978) notes:

Maternalistic and pastoral roles are often played by women teachers and authoritarian roles by men teachers. Many primary schools implicitly recognise the similarity between their relationships and structure and that of the family, even referring to their organisation of pupils as 'family' groupings. Mothers are frequently seen as the model for teachers of young children and fathers seen as the model for teachers of older children (cited in Bradley, 1989, p.213).

The view that older children need more academic teaching, which women are seen as less suited to, and that older children are also more demanding in terms of behaviour, which again women are seen as less suited for, has proved remarkably persistent. Such views are held by children as well as adults. Stanworth's (1983) interviews with school children revealed that most felt that men were better teachers, using criteria ranging from better discipline to greater academic proficiency and knowledge of their subjects (cited in Bradley, 1989).

Thus, the way in which we conceptualise early years education today is influenced by its history. Over the years women have come to be regarded as the most appropriate teachers of young children, appropriate because of their 'natural', 'instinctive' qualities related to their role as mothers. Conceptualising early years teaching as an extension of mothering has resulted in it being considered less demanding than teaching older students. The very qualities which supposedly make women the most appropriate teachers of the young, care and nurturance, are, as noted earlier, least regarded by society. The following section examines the links between teaching and mothering.

#### 'Teacher as Mother': the developing discourse

The discourse which denotes the teaching of children as essentially an extension of women's domestic role includes the powerful metaphor of 'teacher as mother'. The way such metaphors operate is described by Smedley:

In debates about education the use of metaphor is one of the ways that long-established and often damaging associations are perpetuated and reinforced. In each case, a connection is made with a wider web of cultural understandings. ... This usually predetermines that rhetoric or metaphors will have a predictable impact as they tap into rich seams that are value-laden (Smedley, 1994, p.45/6).

Benn (1989) argues that there have always been two distinct teaching functions. The first, an extension of mothering, is reserved for women and the second, an extension of power and authority, is reserved for and guarded by men. Thus, women are positioned as passive, and nurturing is seen in opposition to power and authority. The teaching of young children has long been regarded as an extension of mothering. There is an assumption that the qualities associated with ideal mothers, traditional feminine qualities such as caring, serving, gentleness, patience and conforming, are those most suitable for teaching young children. The 1925 report on the training of teachers described elementary teaching as 'a field of effort for a young girl of average intellectual capacity and normal maternal instincts' (cited in Oram, 1989, p.22).

The assumption that the education of young children was women's province, an extension of their child rearing role in the private family sphere into the public sphere, was strengthened with the reorganisation of schools in the 1930's following the 1926 Hadow Report. This reorganisation resulted in schools becoming increasingly separated into junior and senior departments and led to an increasing distinction between the older

and younger children, and the kind of teaching they required (Oram,1987). On the whole it was regarded as more prestigious to teach older children, despite the emphasis of new educational theories on the importance of the earlier years and the reorganisation lent added prestige to teachers in senior schools (Oram, 1987). The Hadow Report of 1933 on nursery and infant schools proposed the use of girls of 15 to 18 years olds as classroom helpers. As Oram points out:

These policies were detrimental to the status of all women teachers because they implied that the work of teaching younger children was not sufficiently difficult or important to require proper professional qualifications and training. The Board of Education itself referred to this class of teacher as the 'motherly person' type of teacher, suggesting that gender characteristics were more important than training for the work. Lyrical comments on the 'natural' maternal gifts of infant teachers abounded (p.115).

The conceptualisation of early years teaching as a version of mothering has its origins in the historical development of nursery/infant education. Steedman argues that 'the dictum - that the ideal teacher of young children is like a 'mother made conscious' - is Freidrich Froebel's, the founder of the kindergarten system' (Steedman, 1988, p.82). Froebel rejected the severity and formality of the school system that was emerging at the time in favour of an approach founded on a close study of children's natural development, a 'child-centred' or 'nurturant' model of education. Froebel's observations

of mothers interacting with their own children resulted in maternal practice becoming the foundation for educational practice with young children. Steedman describes how the dissemination of Froebel's ideas, from the early publicity of the 1850's to his establishment in many modern textbooks of educational thought as a key figure in the development of child-centred education, demonstrates one way in which the feminine, particularly the delineation of teaching as a conscious and articulated version of mothering, has been established within educational thought.

Ideas about teachers as mothers began to enter the state system just before the first World War. 'Treat each child as if he were your own' was the advice of the McMillan sisters (cited by Steedman 1988, p.82). Byrne (1978) suggests that teaching young children has been regarded as women's work for so long that it is seen as a natural occupation for them and has acquired 'an aura of in-born gifts and external maternity that seems ineradicable' (cited in Aspinwall and Drummond, 1989, p.14).

There are difficulties arising from the conceptualisation of teaching as a version of mothering. Firstly, mothering is considered low status work. It is unpaid and little valued by society and as Casey points out 'outside of the unpaid domestic sphere, mothering will be variously described as inefficient, sentimental, or destructive' (Casey, 1990, p.303). The low status ascribed to mothering becomes associated with the teaching of young children when early years teachers are seen as 'mothers'. As Smedley argues:



Positioned as women and nurturers, women have been and are deemed suited to teaching, and are inserted into a discourse where they operate within a pastoral, supportive and responsible role. And these are important aspects of the teacher's roles but they are not widely valued or respected (p.46).

Secondly, linking teaching to mothering suggests that teachers require only those 'natural' skills that mothering is thought to involve. As such it detracts from all the other tasks involved in early years teaching and the professional role of early years teachers. As a result, the complex, demanding and difficult job of ensuring the promotion of all aspects of children's development is seen as relatively easy for women, and satisfying in itself. Teaching, like mothering, is a question of 'doing what comes naturally' (Aspinwall and Drummond 1989) and as Oram (1989) points out linking teaching to women's roles as mothers and nurturers means that the younger the children involved the more apt is the woman's place as their teacher. Steedman (1988) argues that linking teaching to mothering, an activity that is culturally construed as 'natural' and 'instinctive', can be used to justify the low levels of skills, professional status, resources and pay attributed to primary teaching. Aspinwall and Drummond (1989) quote the following Guardian article to illustrate the way in which the job of teaching young children is misunderstood and undervalued:

Little is asked of a five year old save learning to share his toys and eat his lunch in a civilised fashion - - - We could save about half the number of

full time reception class teachers or even more if we accept that a highly trained teacher is not essential for this age group but could be replaced by a not so expensive nursery assistant working under supervision (Dobbin, 1986, cited by Aspinwall and Drummond, 1989, p.16).

Burgess and Carter (1992) found students in Initial Primary Teacher Training distancing the intellectual from the teaching of young children. Although only a small pilot study the students involved described experienced teachers as having a greater knowledge of children than student teachers and this 'knowledge was thought of in terms of 'intuition, caring, knowing and vocationalism and not a consequence of an intellectual approach towards teaching' (p.351). Burgess and Carter argue that initial training not only fails to challenge the mother made conscious discourse of primary education and its associated gender consequences but actually reproduces and extends the notion of teacher as mother by failing to address these issues.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that all teachers feel comfortable with the dominant discourses. A study by Casey (1993) highlights the way in which 'teacher as mother' is redefined and resisted by some women teachers. Her conversations with teachers in North Carolina show how some women teachers describe their work as 'a form of political responsibility, not domestic duty' (p.306).

I am not suggesting that teachers of young children should distance themselves from the nurturing part of their work in order to enhance their status, rather that such caring

roles, including that of mothering, should be accorded greater status. As Freedman (1987) argues:

Rather than encouraging teachers to block their moral and nurturing sensibilities in regard to children and their families, the schools should seek to extend this way of thinking beyond the confines of the presently prescribed circle of care, the nuclear family, or its mirror image in the school, the individual classroom (p.81).

Not only has the feminisation of teaching and women's growing association with teaching young children left a legacy for early years teachers today in terms of the way they and their work is viewed but the development of the early nursery/infant schools also influences the way we conceive of such work today.

#### The beginnings of nursery/infant education in Britain.

The aims and purposes of the early nursery and infant schools, and the qualities thought necessary for teachers in those schools, have created a legacy for early years education today. In the first half of the nineteenth century schooling for working class children was provided largely through charitable foundations (most notably the National Society and the British and Foreign Schools' Society) and private fee paying schools, and was by no means universal. As Smith (1994) points out:

By the middle of the century (19th) about one in eleven (working class) children received some form of education in elementary or Sunday schools, often of dubious quality. Most children were denied any education, since they were expected to become economically productive at an early age and contribute to the family income (p.2).

Gardner (1984) shows how some working class parents, despite financial pressures, managed to find the school pence necessary to send their children to their own private schools. Digby and Searby (1981) argue that these schools, because they were 'lacking the regulations as to dress, appearance and attendance imposed by church schools, and without their air of charitable condescension and repressive social discipline', were much more acceptable to working class communities (p.5).

As the 19th century progressed there was a growing interest in providing greater public education for the working classes, so much so that by the end of the nineteenth century there were over 5 million children attending public elementary schools (Digby and Searby, 1981).

The virtual demise of private elementary schooling was accomplished by the growth of increasingly subsidised (and eventually free) public education in the next half century (second half of nineteenth century) (Digby and Searby, 1981 p.5).

Clark (1985) argues that the sudden interest in infant education in the 1820's needs to be seen in the light of the developing ideology of the family at this time. Ideally, the child's place was at 'home, under the parental eye and safe from the dangers of the public domain' (p.75). However, because the demands of working class life mitigated against this ideal it was thought preferable to gather these children together in properly conducted schools rather than let them roam the streets. In other words, the first consideration of infant schooling was to provide a safe place for children off the streets, often while mothers went out to work in the rapidly developing factories. There was also concern for the physical condition of such children, their poor health, lack of cleanliness and inadequate clothing. Smith (1994) argues that our present arrangements for the under fives retains this initial aim:

The involvement of the state, whether through health, education or social services, has tended to be on a selective basis, and has promoted a policy of protection from harm rather than one of widely available, publicly funded, high-quality provision as a right for young children (p.1).

It is worth noting that the public elementary schools were provided for the children of the working classes, children from middle class and aristocratic parents usually attended their own 'public' schools or were taught by tutors at home. Digby and Searby (1981) describe the officials of the Education Board (founded in 1839) as 'middle-class Oxbridge graduates chosen by patronage, (who) felt no quickening bond of sympathy

with schools for an inferior class; it would not have crossed their mind to send their own children there' (p.9).

Historically, the provision of early years schooling in Britain was based on a perceived need to ameliorate the adverse conditions of working class children in deprived urban areas. Arising from middle class conceptualisations of family life, and the perceived inadequacy of the working classes to live up to this model, nursery/infant education during this time sought to 'compensate' for these deficiencies. From the beginning nursery/infant education (and it can be argued therefore all public education) aimed to 'compensate' for the children's home backgrounds:

Teachers for their part were to be 'moral entrepreneurs', 'missionaries', saving the working classes 'from the worst excesses of themselves' (Grace, 1978, p.2).

The belief that education should be 'compensatory' has continued into the present century. It was exemplified in the Plowden Report (1967) with its 'educational priority areas' and King (1978) pointed out the difficulties some middle class teachers have when presented with working class children to teach.

## Issues of social control

It has to be said that this interest in nursery/infant education was not entirely philanthropic. There were economic reasons for providing such schooling. It enabled more women to work in the rapidly increasing factories and mills.

By this means many of you, mothers of families, will be enabled to earn a better maintenance or support for your children; you will have less care and anxiety about them (Speech by Owen in 1816 for the opening of the Institution for the Formation of Character, cited by Rusk, 1967, p.130).

Additionally, nursery/infant education, deriving as it did from middle class charity, was not solely concerned with the interests of the poor and working classes. It served to inculcate middle class values in the working classes and acted as a means of social control over that class. As Bergen (1988) points out it was aimed specifically at the lower classes and while purporting to serve their needs clearly protected middle class interests. The concentration of large numbers of working-class people in the rapidly expanding cities of the early nineteenth century posed a social and political threat to the ruling class and education was seen as a solution.

The transition from a rural and agrarian to an urban, industrialised economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had produced deep strains and stresses within society (Digby and Searby, 1981, p.23).

The emphasis placed upon character formation can be seen as a way of ensuring social harmony and control (Clarke, 1985, p.74/5). The preparatory or training schools which children attended from the age of three were 'intended to prevent them acquiring bad habits, to give them good ones, and to form their dispositions to mutual kindness' (Owen's evidence to Lord Brougham's Commission on the Education of the Lower Orders, 1816, cited by Rusk, 1967, p.131). As Tawney wrote:

The elementary schools of 1870 were intended in the main to produce an orderly, civil, obedient population with sufficient education to understand a command (cited by Simon, 1965, p119).

### A basic education

We do not profess to give these children an education that will raise them above their station and business in life: that is not our object, but to give them an education that will fit them for that business (Robert Lowe during the 1862 debates on the Revised Code following the Newcastle Commission Report of 1861, cited in Tropp, 1952, p89).

The infant school movement argued against a concentration on the intellect, its aim being to mould the character of the child by encouraging certain habits of behaviour. Wilderspin defined these habits as obedience, cheerful subordination, cleanliness and order, characteristics which were 'equally desirable in the future working class' (Clarke



1985, p. 79). While the early nursery/infant schools were concerned to develop in children 'appropriate' behaviours they were less committed to developing children's intellect. Education for working class children beyond basic instruction literacy and numeracy was considered dangerous as it might lead to social unrest. Education preserved the status quo, it 'fitted' people for their position in life and so different types of education were considered appropriate for children from different classes.

Elementary education - - - must have a curriculum sufficient to ensure a meagre literacy and be suited solely to the lower classes - hence, in an elitist age, it must be entirely unconnected with the ruling class (Musgrave, 1968, p.61).

This had also been true of the earlier Dame schools:

Indeed, neither parents nor teachers seem to consider this (instruction) as the principal object in sending the children to these schools, but generally say that they go there in order to be taken care of and to be out of the way at home (The Manchester Statistical Society describing, and objecting to Manchester's Dame Schools, cited by Clarke, 1985, p.83).

The purposes of these first nursery/infant schools with their emphasis on social and moral training and their limited educational provision had implications for the qualities thought necessary in the teachers who worked in them.

### Teachers in the first nursery/infant schools.

There are strong similarities between the discourses of early years education in the nineteenth century and those at the end of the twentieth century. Robert Owen is credited with opening the first nursery/infant school in Britain in 1816. Situated in New Lanark, Scotland, the school served children from age three to about five or six in the preparatory or training school. The children then progressed to the superior school until they were ten. The first nursery/infant school in England opened in 1819 at Brewer's Green, Westminster and was quickly followed by the opening of a number of others in London and elsewhere (Clarke, 1985). James Buchanan, who had come from Robert Owen's pioneering infant school in New Lanark, Scotland, was its master. The following quotation indicates the qualities Robert Owen thought appropriate for the staff he appointed to his new nursery/infant school in Scotland:

I had to seek among the population for two persons who had a great love for and unlimited patience with infants, and who were thoroughly tractable and willing unreservedly to follow my instructions. The best to my mind in these respects that I could find in the population of the village, was a poor, simple-hearted weaver, named James Buchanan, who had been previously trained by his wife to perfect submission to her will - - - But he loved children strongly by nature and his patience with them was inexhaustible. - - - Thus the simple-minded, kind-hearted James Buchanan, who at first could scarcely read, write or spell, became

the first master in a rational infant school (Owen, cited by Rusk, 1967, p.132\3).

Teachers of young children were thought to need a love of children, patience and passivity. They did not need to be well educated. Then, as now, the teaching of young children was not considered to be intellectually challenging and academic rigour was viewed as incompatible with the teaching of young children. As the Reverend Mitchell made clear:

If an infant-mistress has learnt to write fairly and read well, the first four rules of arithmetic, and ordinary geography, and has a fair amount of Scriptural knowledge, with a power of illustration by drawing, her intellectual education is sufficient. - - - A healthy frame, a good voice, a kindly, firm disposition, a graceful air, a pleasing manner, tidiness of person, and sound common sense, are the necessary qualifications of one undertaking this task (Mitchell, 1855, cited by Rusk, 1967, p. 176).

The characteristics thought appropriate for teachers of young children by both Owen and the Reverend Mitchell are remarkably similar to today's stereotype of early years teachers:

Because the stereotype of early years teachers and what they do, is this:  
nice, co-operative or compliant, eager to please, devoted, ever-smiling,

not a high flier academically and very sensible. And eternally patient of course (Smedley, 1996, p.11).

Note that Owen was seeking two people for his school, a man to head the school and a woman, often a wife or sister, to assist. Initially, the masters of these infant schools were all men, and they were also the authors of texts on infant education. Women were not thought capable of presiding over a school. Wilderspin, a leading proponent in the infant school movement believed that women lacked the authority over children and the intelligence necessary to run a school (Clarke, 1985). As noted earlier, the sexual division of labour in teaching, which is still apparent today, can be traced back to the beginnings of public education and beyond.

Thus, the historical development of elementary education in England leaves a legacy for early years teaching and its teachers today. The ways in which we conceptualise early years education are strongly influenced by its history. The history of early years education reveals the characteristics which have come to be associated with such work, characteristics thought to be 'natural' for women. Regarding women as the most appropriate teachers of the young, and appropriate because of their 'natural', 'instinctive' qualities results in early years teaching being regarded as less intellectually challenging, less academic, than teaching in other sectors of education. And the very qualities which are supposed to make women the most appropriate teachers of the young, those relating to care and nurturance, are those least regarded in our society.

## Official and Unofficial histories

The preceding account of the historical development of early years education during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries draws upon the written literature relating to that period and provides what might be deemed an ‘official’ history. However, before moving on to discuss the contemporary context in which early years teachers work, I want to consider briefly an ‘alternative’ or ‘unofficial’ history, a history which has largely been lost to us but which some researchers have been taking an interest in over recent years (see, for example, Widdowson, 1983). Robinson (in press) introduces us to the life and career of Sarah Bannister. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Sarah Bannister was an influential teacher trainer and school inspector. Robinson argues that the educational contributions of women like Sarah Bannister have been ignored by writers:

This sadly neglected artefact (an oil portrait) provides a fitting historical metaphor for Sarah Bannister and many other women like her, who were once much esteemed by those whose lives they touched in their professional and public capacities, but who have since been largely forgotten and overlooked in official local or educational histories (Robinson, in press).

For the purposes of my research the ‘official’ history is important because, as argued earlier, it influences the ways in which early years teaching and its teachers have come to be conceptualised. However, Sarah Bannister’s story, and others, are also important

because they often question the homogeneity of official accounts and challenge existing discourses and stereotypes.

Sarah Bannister's long career, while noteworthy in itself, presents an illuminating exemplar not only of how important aspects of late nineteenth - and early twentieth century elementary teacher training were honed and refined but also how they offered ambitious women teachers excellent opportunities for enhanced professional development. This challenges many of the traditional, negative historical representations of women elementary teachers (Robinson, in press).

Not only was Sarah Bannister influential in the development of teacher training but she was also active in promoting the careers, opportunities and conditions of women teachers generally:

Sarah Bannister clearly identified herself both professionally and personally with women teachers and talked in zealous terms of a crusade to elevate and improve their work and status (Robinson, in press).

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's (1980) autobiographical story provides another example of a practical woman with a powerful educational vision. Her account, subtitled 'The Testament of an Inspired Teacher', argued for a creative, organic way of teaching and one which respected the cultural heritage of Maori children. Ashton-Warner's

progressive approach to the education of young children could so easily have become another untold story. She qualified as a teacher in 1928 and began “her creative educational work in 1937 ..... she estimates that her part in this, with the infant groups, lasted twenty-four years” (Russell, 1980, introduction). However, her account of her work found no publisher until 1963, and then not in her own country but in the United States.

These individual stories, stories of real women teachers, serve to remind us that the 'official' history is only one version of the 'truth', a version in which women often remain hidden. As Robinson (in press) writes:

Individual woman teachers as unique individuals with specific personal and domestic as well as professional circumstances, remain fairly elusive, shadowy figures to the educational historian.

Early years teachers today inherit an historical legacy which also includes those women teachers who made significant educational contributions but whose stories remain untold or little known.

## Contemporary context

The previous section considered the historical context to early years teaching and the implications of that history for early years teachers today. This section addresses the contemporary context in which early years teachers work and in particular the recent educational reforms following the 1988 Education Reform Act. Current understandings and theories on teachers' careers are also reviewed and related to this research.

### The recent educational reforms of nursery and primary education.

There have been a number of recent developments and rapid changes in the British educational system which have had great impact upon early years teachers. Importantly, these reforms have been imposed, through state legislation, upon teachers with almost no consultation. Consequently while some teachers may be in agreement with the changes others may consider them inappropriate. Inevitably, the fact that teachers are required by law to implement these changes means that their professional freedom and autonomy is curtailed. Prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum teachers in England and Wales enjoyed considerable autonomy over what, and how, they taught in the classroom, an autonomy which has been greatly reduced.

In contrast to highly centralised and controlled systems of state schooling in other socio-political contexts, the decentralised autonomy of British teachers with respect to curriculum selection and pedagogic methods was



taken to be a distinctive feature of British democracy and schooling  
(Grace, 1987, p. 212).

Denis Lawton has described the period from the 1944 Education Act until the 1960's as 'the Golden Age of teacher control (or non-control) of the curriculum' (1980, p.22). During this period many early years teachers developed, practised and advocated a particular style of pedagogy often referred to as 'child-centred' pedagogy, a pedagogy given new impetus by the Plowden Report in 1967. An examination of the literature about early years pedagogy highlights four basic principles; child-centredness, the role of experience in learning, the integration of the curriculum and a process approach to learning. The Plowden Report gave recognition to such practices, practices which many schools and teachers had been developing for some time, though the school world Plowden described and advocated was not a reality everywhere. Marriott's (1985) analysis of the Plowden Report's data found:

At most, only schools in Categories 1 and 2, 10% of all schools, could be described as having achieved all or most of the Committee's recommendations, with perhaps Category 3, 23% of schools, being well on the way, and another somewhat indeterminate proportion showing some promise (cited by Hunter and Schreider, 1988, p.7).

The early eighties saw progressive education coming under increasing criticism (Alexander 1984). A public perception of falling standards and concern over our ability to compete in international markets resulted in the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The relative freedom enjoyed by teachers in England and Wales in the post-war years was seen to be curtailed and replaced in the 1990's by rigid State prescription (Helsby and McCulloch, 1996, p.59).

The centrally prescribed National Curriculum and its associated assessment practices were clearly in opposition to much early years practice as described above. As already noted, the child-centred approach is the dominant ideology of early years education. While the Government's stated aims for the National Curriculum were to raise standards through the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum others have regarded the reforms as a direct attack upon 'progressive' pedagogy. Brehony (1990) claims that the National Curriculum 'is likely to push primary schools in a direction diametrically opposed to that of Plowden' and argues that it was introduced to overturn progressive pedagogic traditions. Furthermore, Osborn and Broadfoot (1992) point out the threat to this child-centred pedagogy from the subject based National Curriculum as a potentially demoralising factor for teachers (cited in Evans et al, 1994).

Although the National Curriculum does not apply to children under five this sector did not escape its effects and many early years teachers have felt the impact of the recent government initiatives. Sylva et al's (1992) research on the effects of the National

Curriculum on nursery practice found the most cited drawback in nurseries was the pressure placed on both teachers and children to achieve, followed by a lessening on learning through play (cited by Siraj-Blatchford, 1993). Teachers working with the under-fives felt the downward pressure of the reforms and the recent introduction of the standards expected of children about to enter compulsory education (Desirable Outcomes, 1996) has extended the National Curriculum downwards. Arguing that the National Curriculum is not developmentally appropriate Hurst (1994) says:

The downward pressure of the National Curriculum affects both infant education and the pre-school services - - - this malign influence extends into the pre-school area, where practitioners are under pressure to formalise their curriculum (p.58).

Blenkin and Kelly (1994) agree:

Taking, as it does, models of teaching and of learning which are derived from a view of what happens in secondary schools or in higher or further education, it imposes those models on a sector of education where massive research evidence shows them to be unsuitable (p.198).

Government pressure for a return to more formal teaching methods and more whole class teaching is keenly felt by early years teachers and the recent numeracy and literacy

initiatives threaten the integrated day favoured by many early years teachers by introducing a more timetabled organisation.

The subject basis of the National Curriculum causes difficulties for many early years teachers whose approach to the curriculum is more cross curricular. They object to the imposition of inert bodies of knowledge and the premature introduction of 'formal, rule governed ways of making sense to people who have no use for them' (Gura, 1996, p.151). Defining the National Curriculum in subject terms was little questioned but as Kelly and Blenkin point out :

Subjects are, after all, the products of the academic community and members of this community have had time and experience to shape and redefine human understanding within their own sphere of interest. This redefined experience, however, is a long way from the personal, social and cultural experiences that children bring to their classrooms (cited in Campbell, 1993, p.59).

Lawton (1993) argues that the National Curriculum was devised in conventional subject terms, as opposed to, for example, the HMI Entitlement Curriculum Model based on 'areas of experience', because to MPs the latter 'was unfamiliar and looked suspiciously like 'educational theory'- an increasingly taboo subject' (p.65). Kelly (1990) argues that the National Curriculum imposes an alien requirement on the primary school curriculum to adapt to the subject frame of the secondary school and beyond that to the

requirements of the economy, what Blyth (1965) identified as the preparatory tradition in primary schooling. In contrast, much primary practice and theory followed the developmental tradition which concentrated on the developmental needs of the child rather than the needs of society or the next school stage. This developmental tradition has provided the foundation for contemporary definitions of 'good practice', especially in the early years of primary education (Campbell, 1993, p.18).

The inappropriateness of the National Curriculum for young children surfaced again with the introduction of the nursery vouchers scheme. Since the early 1980's many Local Education Authorities had increasingly adopted policies of admitting four year olds to reception classes in primary schools, though legally the children were not required to attend until they were five years old. Whilst the voucher scheme was cancelled by the succeeding Labour government in May 1997 its short life resulted in more four year olds entering reception classes as schools attempted to protect their funding. Several research studies (Pugh 1996, Siraj-Blatchford 1996, Pascal 1990, David 1990) have highlighted concerns about admitting four year olds into school. These include the appropriacy of the curriculum for these young children, the appropriateness of staff qualifications and training, and the appropriateness and adequacy of resources available.

Overall, the educational changes over recent years indicate a lack of understanding by policy makers about early years philosophy and practice. Additionally, Campbell et al (1992) found that the implementation of the Education Reform Act had led to

increasing job dissatisfaction amongst primary teachers. Teachers felt that the time they were able to spend with children was being reduced, while the time they spent away from the children on training, planning and meetings was increasing. As a result they were losing the very thing they had entered teaching for and, as Nias (1989) shows, the area of the job from which they derived greatest job satisfaction, their contact with children. Siraj-Blatchford (1993) argues that:

The ill-conceived and hasty imposition of a National Curriculum and its associated assessment and reporting requirements have denied early years teachers their most prized possession, the very ground upon which their professional identity has been formed, their perceptions of autonomy (p.395).

### Women's ways of conceptualising teaching

The view of learning implicit in the National Curriculum is very different to that held by many early years teachers. One explanation for this disjunction is that in the main the policy makers are men while the practitioners are women. Radical feminist writers argue that men have constructed an educational system which oppresses women largely through the way academic knowledge is generated and taught, what Spender (1989) defines as the patriarchal paradigm of education. Grumet (1988) argues that schooling is based upon men's ways of looking at the world and as such denies women's important ways of knowing. She cites the way in which the 'emotional' is largely written out of

schooling and argues that the way men construct schooling can be seen in such things as age segregated classes, subject divisions and competition. As MacInnis (1994) tells us:

The only acceptable public dialogue to date has been the one dominated by forms of knowledge which exclude the feminine voice (p7).

Martin (1985) has also pointed out that our concepts of education are based upon masculine traits of objectivity, rationality and analysis as opposed to the more feminine traits associated with caring, connectedness and nurturance. She considers the latter to be equally important to society and argues for a redefinition of our educational model to include both the reproductive (female) and productive (male) processes (cited in MacInnis). Spender (1989) argues that women's experiences are denied visibility in course content and teaching methods or are interpreted through male eyes. Educational institutions, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels, are structured on the basis of academic disciplines with hierarchical patterns of organisation (Acker, 1989). In comparison, the pedagogy associated with infant and pre-school education allows for greater flexibility in timetabling, integration of curriculum subjects and a less rigid mode of assessment than the pedagogy associated with secondary and tertiary education (Bernstein 1975, cited in Acker 1989). Bernstein points out that the sectors of education with more child-centred pedagogies occur where women predominate and have the lowest status in the teaching profession. The sectors where men have traditionally predominated, secondary and tertiary, are more bureaucratically organised and have higher status. Here teachers generally have less flexibility in what they teach, when and

how to teach it, and methods of assessment are more focused. The introduction of the National Curriculum can be seen as introducing more 'masculine' ways of working in primary schools. It has undoubtedly conflicted with the beliefs and working practices of many early years teachers who are almost all women. Without an acceptance of women's understandings status will automatically be given to 'male' values (Grumet, 1988). While women's ways of knowing are undervalued and often excluded from both the practice and theory of education it is unlikely that qualities such as caring and nurturing will achieve greater status.

Miller (1996) argues that the recent educational policy changes and legislation may be seen as a response to the feminisation of teaching, a fear of the influence women have had and continue to have upon teaching. Miller contends that criticism of teachers must be interpreted as attacks upon a largely female work force and that criticism of current educational practice often has gender as its hidden target. Such criticism is of areas most associated with women, teaching the young and teaching English, sectors associated with a more liberal pedagogy. As noted earlier Miller (1992) attributes many women teachers' desires to liberalise pedagogy to the historical development of teaching. As the expansion of public education offered young women, initially from working class backgrounds and later from the lower middle classes, opportunities for both independence and intellectual growth many became politically aware and active.

A history of the last one hundred and twenty years or so reveals a recurring pattern of utopian ambitions amongst mainly women teachers



for their working class pupils, alternating with periods like the one we are currently living through when a barrage of criticism is addressed at what are seen as the 'soft' centres of education. 'Basics' and a stiffening of standards will be opposed to a presumed laxness. Frugality will replace prodigality. 'Pleasure' becomes a word which has no place in education, and all that is 'hard', 'difficult', 'demanding' will be set against the 'informal', the 'progressive' and the 'popular'. Above all learning for its own sake will be disparaged in the name of both vocationalism and value for money (Miller, 1992, p.5).

There is a paradox here. Women are designated as the most appropriate teachers of the young, they are considered ideally suited to the role. However, while their 'natural' qualities make them best suited for the role they are criticised for the work they do.

There is, first, the natural rapport with children, the intuition of the woman primary teacher: properties, indeed, which justify her overwhelming presence in classrooms filled with young children. Yet within Government regulatory policies, another kind of 'common-sense' is able to transform those 'natural teacherly talents' into 'new-fangled', 'progressive' and insufficiently rigorous or consistent practices, requiring the attention of outsiders (men, for the most part), who become, for this purpose, the repositories of common-sense, intuition and a natural and traditional concern for the nation's children (Miller, 1996, p.17).

## The Changing Role of the Teacher

The role society expects teachers to perform, and the role teachers envisage for themselves, is not fixed. Our recent lack of Olympic success was greeted with calls for teachers to focus more on children's sporting development. Similarly, recurring moral panics lead to calls for schools to ensure pupils know the difference between right and wrong. Stewart (1986) describes how primary teachers' roles have expanded beyond classroom interaction to include such responsibilities as child welfare, record-keeping, consultation with colleagues, equality initiatives, community contact, computer literacy, in-service courses and children with special needs (cited by Acker in Delamont, 1987).

Campbell (1997) concurs:

There is increasing pressure on schools, and therefore on teachers, to take on ever-widening scope or range of activities, in addition to the task of teaching or instructing pupils. Increasingly, in modern societies teachers are expected to be concerned with the social and moral dimensions of pupil's lives, with welfare matters, with health, and the pupils' communities. We might characterise it as a shift away from being expected to take responsibility only or mainly for instructing pupils to being expected to be a teacher, cum secretary, cum liaison officer, cum social worker, cum community liaison officer, cum paramedic, cum priest (p.25).

As Nias (1997) says:

One way and another, in the course of the last two centuries it has become customary to assume that primary teachers will willingly accept responsibility for all aspects of children's welfare and development (p.53).

Recent Government changes to education have further changed the role of primary teachers. They are now more accountable, have greater responsibility for delivering a National Curriculum and for assessing, recording and reporting children's progress. Additionally, the National Curriculum takes little account of the affective dimension of learning, an important area for all teachers, and especially for teachers of young children. As Kelly argues:

It has been claimed (Eisner,1982) that traditional forms of education in the Western world have discounted the affective aspects of experience and have thus been limited and diminished in that they have ignored a number of the forms of representation he has posited as essential to full cognitive functioning. Yet it must be pointed out that it is exactly those affective aspects of education which are at risk in a curriculum whose core consists of technologically useful subjects, which is fundamentally instrumental and which is to be assessed by forms of testing that are likely to emphasise the more simplistic and readily measurable aspects of learning (Kelly, 1990, p.93).

### The early years teacher's role: To care or to educate?

When teachers talk about their work two themes repeatedly surface (Nias, 1989; Cortazzi, 1991; Evetts 1990). One is a concern for children's social, physical and emotional well being, the other is concern for their learning and development. Many writers and practitioners see the role of early years teachers as one of caring for all areas of a child's development. Children's cognitive and their social and emotional development are seen as interrelated. Barbara Tatton writes:

You often can't fulfil a moral responsibility for pupils learning, that is teach them, if those children are unhappy, asocial, or neglected in a personal sense as these areas are foundations upon which intellectual development needs to be built (p.76).

However, Campbell (1997) questions the increasing number of areas primary teachers are expected to, and are prepared to, take responsibility for and argues that teachers should concentrate on children's cognitive development while non-teaching staff take responsibility for other areas of children's development. Woodhead (1995) is equally dismissive of teachers' concern for children's social and emotional development and makes clear what he believes education should be about:

I believe we have a deep responsibility to be crystal clear about the true ends of education. Have we really come to a situation where the received wisdom is that knowledge is unimportant? Are 'personal and

interpersonal skills' (whatever they might be) so important that there is no room for the knowledge that I, for one deem so important? (cited by Alexander, 1997, p.87).

I have argued that the introduction of the National Curriculum and its associated practices have presented challenges to early years pedagogy, in particular to child-centredness, the role of experience in learning, the integration of the curriculum and a process approach to learning. The pressure to raise standards through greater accountability, publication of league tables and OFSTED reports, has resulted in a downward pressure on the early years sector. The National Curriculum itself can be viewed as a model of education based upon secondary education and imposed inappropriately upon the early years sector. I have also acknowledged the changing, and broad, role of the early years teacher, and considered competing conceptualisations of the role of the early years teacher. (The fourteen teachers views and experiences of these issues are analysed and discussed in Chapter 5.) The following section provides an overview of the research evidence on teachers' careers in order to provide a context for the individual stories that follow.

### Teachers' careers

Hughes (1937, cited by Evetts, 1990) described two dimensions of the career. The 'objective' dimension is based upon a concept of career which regards career advancement as an unbroken, linear progression, a series of upward moves, a career ladder to be climbed. The 'subjective' dimension involves individuals' own

perspectives towards their careers, their perceptions of what constitutes career success for them and progression is not necessarily seen as a smooth, linear development involving promotion and increased responsibilities. For some teachers, success may mean becoming an excellent classroom teacher, or successfully balancing both home and work, rather than success in promotional terms. For example, Nias (1989) found older women teachers creating satisfying careers by developing roles which enabled them to influence their colleagues without becoming head teachers.

Focusing on how people actually experience their work and their careers, subjective careers are not just an orderly and regular progression up through a series of posts arranged in a hierarchy of increasing prestige, reward and responsibility. The subjective career focuses on individuals' experiences: how they see problems and possibilities, how they cope with and negotiate constraints and make use of opportunities; what influences, key events, turning points, decisions and so on are involved (Evetts, 1990, p.11).

It is important to keep both the objective and the subjective dimensions in mind when analysing and discussing teachers' career experiences. A teacher may view their career in 'objective' terms at one stage in their life while seeing it in more 'subjective' terms at another and a career may have both subjective and objective elements operating together.

Teachers' careers may be influenced by many factors, personal and professional. Evetts (1990) shows how women teachers' careers are not developed in professional isolation but are strongly interwoven with their personal and family lives. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that careers are not necessarily planned in advance. While some teachers may plan their futures, Acker's (1994) study of two English primary schools indicates that career plans are provisional and changeable, especially, but not exclusively, for women. Such career plans are tentative and may be influenced by the unforeseen events that happen to us all and which, for better or for worse, affect our plans (if in fact we ever made any). For example, an unexpected house move, a chance meeting or an illness may play their part in a teacher's career development. Thus, teachers' careers are influenced by personal factors, planned and unplanned events.

Teachers' careers are also influenced by wider societal factors as well as personal and family ones. The contexts in which teachers live and work, for example political, social, geographical, economic and demographic conditions, play their part, for better or for worse, in the ways teachers' careers unfold (Ball and Goodson, 1985; Sikes, Measor and Woods 1985). As Acker (1989) indicates:

Demographic changes resulting in falling or rising school roles; social changes in the acceptability of married women and mothers working outside the home; the age structure of teachers or academics now in post (a consequence of earlier social event), political decisions about expansion or contraction of certain curriculum subjects or extension of

education to younger or older children or adults -- all these produce what feel like historical accidents to individuals who are relatively advantaged or disadvantaged by their operation (p.9).

At various times the educational system can be seen to be either in contraction and expansion. During the 1960's and early 70's the increased birth rate and general mood of political and economic optimism resulted in the educational system undergoing a period of growth. In the 1980s and 90's this situation was replaced by one of contraction (Ball and Goodson, 1985). Falling pupil numbers and a reduction in economic prosperity led to the amalgamation or closure of some schools. Fewer schools mean that fewer headships and promoted posts become available to teachers wanting promotion. Between 1970 and 1988 the number of maintained primary schools fell from 23,060 to 19,319 (Evetts 1990, based on DES statistics).

Studies of career therefore need to represent individual experience, a person's choices (and constraints) within this wider structural context. The changes resulting from the Education Reform Act (1988), in terms of the nature of teachers' work and their working conditions, may well influence the way men and women teachers view their careers. Already there has been some difficulty in filling headship vacancies and this may well reflect teachers' response to the changed nature of the head's role. Classroom teachers struggling to meet the demands made upon them (see, for example, Campbell and Neill, 1992 ) may well dismiss the idea of taking on further commitments through promotion.



Furthermore, as Acker (1994) argues, it is important to recognise that individuals negotiating their way through the complexities of occupational, social and historical structures do not possess equal life chances.

For those belonging to particular groups there are blockages and barriers making their passage more difficult. Individuals possess different currencies (qualifications, length and type of experience, subject specialities) but their probabilities of holding these depend on their class, sex, race, age and other identifications and memberships (p.19).

### Gender differences

In early years teaching, where women teachers significantly outnumber men, gender is an important factor in career development. In 1987 women teachers accounted for 79% of all primary teachers. In infant and nursery schools the figures rise to 98% and 99% respectively, with women teachers dominating to the almost total exclusion of men (DES, in Evetts 1990). However, while women dominate in numbers in primary schools they do not do so in terms of promoted posts. There are significant differences in the extent to which men achieve primary headships compared to women. In 1996 women teachers comprised 82.5% of teachers in maintained nursery and primary schools with men making up the remaining 17.5%. Despite their numerical superiority only 7.5 of the women were headteachers compared with 30.7% of the men (DFEE, 1997, provisional

figures). As Strober and Tyack (1980) remark, women teach and men manage (cited in Acker, 1994).

Traditionally, women have been more likely to be headteachers of separate infant and nursery schools, and men headteachers of junior and primary schools. In addition, men and women often achieve primary headship in different ways. Evetts (1990) found that while men generally move from deputy headship to become the head of a primary school, most women primary heads hold an infant headship, or headship of a small rural primary school first. The route to primary headship via an infant school headship is not one men tend to follow. Thus, women are very dependent upon the number of separate infant schools for promotional opportunities. The recent moves to amalgamate infant and junior schools under one primary head may prove detrimental for women teachers' headship opportunities.

Traditional explanations use women's family responsibilities to explain their under representation in promoted posts. One of the major obstacles for women seeking promotion is the career break (De Lyon and Mignuiolo, 1989). In a promotional structure which values length of uninterrupted service women find themselves at a disadvantage compared to men. Research indicates that such breaks have a negative effect upon career achievement (Grant, 1987). Returners are likely to forfeit any previous promotional gains on re-entering teaching (Grant, 1989) and the break often occurs at a critical time in career terms, when teachers are most likely to be seeking promotion (National Union of Teachers, 1980). Such breaks also have implications for

women because of the age-related norms associated with promotion, in effect an unofficial age bar operates (Grant, 1987).

However, not all women teachers take career breaks and the time taken for career breaks varies. Women teachers may not be away from teaching for long periods of time and Evetts' study (1990), although only based on twenty-five women heads, found that most of them had kept in touch with teaching through part time or supply teaching or through their involvement in playgroups to such an extent that they were not anxious about their ability to do the job on returning to full time teaching. For some of the women in Evetts' study, the break actually increased their self-confidence and they felt the time spent with their own families had added to their understanding of young children. Evetts' research was based upon the experiences of women before the changes relating to the Education Reform Act (1988). It is possible to speculate that these changes, the increased demands made upon teachers in terms of time, responsibilities and keeping abreast of new initiatives, might make returning to teaching after a break more difficult for teachers today.

Traditional explanations for women's under representation in promoted posts have been challenged by writers such as Acker (1987, 1989, 1994), Evetts (1990), Grant (1987, 1989), and De Lyon and Mignuiolo (1989). Their work questions the stereotyped assumptions that men have higher career motivation than women and that they plan their careers more systematically than do women. They ask why women with full professional and family lives are deemed unsuitable for promotion when it could be

argued that they have demonstrated, in their personal lives, the very organisational and managerial skills necessary for such posts.

Particularly damaging to women has been the assumption that family commitments necessarily reduce their commitment to teaching. However, a study by the National Union of Teachers (NUT, 1980) demonstrates that not all women teachers are married, not all women teachers have children and that even for women with families the assumption that they could not combine both roles is totally unsupported by evidence. One could equally argue that a woman with family commitments who takes on a teaching post is showing strong commitment to her job. Eighteen years on from that NUT study I see no reason to suggest the situation would be any different.

While family responsibilities may be seen as a disadvantage for women, because they are viewed as potentially unreliable workers, men with family commitments are likely to be seen as being even more committed to their work because of their need to support a family. Thus, while 'men's domestic responsibilities are 'approved', women's are viewed with suspicion' (Grant, 1987, p.237). Grant argues that because of traditional role expectations and responsibilities (particularly responsibility for child care) it is inappropriate to expect women to adopt a single minded approach to career advancement. There are likely to be times in women's careers when they become more or less ambitious:

The concept of aspiration levels as a static and objective measure of career intentions which differentiates ambitious teachers from the rest is built on male norms and experiences and serves further to dislocate women from the promotional process (Grant, 1989, p.41).

However, Sikes found that men teachers may also adapt their views about career on becoming parents, that they were 'less concerned to pursue promotion' (1997, p.44). It is also possible that women's aspiration levels in teaching are 'little more than a reflection of the current situation, shaped by normative influences and further reinforced by lack of personal success' (Grant, 1987, p. 231). Women tend to be blamed for the factors hindering their promotional opportunities; they take career breaks, they are not as ambitious or committed as men, and they are unreliable. Feminist researchers argue that these are not the fault of women, but 'the fault of their relationship with men in the sexual division of labour, and to the manner in which capitalist societies organise and reward productive and non-productive work' (Deem, 1978, p.116).

Acker (1994) complains that sociologists, when writing of men, show an acute awareness of the social constraints upon their actions. However, when writing about women they frequently switch to psychological or biological levels of explanation, ignoring the structural obstacles in women's lives and blaming the victim. For example, equating teacher non-militancy with the conservatism of women teachers and by explaining the under-representation of women in school headships by women's lack of ambition. Acker (1994) argues that much of the literature on women teachers' careers is

based on an ideology of individual choice and neglects consideration of constraints at anything but a familial level. It often takes male experience as the norm against which women teachers are unfavourably compared and studies of women teachers frequently resort to unsubstantiated assumptions about their deficiencies. The stereotype of a married woman who shows a half-hearted interest in teaching while getting on with her family responsibilities is so powerful an image that it appears to have prevented sociologists from making the sexual division of labour in teaching problematic (Acker, 1994).

Finally, the power to promote usually resides with men. It is possible that the qualities and attributes promoters are looking for in candidates are those traditionally associated with men (Grant 1987). For example, interviewing panels may consider men to be more suited to headship because they are perceived to be stronger disciplinarians, or because the qualities associated with management are stereotypically attributed to men. When most secondary and junior school heads are men the image of how a headteacher looks and behaves is powerfully male in the minds of those responsible for appointments and society at large (Grant, 1989). Furthermore, governing bodies now have increased powers when appointing staff and their awareness of equal opportunity issues will be a factor in determining application outcomes.

In summary, Part One has argued that early years teachers' biographies are influential for the ways they conceptualise and experience their work as teachers of young children. I have used my own life history and the relevant literature to show how the

‘personal’ has significance for the ‘professional’, for the kind of teachers we become. This is true not only for how we see our work and operate in the classroom, but also for areas like career development. The significance of our past histories, ‘personal time’, is one of three time scales influencing the lives, work and careers of early years teachers in the 1990’s. I have also emphasised the importance of the history of early years teaching, ‘historical time’, and discussed the historical legacy all teachers of young children inherit. The association of women with the teaching of young children has implications for how early years teachers themselves experience their work and for how society views such work. Thirdly, there is ‘contemporary’ time. I have examined the current context in which early years teachers work and in particular the educational changes resulting from the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) to argue that recent reforms pose challenges to the preferred practice of many early years teachers.

Finally, I have shown how my chosen methodology, life history, is well placed to study both the meaning early years teaching has for its practitioners, and for acknowledging the contemporary contexts in which these teachers work. Part Two uses the life histories of fourteen early years teachers to show how these theoretical accounts of personal, historical and contemporary time translate into real lived experience, and to show what being an early years teacher means to these fourteen people.

## **PART 2**

### **Findings**



## Introduction

As noted earlier there has been very little descriptive work which describes, from an insider's point of view, what it is like to be an early years teacher. This research has sought to begin to address this lacuna and the following chapters discuss the experiences, perceptions, and understandings fourteen early years teachers have of their work. The findings are reported thematically and extracts from the teachers' life histories are used extensively to inform the discussion around these key substantive themes, themes which are derived from the transcript data.

The names of teachers and schools have been changed to safeguard anonymity.

### A Note on Transcription

As noted earlier, spoken language has its own rules and conventions and these are different to those of the written word. This makes it difficult to use punctuation when writing talk down on paper. I have therefore only included punctuation symbols where I felt them to be useful to the reader's understanding of the text. Full stops indicate the end of a sentence (as far as it is possible to judge). A row of dashes (- - -) indicates that a section of text has been omitted and a row of dots (.....) indicates an unfinished sentence.

### **Becoming an early years teacher and career journeys**

This chapter focuses on how fourteen individual people came to be early years teachers. It examines their motives for becoming teachers and the factors identified by them as having influenced their career choices. A few of these fourteen teachers had always wanted to teach young children but for the majority the move into early years teaching can be seen as a pragmatic one. I explore their various routes into early years teaching and then consider their career pathways. Whilst each individual story of becoming a teacher is unique, I have in my analysis looked for commonalities as well as for differences.

I have chosen to begin with my findings relating to how and why people become teachers for two reasons. Firstly, I feel it aids comprehension to take a chronological approach and begin at the start of the participants' teaching careers. Secondly, the discussion provides another context, in addition to the historical and contemporary ones provided earlier, for the teachers' stories in the sections that follow.

## **Becoming a teacher**

While all fourteen participants were teaching children under seven years of age at the time of interview, and some had been involved with this age group for considerable periods of time, not all had initially intended to teach young children. Indeed, several teachers described their original decision to teach as a pragmatic one, they had ‘drifted’ (Broadfoot and Osborn, 1993) into teaching as a career rather than making a positive choice. For these teachers the decision to teach did not result from a lifelong ambition and this is important because at the time of interview all of the teachers spoke about their work with great commitment and enthusiasm. (Their growing ‘identification’ with early years teaching is considered on page 149/150.) Others had originally started their careers teaching older children and later moved to work in the early years sector. I therefore decided to explore their various routes into early years teaching.

Not everyone becomes a teacher because of a life long ambition to do so. As Karen and Susan testify, the decision to teach can result from the lack of other possible alternatives. Neither had any intentions of going into teaching when they went to university:

*Well, actually even teaching was an accident because I couldn't think of anything else to do. I went to university to do an English degree, ended up doing English and Theology joint with no intention whatsoever of going into teaching and it came towards the end of the degree and I still hadn't a clue what to do. I'd always quite favoured social work but at*

*the time didn't think that I was tough enough somehow. So I didn't do social work and so I thought well I'll try teaching instead. It was not with any great um, commitment or enthusiasm I have to say, it just seemed like an idea. It was a drift in. (Karen)*

*I mean I didn't intend to go into teaching at all, necessarily. I had a year before going to university and one of the jobs that I had was working in a playgroup, which I enjoyed but no more than any of the other jobs that I had. And then I went to university and did an English degree and then I don't, I can't remember a very conscious decision. (Susan)*

Pauline chose to use the word 'drift' to describe her route into teaching and Diane used the word 'default'. Their comments indicate the varying degrees of commitment individuals had to teaching initially:

*I suppose I'm not a very good example because I can't really remember why we do go into it, into these professions, you know into the caring professions other than that I got there really by default. (Diane)*

*And I'd always liked children so I thought you know I'll have a go at this, but I wasn't desperate to be a teacher. I think there was a bit of drifting into it. (Pauline)*

Others had made more positive choices to teach young children. Mati and Anne had considered little else:

*Yeah, all through school I sort of wanted to work with children so I was either going to be a nursery nurse or a teacher. (Mati)*

*I mean I think I said to start with that it was, it was the job I really always wanted to do, was teaching the younger ones so it was a straight forward going through the college system and straight into teaching without this year off or anything like that and straight into, well it was nursery teaching so I've always been in nursery, reception or year 1 apart from you know some of the teaching practices where we had to go to another year, age group which I enjoyed but it just reinforced the fact that I wanted to be with younger ones. (Anne)*

Anne spoke with disapproval of those entering teaching who were not committed to the work:

*I had friends at school who went to teacher training college without having any interest whatsoever in teaching which I felt was quite awful, but then you realise later that an awful lot of people had done that, or had gone because they hadn't got the qualifications to go to university or they hadn't known what to do. (Anne)*

Sheila's story is more complicated. She had made an early commitment to teaching:

*Well, my mum's a teacher so ever since I was about 5 or 6 I played schools and thought yes that's what I want to do, I really want to be a teacher. And for years and years that's what I wanted, to be a teacher.*  
(Sheila)

However, she later changed her mind in favour of doing business studies. Sheila described how, through her grammar school experiences, she became aware of a perception of primary teaching as not being academically challenging and not wishing to be perceived in this way she decided upon business studies instead. However, she intended to retain the option of becoming a teacher by doing a one year postgraduate qualification following her degree.

*And I got to 15 and the grammar school I went to didn't push that idea (of being a teacher). It almost seemed to be a second-rate career really I think, not seen to be like a lawyer or a doctor or a, nobody ever encouraged me to do it. When I changed my mind to business studies they didn't say well teaching is a valuable career, it's a good career. They didn't take me further on that route. And nobody else seemed to want to do it either and no teacher, teachers pushed it at all so I thought I'm not going to do that I'll do business studies. (Sheila)*

However, Sheila did not achieve the A level grades she needed for the business studies course so she returned to the idea of teaching. Her original 'vocational' motive had been replaced by a more pragmatic one. Sheila now talks with relief that the business studies option was curtailed. When I asked her if she thought she would have taken up the business studies option if her examination grades had allowed she replied:

*Yes, probably I would have done and probably hated it because now no way could I see myself doing business studies. (Sheila)*

It seems somewhat ironic that Sheila dismissed teaching because she became aware that it was not considered appropriate for those considered academically able only to return to it due to her own lack of examination success.

While some teachers had 'drifted' into teaching and others had made an early decision to teach, Helen made her decision to teach after considering and dismissing other alternative careers:

*I did consider taking languages and, also an avenue I did want to go down (physiotherapy) but working in the unit (physiotherapy) itself was fine it was when they took me onto the ward, and especially the children's ward and all these little children I decided I couldn't cope with it. But the actual work itself, the physiotherapy unit was brilliant, I really liked that. And then I thought I do something with languages and*

*perhaps go into, I don't know a tourist industry or an airline industry, some aspects. So they were avenues, sort of GCSE, O level year, that I had a look at. Teaching had always been in the back of my mind as something that I possibly would like to do but it was an avenue that was decided after I had written off these other two, which were the only other two I considered really. (Helen)*

Four of the early years teachers in this research had followed other careers before coming to teaching (Claire, Judith, Alison, and Theresa). The decision to leave one career and begin a new one as a teacher suggests a strong desire to teach and this is true of both Alison and Marie. Alison did a degree in Fine Art and worked for several years in museums before deciding upon a career move into teaching. Marie started off wanting to be a teacher and went to college to train as a secondary art teacher at eighteen but left before completing the first year. She then worked in a graphics studio and completed a graphics degree. Work as a part-time art lecturer, auxiliary nurse and educational assistant followed before Marie returned to teaching several years later via a one year primary postgraduate course.

Marie's religious beliefs and upbringing are an essential part of how she views teaching. She sees her return to teaching as something she was destined to do, a fulfilment of her true vocation. Lortie (1975) identifies 'service to society' as an important conception of teaching for many teachers and goes on to point out that within the Roman Catholic church teaching has long been an honoured vocation. As Marie explained to me:



*As Catholics we are brought up to believe our lives are mapped out for us, that Jesus has a plan for us. No matter what we do we'll end up down that road, which is what's happened to me isn't it? I was given that resting period to learn, to learn about people, to learn about life and then to come back and give it back to younger children, not older children. I do feel that I was meant to do it, very much so. I look on it as a vocation, although I don't look on it as taking over my life. (Marie)*

Judith, for whom teaching was a later career, drifted into teaching. She went to train as a teacher, with no intention of becoming a teacher, after working first as a hairdresser and then for the Inland Revenue. She saw the course as an opportunity for her to gain qualifications and as a route to a better job, though she had no clear idea of what this job might be. Jackson and Marsden (1968) document the drift of working class girls into teaching, not as the result so much of a desire to teach so much as the drive for qualifications.

*I went in to get a teaching qualification because it was the easiest way for me to get a degree, not that I wanted to be a teacher but I'd got this wonderful idea that if I went and got a degree I'd get a good job and because I'd got a young family there was a course in Birmingham that considered mature students. And also I'd only got 1 A level and you needed 2 A levels to go to a university and that was the consideration of the course, because you'd got life experiences as they called it. I can*

*remember an uncle of mine saying what are you going to do when you've finished this course and I can remember saying oh I don't know, I don't know. I don't particularly want to teach. (Judith)*

On qualifying Judith had still had not decided what to do and 'drifted' into teaching when nothing else materialised. Initially, she registered with the local education authority pools but there were few teaching jobs available and Judith returned on a temporary basis to her previous employment at the Inland Revenue. She was then asked to do some supply teaching which later resulted in a temporary and finally a permanent teaching position.

Carol decided to train as a teacher due to economic/institutional pressures. She had become dissatisfied with her work as a dietician because she felt it gave her little opportunity to exercise initiative and judgement and began working as an adult education tutor. Carol saw teaching as being more creative and offering greater opportunity for decision taking. However, Carol was not trained or qualified as a teacher when working as an adult education tutor and it was the insecure nature of adult education work that led her to apply to do a PGCE course. Carol did point out that she enjoyed working with children and would not have made the move into teaching young children purely for financial reasons, but she also felt she would have stayed in adult education had it offered more job security.

*As I say I enjoy working with young children, um and also for a degree of financial reasons, working in adult education doesn't have, or didn't have financial stability. So a mixture of reasons but as I say I wouldn't have gone in to it only for financial, sort of, financial stability. (Carol)*

The fourteen teachers in this research entered teaching with various degrees of commitment. Some had only ever wanted to teach while others drifted into teaching when nothing else materialised. The following section looks at the factors teachers identified as influencing their choice of career.

#### The decision to teach: factors influencing choice

In the teachers' accounts of how they came to be teachers were references to factors which influenced their decisions. Of particular importance are biographical experiences as they played an important role in these teachers' career choices. School and family experiences were frequently invoked in the descriptions of how these people came to be teachers.

#### Secondary schools - a) their expectations of pupils

Secondary schools and their expectations of pupils were frequently mentioned as being influential in the choice of career. Those who had attended grammar schools or schools with a reputation for academic excellence spoke of an expectation that they would go on to higher education, either university or teacher training college and not follow alternative choices:

*And our school, it was virtually a case of you were expected either to go to university or teacher training college and if you had any other options they didn't want to know. (Anne)*

*Well, I think it (career choice) was, it was limited by the type of school I was in. Because you were in a highly academic school it was expected that at eighteen you would go off and do further education in something. I mean it was the thing to do. You either went and did a pure subject at university or you went to teacher training college, it was nice for their statistics at the end of the academic year. (Helen)*

For Marie her thoughts of going to a polytechnic were frowned upon:

*So I thought of going and doing a foundation course from school, which I didn't know a lot about, and to go to a poly which was even worse, especially from a Catholic school, middle class origins. For the secondary school that was just awful, poly was definitely down there (points down with finger). Go to college or university and then you're all right. (Marie)*

Secondary schools - b) career advice provided.

Several of the women teachers were critical of the careers advice available at the time and the limited career options considered appropriate for them.

*Careers advice when I was at school was nil. You know we did have a careers teacher but he was there really to advise you which universities and colleges to apply to, because everybody in the grammar school stream went off to college or university. (Helen)*

*We did have a careers advisor but she doesn't sort of feature terribly heavily on my, as having an awful lot of, and somehow I got sort of tracked into becoming a dietician. (Carol)*

As I argued earlier teaching has been traditionally been associated with women. This is based on the assumption that women are best suited to look after children. Furthermore, teaching has also provided a means for working class people to move up a social class. Consequently, teaching is often promoted as a 'good job for a girl' (Sikes 1997, p.62). Pauline and Marie talked of the limited number of options considered appropriate careers when they were making their decisions (early 60's and early 70's respectively). No doubt in the late 1990's career options for women are less restricted. However, it remains true that the majority of teachers are women and that the younger the children the greater the number of women in proportion to men.

*- - - and in those days it was really teaching, being a secretary or being a nurse and that was, you know, about the choice. (Pauline)*

*It was either be a nun, a nurse or a teacher at my secondary school.*

*(Marie)*

### Secondary school - c) experiences of teachers and teaching

Many of the women teachers spoke of their school experiences in terms of the ways schools restricted or channelled their career opportunities. The assumption that teaching is a good career for a woman seems to be implicit, if not explicit, in their experiences. Paul and Dave however focused on the positive influence of specific classroom experiences or teachers. Paul recounted a pivotal experience at school, an event which he felt indicated that he had the qualities required by a teacher:

*I'll tell you what happened, thinking about it afterwards but with hindsight, at O level we had to present a talk, for 20% of the final mark you had to talk about something you were interested in and I happened to be very good at it, comparatively, and enjoyed it immensely and it was that point I think, retrospectively, where I thought yes that's great and this is what I'd like to do. (Paul)*

Dave describes his own school experiences as being influential in his decision to teach. At secondary school he was impressed by the teaching of one particular teacher. Dave spoke at length about her positive qualities, in comparison to many of the other teachers.

*But there was one teacher in particular who was a drama teacher, who came to the school, who was just very, very different I think and she was possibly my first, I don't know if she guided me into wanting to be a teacher but, I saw her as something very different and I had her up in awe, she was this wonderful person and wouldn't it be great if everyone was like this. And so I kind of got this idea about wanting to be a teacher, possibly from my experience of her, possibly from somewhere else (pause) I think more that I recognised there were a couple of good teachers and wanting to be like them. (Dave)*

### Teacher relatives

*Well, it was in our family, my mother was a teacher. So there was a bit of influence there, although no pressure on me at all. (Pauline)*

Family links with the teaching profession were frequently mentioned as a factor in deciding upon a career. Such links operated in different ways. For Sheila having a parent who was a teacher enabled her to experience first hand the work of an early years teacher:

*I think partly because my mum was a nursery school teacher so I'd been into help and read stories. I went in to help on so many occasions at mum's school and really enjoyed it. (Sheila)*

Diane's cousin was proactive in encouraging her to join the profession and in Theresa's case an elder sister who taught provided a positive role model.

*I had another, somebody else who was in the family, a cousin, who was in teaching and she worked at Welton Park at the time and she said, oh come and have a look, and it had not long been, well actually I'd come out of hospital so I was sort of, you know, really at this stage thinking well what am I going to do and where am I going to go. And she got me quite into the idea of doing home economics and going to be a home economics teacher. (Diane)*

*I applied to go to do teacher training for secondary specialising in art, art and craft. My eldest sister incidentally did this. She went off to college and she did her teacher training in art and then when I was fourteen she went to New Guinea. She got married and went to New Guinea to do VSO work and maybe part of it (choice of teaching) was that I wanted to be a little bit like my eldest sister who was a little bit elusive. (Marie)*

While for several teachers having teacher relatives provided a positive incentive to teach, or at least one that was not resisted, there was an exception. Judy's family association with teaching and their keenness for her to join its ranks initially had the opposite effect. Alison rejected family pressures to go into teaching and instead did a



degree in Fine Art and worked for several years in museums before moving into teaching. Alison sees her decision to teach as returning to a career she had really always wanted to do but had rebelled against due to family pressure:

*Well, I didn't go into teaching until, I've been teaching for 20 years, 1976. I went into it late. My parents were both teachers, my mother was an infant teacher and my father was a secondary teacher in London. All my aunts and uncles were teachers, both on my mother's and my father's side and I determined that I wasn't going to be a teacher because my mother wanted me to be a teacher very much. So I decided that I would go to art school and I've got an art degree. I really wanted to be a teacher all the time but I suppose I'd reacted against it because of my mother's pressure. (Alison)*

### Becoming parents

The ways in which parenthood affects the professional lives of teachers, as well as their personal lives, is explored by Sikes (1997). Sikes documents the ways in which the experience of parenthood imparts skills and understandings to parent teachers and which inform their roles as teachers. The experience of parenthood can also influence the very decision to become a teacher. For Marie and Alison, who both came to teaching after other careers, the experience of having their own children was acknowledged as influential in prompting the move into teaching.

*I got very involved in my, there's five years between the children and after I had the first child I became very involved in the area I live in setting up a playgroup and that's really what led me to thinking I ought to do a degree in and learn to be a proper teacher. (Alison)*

*Well, it was after I'd had Jessica, well and Lydia, not when they were babies, it was when they were getting older and I loved the way they saw things and the different way they could explain things to me. - - - And then when we went to toddler groups and playgroups and I got involved in there like, not nursery, pre-school groups, like the playgroup thing, I went and helped a couple of times but not a lot because I didn't want to hinder them but I really enjoyed that and I knew then that I would like to go and do teaching. So it was my own children that sort of made me feel that that was where I wanted to go rather than back to graphics because I got more of a feedback from that and I just love the way children see things. - - - So I'd say it was my own children who prompted me really. And my sister's children and my friends' children, but it was mainly my own. I do think it brought that to the fore. (Marie)*

### Compatibility with family life

The view that teaching fits in well with raising a family was mentioned by only two of my interviewees. Judith, who had not originally intended to teach when she attended

college, thought it might have influenced her decision to actually go into teaching once she had qualified:

*Now whether I was influenced by my children because my children were still in primary school and obviously they had to be considered. (Judith)*

While teaching's assumed compatibility with family life did not influence Helen's initial decision to teach she did see it as an advantage when she decided to return to teaching after a career break to have her own children.

*I didn't know how long I'd have out but I knew that teaching was a job, you know everyone tells you teaching is a good job for a mum because you know same holidays as the children and you can go back to it. (Helen)*

Teaching's presumed compatibility with family commitments is questionable today with the demands made upon teachers particularly following recent educational reforms. Teachers are now more accountable, they face curriculum and assessment changes, and work within limited budgets. The long hours worked by primary teachers, as evidenced by the Teaching as Work Project (Campbell et al. 1992), would seem unlikely to fit well with family commitments. There may be advantages in job flexibility; Susan, Carol, Sheila and Paul had all chosen part time working.

### 'Moving up a class'

As noted earlier, teaching has traditionally provided a way for working class people to gain qualifications and thus move up into the middle classes. This was the case for Paul, as it was for me:

*- - - what happens is that if you come from a working class background and you're the first generation, it's a classic one to go into teaching because that's where you are accepted, you wouldn't go into law and you wouldn't go into medicine or anything because these things you feel are, they're not quite for me, I'm not intelligent enough. Paul*

For Judith too, teacher training provided her with an opportunity to gain qualifications and thus a better job.

### Possessing the qualities needed for teaching

Paul was the only teacher to refer to the personal qualities/skills necessary to be good at teaching. It is possible that other participants also felt that they had characteristics that suited them to teaching but did not mention them, perhaps because it seemed obvious that people would chose careers that they felt they were equipped to do. Paul felt well-suited to teaching:

*I got into teaching because it's something which I've always innately felt that I can do, that I enjoy doing. I enjoy talking and performing and it*

*just seems to fit in very well with teaching, standing up and talking.*

*(Paul)*

### A worthwhile job

Paul also talked of seeing teaching as a way of doing a worthwhile job, a factor also raised by Karen, Carol and Marie.

*And I'm also I think, I think I'm a serious person in the sense I enjoy, I enjoy learning and I wouldn't have liked to have taken a job which was, for me, doing something which I don't consider as being that good, say going into manufacturing industry and producing bits of plastic or something. So I had to have a job which was a serious job and teaching seemed to fit in with that. (Paul)*

For Karen her own biography, particularly her religious upbringing, is significant in her choice of career:

*I'd always had a sort of, I come from a fairly religious background. I wasn't at that stage religious particularly personally but it is the, you used the word service which is a kind of old fashioned word isn't it but yes, that's part of my heritage if you like. So that's, there was, there is a sense that you were brought up to feel that there was something worthy*

*about doing a job to do with service and servicing people in their emotional needs and so on seemed the worthiest of all. (Karen)*

Carol had worked as a hospital dietician before becoming a teacher and both of these choices were influenced by a desire to be helpful to others:

*And I wanted a career that, I didn't have any sort of great burning career ideas but I wanted a career where I would actually be working to, sort of, vaguely helping other people and that was, I thought of a hospital type of environment. (Carol)*

For ease of presentation and comprehension the factors influencing career choice have been presented singularly. However, in real life it is rarely one factor alone that decides career choice. Marie's story indicates the ways in which various factors can combine to influence the final outcome. As noted earlier Marie first went to train as a teacher at eighteen and left before completing the first year. Four factors influenced Marie's initial decision to become a teacher; an older sister who was an art teacher, parental pressure, school expectations and notions of 'appropriate' careers. She also wanted to do something that involved her favourite subject, art. Underlying and intertwined with these factors are Marie's Catholic upbringing and schooling. Marie attributes that initial choice and its failure largely to parental pressure. She was not following her own desire to teach but fulfilling parental wishes:

*So I thought of going and doing a foundation course (in art) from school, which I didn't know a lot about, and to go to a poly which was even worse, especially from a Catholic school, middle class origins, for the secondary school that was just awful, poly was definitely down there (points down with finger). Go to college or university and then you're all right. I knew I wanted to do something with art, I knew that but there was no careers advice so the only thing I had to go on was what my sister had done, the art teaching. So I thought yeah I'll go and be an art teacher. Nothing else was ever suggested to me which is sad really isn't it. I wonder if I'd still be talking to you now if I'd have had that careers advice. It was either be a nun, a nurse or a teacher at my secondary school. - - - I felt so young. I didn't feel ready. I felt like I was just going through the motions. You know, I was doing the studying, doing the reading, I was doing my essays and I think a lot of it was doing it for my mum and dad and not for me, my mum and dad because of their pressure on me. (Marie)*

Marie returned to teaching several years later after doing various other jobs. Lack of satisfaction from the work she been involved with and the experience of having her own children prompted her decision to return to a teaching career:

*So I'd say it was my own children who prompted me really. And my sister's children and my friends' children, but it was mainly my own. I do think it brought that to the fore. (Marie)*

It is clear from these teachers' accounts that biographical factors play a key role in the decision to become a teacher. Individuals about to make career choices do not sit down with a sheet of paper detailing the job description for teaching and match it to their own criteria in a detached manner. They are influenced by their own schooling, by close family and relatives, by parenthood, by other work experiences and by their own upbringing. Several writers have indicated how influential biography is to the teacher we become (Sikes, 1997; Bullough et al., 1991; Casey, 1993; Thomas, 1995). Hargreaves (1997) writes:

Teachers teach in the way they do not just because of the skills they have or have not learned. The ways they teach are also grounded in their backgrounds, their biographies, in the kinds of teachers they have become (p.xi).

The teachers' stories in this research indicate the influence of biography not only upon the teachers we become but also upon the actual decision to become a teacher in the first place. Society's views on the 'appropriateness' of certain jobs for women was also a feature of several of the women's stories.



### Becoming early years teachers

At the time of the interviews all fourteen teachers were teaching children under seven years of age and most were working with reception and nursery age children. Five of the teachers had not trained for early years teaching. Karen and Paul had initially trained and worked with secondary age pupils. Helen, Judith and Pauline were junior trained. Pascal (1990) found that 40% of teachers of four year olds had no early years training, and 10% had no primary training. For the teachers in this study who had not initially intended to work with the younger children I was interested to explore their moves into the early years sector. The next section considers how and why those people who had not intended to teach the younger children came to this work.

### Junior qualified -- pragmatic stories

In the preceding account I have drawn attention to the influence of personal, biographical factors in becoming a teacher. It is also important to remember that career choices and career journeys exist in a wider context, that social, political, economic and demographic factors provide the macro context in which individuals play out their lives. Thus, for three of my interviewees the supply and demand for teachers at the time they qualified had implications for their careers. Helen, Judith and Pauline, all junior trained, began teaching younger children because of the difficult job situation which existed when they qualified. Although there were seeking junior posts they accepted positions teaching infants because they needed a job:

*So I wanted to do junior children. All my teaching practices were junior and I took a junior course. - - - I didn't want to do young children, definitely didn't want to do young children. But when I came out of college (early 80's) it was all the sticky time of the jobs, jobs were in short supply and I started off um not being able to get a job at first.*

*(Judith)*

So Judith returned briefly to her previous job with the Inland Revenue on a temporary contract while continuing to press the local education office for a teaching job. Finally, some supply teaching came her way, followed by a short term contract at Key Stage Two. When that expired Judith accepted a job teaching younger children because there was no alternative and she wanted a teaching position:

*So I started off by doing a fixed term's contract in a primary school where I worked with key stage 2 children, second year junior. Then that all fell by the side, but the head said oh would you be interested in going to an infant school. So I said well I don't mind, I was desperate for work, I wasn't particularly interested in infants, but I hadn't really done anything with infants. Oh you'll be all right, you'll be all right, go. So I went and chatted to the head and she said oh you seem the sort of person that would fit in our you know, blah, blah, blah. So then I finished my probationary year off there. I think in the first instance it was for a job, definitely a job. And I didn't care, I think I'd have gone in for any age*

*and said yes I'll do that, sort of try to get over whatever complications there are to it. (Judith)*

Helen too accepted a teaching job with infant children when her preferred option to work with junior children proved unavailable:

*When I came out jobs were scarce in 1975 to say the least and you ended up applying to teachers' banks all over the place because there just weren't the jobs available. I mean six years before that nearly everyone was coming out of college there was a job automatically for you when you came out, it just wasn't the case. When I left and I applied for jobs I was applying for junior jobs. - - - I'd applied to Durham and I'd applied to Middlesborough as it was then, it's now Cleveland, it's gone back to being a borough again, and had the letters back, yes you are on the list and when something comes up, that sort of thing. And then literally just before I finished that third year in college I got a phone call from Liverpool to say there is a job available at Green Road Infant School if you would be interested. So that's why I started in an infant school and not a junior school. (Helen)*

Pauline had initially trained to work with junior age children and was sure that neither secondary or infant education appealed to her. Again a shortage of junior jobs resulted in her accepting an infant post:

*Well, I think I thought infants were too little and couldn't do anything (laughs). I certainly didn't want to do secondary and I just felt that (junior) was the age group I was interested in. When I first came to apply for a job I went to Sheffield which is where I came from and in those days you applied to the office and they just allocated you a school and when I went for my interview I can remember them saying 'Well we're terribly short of infant teachers, nobody wants to be an infant teacher so you have a choice of this, this and this school and it's infants.' And there wasn't a choice about whether I could have juniors or not. So I was pushed into an infant school without any choice. (Pauline)*

However, Pauline did not remain teaching the younger children. After a difficult first year she took the first available opportunity to move to teach older children. It was several years later and after the birth of her own family when Pauline returned to teaching younger children. This move appears unplanned and came about through her association with her daughter's school:

*Later we moved to Solihull and my eldest daughter started infant school and I made a very casual comment about how strange it was being on the other side of the fence and before I knew where I was I was being called in for supply work in this infant school where she attended. And I carried on there, part-time until eventually I got a full time job and stayed there for, roughly about 14 years I think on and off. And then I*

*came here 9 years ago. When I was in the other side of the borough I took all the age range of the infants. I think I started in reception and gradually ended up having, you know, all the year groups, but I really enjoyed it, second time round. I hadn't enjoyed that first experience at all. (Pauline)*

### Secondary qualified - more pragmatic stories

Paul initially taught sixth form economics and his move into the primary sector was a result of his wife changing her job and the reduced demand for economics teachers. On moving house Paul found that his preferred choice, teaching economics, was unavailable and this resulted in his involvement with early years teaching. The combination of biographical factors and also the impact of the reduced demand for economics teachers, business studies being more popular, led Paul to become a supply teacher:

*I was teaching in a sixth form college. I'd applied to teach economics and there was a big demand for economics and that's what I'm interested in, the politics and the sociology and how it fits in, and increasingly throughout the late eighties there was this drive towards business studies and economics withered on the vine and so economics teachers were being pushed into teaching business studies which I find is just a, it's a terrible, terrible subject and should never have been introduced into schools in the first place. Well, it's not really a subject,*

*it's just a, I don't know, a piece of, bit of dogma really. And I became disillusioned and when my wife to be said we're moving, we're leaving, we're going to go to the Midlands I followed her and couldn't get another job teaching economics and so I went into supply work and became a supply teacher. And then I became attached to a primary school in Coventry as a sort of a fill-in teacher and then the numbers have gone up in the primary, early years dept, dramatically, they went up from 17 to 40, and then they took me on as an early years teacher.*

*(Paul)*

For Karen too, after teaching secondary children for two years, it was also a house move that prompted her to work with younger children. Karen had not planned to work with young children but when she and her husband bought a house which included an existing playgroup on the premises Karen continued to run the playgroup and through this she became very interested in early years provision:

*- - - the house that we happened to find, the person who had lived there before had a conservatory on the back which she had converted into a playroom and which she ran as a playgroup. And we were going to buy the house and it, I can't quite remember how it happened but it evolved out of discussions that there was this business which you could buy as well, the goodwill and so on and the equipment and we ended up buying, for not very much but, the goodwill and the equipment so that I could*

*continue and certainly the children who would come on, so that I actually began once we'd moved in, I began to run a home playgroup for 12 children which meant I had somebody helping me. And in order to do that I then decided, I went on a PPA course to find out about that, a little bit about that and for the next two or three years which included having a baby, so I had just a weeny bit of time off but then managed my baby because it was in my own home as well, my second baby, I ran this playgroup in my own home and from that point on I think I never, ever considered going back into secondary education again. (Karen)*

#### Early years teaching - taking on an 'identity'

*When it comes to teaching children I would see myself as an early years teacher. (Susan)*

The fourteen teachers were all teaching children under seven at the time of interview. Some participants had not intended initially to teach young children, however, they all spoke about their work with strong commitment and regarded their work as important and rewarding. With the exception of two (Paul and Judith who were both happy to work with older children as well as the younger ones), the teachers saw themselves as 'early years teachers' with an early years specialism regardless of their initial intentions. How then had they come to take on the identity of an early years specialist? Pauline,

junior trained, and Paul, secondary trained, both recalled their initial experiences of teaching young children and their lack of experience:

*I was in this family grouping, huge class, with an age range of 5 to 7 and I'd never, ever taught infants. I'd had friends at college who'd taught infants. I knew a little bit about what sort of things they were doing, you know when we were sitting doing charts and on teaching practice I used to know a little bit but that was all. And it was awful and I just didn't cope at all well. It was just, I can remember the chaos of it very clearly.*

*(Pauline)*

As Paul found, for those teachers not trained in early years work it was necessary to learn as they went along:

*And I was useless, I had no idea, absolutely no idea but because you have taught in sixth form college you have this kind of presence, you're kind of listened to and I've learned as I've gone along really. I think you largely, you get into what you're doing, you build an interest in what you're doing and it hinges greatly upon the other members of staff in the department, how the department is perceived within the whole school, so it depends greatly upon those factors where you're teaching. But I do find it quite interesting, I find it more interesting the more I've gone into it because I've learned very much on the job. (Paul)*



Working alongside other early years colleagues enabled teachers to develop their expertise and to identify with a particular specialism. In effect they joined the ‘club’ and this ‘club’ operates both at school level and outside school. There are early years networks at school, local, national and international levels and becoming involved in this early years community contributed to teachers’ professional development, to their feelings of being involved in a worthwhile task and to their identification of themselves as early years specialists. Several teachers spoke of early years courses they had attended and of professional relationships with local authority advisors who had particular responsibility for the early years. Diane recalled the feeling of being ‘sucked into’ early years teaching and becoming part of the early years community in her area. She also indicates the satisfaction gained from seeing oneself as having a particular specialism.

*I'm absolutely sure that a lot of it (working with the younger children) was to do with just getting a job but I then became quite interested, we had a lot of in-service at the time and it was quite a process going on in the 70's with nursery education linked to the community education as well in Coventry. So I think you got sort of carried along with that enthusiasm and that excitement and you started to see yourself as a little bit specialised which you hadn't done up to that point. (Diane)*

Identifying themselves as specifically ‘early years’ teachers had implications for their careers as the discussion on p.159/160 indicates.

## Career

As argued in the literature review teachers' careers are influenced by the contexts in which they live and work. Political, social, geographical, economic and demographic circumstances play their part, for better or for worse, in the ways teachers' careers unfold. We have already seen how availability of jobs may constrain an individual's career choices. A scarcity of teaching jobs resulted in some teachers accepting posts teaching younger children when they had intended working with older children. Also, the notion that some jobs are more appropriate for women than others, with teaching being considered an appropriate choice, was a feature of some women's accounts.

In addition, personal and family factors also influence an individual teacher's career development. Unplanned events were frequently referred to by the teachers and house moves, career breaks and chance meetings were important factors in the ways in which their careers developed. Their stories indicate the fragmented, accidental nature of many teachers' careers:

*Then we moved to the Midlands, to Bromsgrove and I continued working in a junior school for another year and then I had my first baby and then I did some supply work again in junior schools, in between babies. Then we moved to Solihull and my eldest daughter started infant school and I made a very casual comment about how strange it was being on the other side of the fence and before I knew where I was I was being called in for supply work in this infant school where she attended. (Pauline)*

*Well, it's been a bit of a hotch potch really (laughs) because it was 6 years full time and then I moved up here because of Graham's job and I then had my family but I mean I've always worked part time ever since my first child was a year old. (Susan)*

Home and family commitments are particularly significant, but not exclusive, to women's experiences of career. Several of the women in this research had moved area in order to accommodate their husband's job. Such geographical moves are usually associated with women (Evetts 1990) but one of the men in this study had also moved to accommodate a partner's career. In Paul's case, as noted above, this personal factor combined with the wider context of the reduced need for economics teachers resulted in Paul transferring from secondary teaching to primary supply teaching:

*When my wife, my future, who's my wife now said we're moving, we're leaving, we're going to go to the Midlands I followed her and couldn't get another job teaching economics and so I went into supply work and became a supply teacher (primary).*

### Unplanned careers

As noted in the literature review, it would be a mistake to imagine teachers starting their teaching careers with formulated plans in mind. While some do, most do not. As Evetts (1990) notes:

Strategies were developed and decisions made sometimes through deliberate planning but just as often through chance and coincidence, procrastination and serendipity (p.15).

The above quote accurately describes Karen's experience:

*So then we had babies and really the next bit, all the rest of it is complete accident. Well actually even teaching was an accident because I couldn't think of anything else to do. There is really so little good planning about this. (Karen)*

There were several unplanned incidents in Helen's account including two house moves. After the second move another scarcity of jobs resulted in Helen accepting a job in an independent school. When this school later ran into financial difficulties Helen applied and got a job in another local independent school. All of these geographical moves were prompted by Helen's husband's career choices. They are now about to move locality again.

*- - - and then that school, over the six years it had started to, when I went there it was from age 3 up to age 16. And then the senior school started getting into a few dire straits and that sort of filtered down into the quite young ones as well, well number wise with children really and you know that relates to money, if the numbers drop the money drops, you know we*

*had to start laying teachers off and by the time I left they'd actually closed the senior school and it was just to the age 11, sorry 13, just to the age of thirteen, so really in my last year do I start looking for something else or do I just sit it out and see what happens. And then there's a job advertised at the school in Stonetown for a middle infant teacher but to take responsibility for the head of lower school as well. So I applied for that and got it. (Helen)*

Helen's story also highlights the advantages of having contacts in the educational world, informal occupational networks which Evetts (1990) found to be particularly useful to women.

*Now I know a friend at church pulled strings to get me that (her first teaching job) because she was actually working in the town and she knew somebody at County Hall and she phoned me up one day and said look how are you sorting out these jobs and I said well going through the list, dot, dot, dot. She said (to County Hall) there's a job coming up at my school and I know the lady for it will you put her name down at the top of the list. So it wasn't a case of what you knew it was who you knew really. (Helen)*

Diane's story also has similar unplanned events, both positive and negative, which have influenced the route her career has taken. It also indicates, as did Evett's (1990) study,

the important role of advisors/inspectors in teacher's careers. It may be significant that the advisor concerned was a woman concerned with women's issues.

*I actually got the playgroup supervisor job in Bromsgrove because I lived at this time then in Redditch and I was quite keen to start up my own nursery at the time. I remember thinking oh yes it would be nice. I pursued it through social services, I found a place where I thought you know there was going to be a possibility but it all fell through and I seemed then to lose the enthusiasm. I also separated from my husband and then there was an urgency to do something for me and I think my confidence from that point grew and I rang up er, the education office and said you know, I need to come back to work. It wasn't financial that I needed to go back to work I just couldn't bear the thought of being completely on my own at home all day and having no adult, you know, interaction and I managed to get a supply job back in Coventry. - - - I think meeting Joanne (local advisor), she was the advisor for the early years and she was very supportive in that time, incredibly supportive, and you know helped, sort of advised me on places that you know were coming up, where to go really. (Diane)*

And Anne:

*Then I applied for and got a job abroad, you know it would have been in charge of a nursery unit abroad and so that would have been quite a change in my life because I gave up my job, sold my house and everything and I was going off abroad and then at the last minute you see that fell through, to everyone's shock, I think most of all to my own - - - I was homeless and jobless which I'd never ever been before you know and in a way I saw it as quite exciting because I thought oh well it's an opportunity to go and do other things like go round the world for a year or something um but I didn't in the end what I did was I did supply work and I've stayed at that school ever since. They offered me a permanent job which was quite nice really in a way. (Anne)*

Thus, teachers' careers are influenced by personal factors, planned and unplanned events. The women's stories included house moves because of their partner's work, career breaks to have children, and part-time working because of family commitments. While women's child/family responsibilities have long been cited as reasons for women's lesser career ambitions and promotional success (as argued on p.110-114), Paul's story suggests that the current social and educational climate has resulted in some men reviewing and experiencing their careers in ways more traditionally associated with women. Paul had moved locality because of his partner's work, a move which resulted in him being unable to teach his preferred subject and age range. He had also opted to work on a part-time basis in order to share child care responsibilities with his wife and had dismissed the idea of becoming a headteacher:

*I've never been that interested in my career to be honest. I've never been that much of a person who's interested in climbing up the career ladder so when we had Emily and we decided that we wanted to bring her up ourselves it just seemed a fair way of distributing things, that we'd both go, both work part-time. (Paul)*

These personal and family influences coincide with wider structural phenomena which combine to influence career paths. As we have seen individuals do make choices, they take decisions, but it is important to remember that they do so within these frameworks.

### Becoming a head

*Oh no, it's a silly job really. (Paul)*

All of the teachers I interviewed were classroom teachers. One was a deputy head and one a deputy principal in the independent sector. As I talked with the teachers about their careers and future ambitions it became clear that most had dismissed the idea of becoming a head and this was as true of those newly entering the profession as those with much longer experience. When I analysed the transcripts I found that reasons were always forthcoming to explain their rejection of headship. The teachers who had ruled out headship gave two main reasons to account for their decision. Firstly, a move into



headship was seen as reducing the contact one had with children, something they did not wish to do. Nias (1989) and Campbell et al. (1992) have shown that primary teachers' contact with children is a prime job satisfier and, as we shall see in a later section, these teachers were no exception to that finding. Secondly, they felt their strong identification with, and attachment to, their early years specialism would be lost if they became heads. They saw such a move as meaning they would no longer be able to specialise/focus on the youngest children but would need to take a broader perspective, something they did not want to do. Their explanations usually included a combination of both these explanations, to various degrees. Additionally, but to a much lesser degree, the time and stress pressures associated with headship were referred to.

#### Loss of contact with children

As noted earlier, primary classroom teachers derive their greatest job satisfaction from their contacts with children. Headship was often equated with a reduction in this contact with children making it an unattractive proposition for most of the teachers I spoke with. As Pauline explained:

*I've always been very happy to be a classroom teacher, I've never had any desire, you know great desire to be a head or a deputy, in fact I think I would adamantly say I would never want to be a head or a deputy. I think you lose the contact with the children and that's what I enjoy.*

*(Pauline)*

The same was true for Anne with 23 years teaching experience:

*And so I suppose this goes hand in hand with the promotion thing in as far as I didn't really, I perhaps felt that I didn't want to or didn't feel that I had as much to give as a deputy head or a head as actually staying and being with the children. (Anne)*

Sheila, with eight years experience, spoke of wishing to retain her classroom role. She was prepared to take on extra responsibility but only in ways which enabled her to retain her contact with the children. She seemed to feel she would be less effective as a head, having to work second hand rather than first hand with the children.

*I enjoy being with the children, I enjoy the curriculum, I enjoy learning about new ways of teaching it. As a head you wouldn't be able to put that into practice. You'd have to tell somebody else so they could put it into practice and the enthusiasm might not be translated because if you've got enthusiasm it's so hard to translate it to someone who hasn't, who hasn't been on the course or, so it's a lot harder. (Sheila)*

Sheila's mother, a headteacher, had just taken early retirement. Earlier I noted Sheila's mother's influence on Sheila's choice of career. She was also influential in how Sheila perceived headship:

*I've just seen my mum and I think that I value my hobbies and my life better, I just could not cope with stress of it, what I see her going through and her life's totally taken up with school and I think no, no way not even for all the credit, all the responsibility, all the money in the world there's no way I'd do it. (Sheila)*

A little later Sheila expanded upon this describing how she also had concerns about the management role involved in being a head:

*I don't see myself as it. I don't see myself as a person who can manage people. I just don't think I'm the sort of nature to do it. I would worry, I would just worry about what I was doing wrong, the decisions you'd have to make about people. I just couldn't do it. (Sheila)*

### Loss of specialism

Teachers of children of all ages might associate with these early years teachers' concerns about the reduced contact possible with children following a promotion to headship. However, these teachers also raised an issue specific to them. Headship was also equated with a loss of their early years specialism as headteachers have to be responsible for a wider age range of children. All but two of the teachers participating were very attached to the early years sector, regardless of their original intentions for

the age group they wanted to teach. They saw themselves as early years specialists and wished to continue with that particular specialism:

*When it comes to teaching children I would see myself as an early years teacher. I wouldn't want to go into any other age range now because I enjoy that, from nursery to year 1, that's the age that I enjoy. (Susan)*

*I mean if I ever changed I would go down in age group not up but there's not many jobs for teachers out there working with babies. There should be, there should be, there should be in day care nurseries teachers out there specialising in the curriculum for the under twos. Now if a job came up I'd be there, that I would change to, I would go to that, that would be my next new challenge. I love very little people. (Karen)*

This focus on early years meant they had dismissed the role of head with its wider age range responsibility. For Mati retaining her nursery focus was important:

*Well, sort of career wise for me personally I wouldn't actually want to be a boss. I wouldn't actually want to be a sort of senior member of staff where you are doing things for the whole school because I, I don't know, I'm more concerned with nursery than years 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7. (Mati)*

### Early years teaching -- a cul de sac

While teachers cited loss of contact with children and loss of early years specialism as reasons for not pursuing headship there is another explanation which may be influential. Few nursery or reception teachers become heads in primary schools. For nursery teachers headship is more likely in nursery schools and centres. David (1990) describes promotion prospects in early years education as being 'traditionally poor, despite high levels of commitment from those who choose to work with this age group' (p.151). Whilst this was never given by teachers as a reason for not becoming heads, they were certainly aware of this situation. Teachers develop their own understandings about career paths and they use their own experiences and observations of who gets which job to build their own theories of career development. While more women than men teach in nursery and primary schools they are under-represented at headship level. As pointed out earlier, in 1996 women comprised 82.5% of teachers in maintained nursery and primary schools and 7.5% of them were heads. In contrast men accounted for 17.5% of teachers in maintained nursery and primary schools and 30.8% of them were heads (DFEE, 1997, provisional figures).

During the interviews I was often told that being a teacher of the younger children had negative effects on promotion prospects. There was a belief that their early years specialism worked against them in promotional terms, that being a nursery or reception teacher inhibited career advancement. Whether this belief influenced their decision about headship is difficult to establish. Did they really prefer to stay in the classroom role with the younger children as their focus, or did their belief that they were unlikely

to be become heads influence their decision? Or maybe both? Several teachers commented that they personally knew of no head who had previously been a nursery or reception teacher. Their observations of which classroom teachers became head teachers led them to believe that their early years role was a negative factor in promotional terms. Anne felt that for nursery and reception teachers the only route to headship was to make a tactical decision to spend some time teaching older children in order to qualify as a candidate for headship. This was not seen as a requirement to expand teaching experience but as a way of proving one's capability. There was a widespread feeling that while early years teachers needed to gain experience of working with older children in order to qualify for headship, the reverse was not true. Being able to teach the older children was seen as a qualifier for headship whereas teaching the younger children was not. This perceived inequality was much resented:

*So I was stuck in this nursery class not knowing where I could go from there, well more or less being told there was nowhere to go, and of course what I should have done if I'd wanted promotion was to have moved out of nursery and taught you know an older class. And I think again it's back to this idea that if you've taught the youngest you're not material for applying for headship. There's no way out really (from nursery) and I think it's the same in reception. (Anne)*

The introduction of the National Curriculum was seen to have exacerbated the position:

*As you've gathered I'm not a great career person but say I was and I wanted to be interested in this phase of education, there is actually nowhere for me to go. But where do I go from here? I can't become a headteacher because I'm not National Curriculum, I haven't got enough um, grounding in National Curriculum. I suppose I might be able find a nursery school somewhere to manage but they're few and far between. There's not a lot of places to go as a nursery teacher, not a lot. And maybe that is why it is low status. (Karen)*

Nursery teachers felt not just disadvantaged but debarred from headship. However, as Mati argued, their managerial experience could be seen as a valuable qualification for headship:

*Well, it is a different job in many ways isn't it because you're actually managing as a nursery teacher a team of people which is different to being a class teacher in a room on your own? Which I'm not sure most people appreciate actually but it's a management role. - - - It seems to me as a nursery teacher, working in that management role, it would be very valuable experience for people who wanted to advance career wise. Yet the nursery teachers I've spoken to have said to me that they felt it was, well a dead end almost, that it was very difficult as a nursery teacher to move on. (Mati)*

## Alternative careers

For those who had ruled out headship because of a wish to remain with their early years specialism, alternative avenues for career development were sought. Anne would have liked to move into the training of early years practitioners or into an early years advisory role and was still considering such a move.

*You know career wise I'd have preferred to have gone into teaching nursery nurses, doing that sort of thing. I've only been interested in going into the advisory side of things, as you say early years. I don't really want anything unless it's to do with early years because I feel that's where the expertise is. And I'd be happy to be sort of you know passing on what I would hope was my knowledge to other people in early years or to stay you know to stay with the children so I'm still with the children at the moment. (Anne)*

Mati saw her career development in the area of pastoral/social/emotional development side. She had no desire to become a head:

*So I haven't actually got career plans in schools, to be deputy head, head. - - - My personal career progression, um, I'd rather be a counsellor. I mean I could see myself doing like PSE (personal and social education) across school, I mean if ever that became a role so you got a PSE teacher in school because I mean, personally, I think each school*



*should have its own counsellor. You know I could see myself doing that, I mean I'd even thought about doing that in secondary schools but um, well in terms of career I'd say I'm quite happy being a nursery teacher but I would extend so that I did some PSE work throughout the school.*

*(Mati)*

Diane had begun her career teaching nursery aged children. Later she successfully applied for a job training nursery nurses. Diane felt this move enabled her to gain promotion while at the same time retaining her early years focus. However, she found the same dilemma pertained within the college system. If she wanted further promotion she would be expected to move away from specialising in early years and take on a broader role. This, in addition to other frustrations about college training, resulted in her moving back into teaching nursery children:

*I had progressed in that system (college training nursery nurses) to a degree and the next sort of step would have been something like a head of school which was head of school of health and, which was much broader spectrum. If it had been head of school for early years, something that was, you know, I felt very in tune with then I wouldn't have minded that but it didn't turn in our college into that sort of aspect.*

*(Diane)*

Susan too had rejected headship. In choosing to work part time Susan recognised that promotion in traditional terms was not possible. However, Susan was keen to develop her own potential and feels she has achieved this through her teaching of adults enrolled on child care courses. This has enabled her to continue her professional development in a way that Susan knows would not have been possible as a part time teacher and which she sees as being preferable to teaching children full time:

*I think it's (teaching adults) given me sort of, I know it's a well-worn phrase, personal development, in that I feel that if I'd have carried on teaching young children full time I don't think I'd have got that personal development that I need as an individual. And I think the work with adults has given me that and I think that's why I wanted to continue that, very much so. (Susan)*

### Headship? Maybe - in time

Not surprisingly, those who had only been teaching for a short time were primarily concerned to master their classroom role and felt they were not at a stage to consider headship. Research by Leithwood (1990) and Sikes, Measor and Woods (1985) indicates that teachers move through stages in their career development. During the initial stage the teacher is concerned with launching their career. Teachers then move onto a second stabilisation stage to be followed by a third stage in which teachers take on new challenges before reaching the fourth stage where a professional plateau is reached (serenity or disenchantment). The final stage is concerned with preparing for

retirement. While this research was carried out with secondary school teachers it may tentatively be generalised to other contexts and it seems likely that newly qualified teachers will be more focused on developing their teaching expertise rather than pursuing headship. Thus, becoming a head was dismissed by Marie, not because she had ruled it out, but because she was not ready to consider it seriously. She was keen to develop her teaching expertise before contemplating a more senior role but was enthusiastic about accepting more curricular responsibility:

*I'd like to go on some assessment courses because I really have got, I love doing assessment and if something came up within a school for an assessment co-ordinator I think that I would be very, very tempted to have a go at that. I think my next move I'd, some people have said you ought to try and go for a B post Marie, or something like that. I think I'd like to do a sideways move to start off with just to get experience as a classroom teacher. I have no big ideas about being a deputy or a head or anything like that, I haven't thought about anything that high but I would like to have an area of responsibility whether it be assessment or whether it be in a scientific mode but I think that assessment is the one I'd like to go on really, I really enjoy that one. (Marie)*

While Marie is content with her present classroom role she acknowledges the fact that her views might change with time:

*I've seen the way our deputy works, although she makes a rod for her own back, so I haven't had very good role models there, and I know that I haven't which is why I'd like to have an experience outside of the school that I'm in. But oh she's, she's run ragged, and the amount of work that she does and I'm certain that the majority of it is unnecessary so maybe I should think that I would do it a different way but I do think that a lot of it is because I came to teaching late. You know some people have said oh you ought to get a move on because you're getting older and you won't get this and you won't get that but then there's another side of me and I do think well I'm quite happy being a classroom teacher. So I am happy at the moment but I'm sure that there will come a time when I will feel that maybe I'm not challenged enough, which is another reason why I think maybe I should, why I am looking around and if something catches my eye then I'll apply for it because I think I have been perhaps at my school long enough now and I just feel, I'm ready for a changeover, you know, it's been three years and I did my teaching practice there as well so I feel I've been there a long time.*

*(Marie)*

Marie who had been teaching for just three years was keen to further develop her experience teaching the younger children but had not dismissed the possibility of working with older children in the future:

*I really would like to stay in Key Stage 1, at the moment. Some heads have said to me that I should say (at interviews) I'd like to do both and I say to them why? I mean I understand what they're saying, that you need to have an experience of the whole school but surely if I'm comfortable with Key Stage 1 at the moment then they should respect that and that's the answer that I give. (Marie)*

Helen spoke of the way her career aspirations had changed over the years. Initially, she had been content to develop her classroom role but as she became more experienced she successfully applied for promoted posts and was currently head of lower school/deputy principal in an independent school:

*I think in some ways I wasn't ambitious enough (early on) because I was, I liked my job, I thought I was reasonably good at it and I enjoyed being in the classroom with the children and at that stage I didn't particularly want anything else. I wasn't even applying for responsibility posts or anything of that type. (Helen)*

Sheila too spoke about how initially she was concerned to focus upon developing her classroom teaching role and how her increasing mastery of that enabled her to accept greater responsibility. However, as noted above she had dismissed the idea of becoming a headteacher:

*It was enough to start teaching and to have a class, that was as far as I was thinking when I started teaching. I knew that it would be hard. I knew that it would be a tremendous amount of work but as far as I was concerned when I first started teaching that was all that I was concerned about. As you get into it it gets slightly easier and you see what you do and you don't get credit for it, taking on the roles and then, the money was a side but getting the responsibility to go with it and thinking yes I could do that, I could get the credit for doing all these things. I enjoy doing them and want to do them for the better of the school. So yes it did change, as you get into it you cope with the work better. (Sheila)*

Dave, a new teacher, was aware of the possible advantages, in promotional terms, of being a man in primary education:

*I applied (to college) for infants, you had to identify your age range but there was some movement available, but I mean in many ways the fact that I was doing infants probably got me a place on the course because I didn't get the grades that I needed but as soon as they found out that I wanted to do infants it was oh yes, you could see this big tick. I'm in absolutely no doubt whatsoever in my own mind that one of the key reasons I got the post (first job) was because I was a man. And that's not me putting myself down saying that you know, I actually think I was a good candidate as well but I don't doubt it at all, that that was a part. I*

*still find it, you know I went to have some advice from someone in careers and I told them that I was planning to be an infant school teacher and they kind of looked up and said oh in six years you'll be a head. (Dave)*

Currently Dave had no intention of becoming a head. He was ambitious but was rejecting headship in favour of becoming a deputy head in the future. He also acknowledged that his views might change with time. Dave was interested in the staff development side of headship and thought deputy headship would give him the opportunity to pursue this while avoiding the financial and administrative responsibilities of headship. Dave was keen to develop positive relationships with the children as well as with adults. He saw headship as challenging the kind of relationship he wanted with children.

*I mean I don't see myself ever becoming a head, ever. I don't want to be at this moment in time I just look at the role of headteacher now and just think I don't want it. It's all managerial now because of the expectations that the head has I don't see myself doing that. At the moment the reason I'm going into teaching is because I want to teach, you know I don't want to sit behind a desk. You're held up as this, you know almost a threat half the time by other staff members so I don't, certainly don't see myself becoming a head. Not you know that's not why I'm going in, who knows things may change, my attitudes may change but at the moment that's not*

*where I see my career going. But I don't see myself being in the classroom for the rest of my, you know I'm going to be twenty-two when I qualify, forty years is a long time. I mean I see myself as reasonably ambitious. I mean I see myself going in as a teacher and then moving on to take responsibility in the school. I'm much more interested in the role of deputy head although that's not a real ambition of, it's not an ambition I've set myself up for. If it came along then I'd be happier at the moment to accept that than a headship. I just think that in my experience the deputy head's almost been the link between the head and the staff and I quite like that role, almost personnel in some ways, staff management.*

*(Dave)*

### An exception

Judith was an exception. She was keen to become a head and at the time of the interviews she was applying for headships. Junior trained, but with mostly infant experience, Judith sees herself as a primary teacher not an early years teacher. Unlike many of the other teachers who were keen to retain an early years focus, Judith was keen to teach in Key Stage Two believing it important to have that experience in her role as a primary deputy. Maybe she also felt experience of teaching older children would be an advantage when applying for headships, as other teachers commented, but she did not make this point:



*Now this year I'm working with reception but I would be quite happy working with year 6. The Key Stage 2 staff have been um less, they've been more or they want to stick with Key Stage 2, don't want to go to key stage 1. Whereas Key Stage 1, not just myself but other members of staff oh yes we'd like to go into Key Stage 2 as well. They want to go and move around but it seems that the reverse isn't what's wanted by a lot of Key Stage 2 teachers and the head, to be very honest he thinks early years teaching is a very specialist area and he admits he hasn't got, he's got very little knowledge of, he relies on me and other early years teachers for that knowledge but I still think, particularly as a deputy head, as deputy of a primary school now I need primary school, more primary school experience. (Judith)*

Regardless of their original career intentions almost all of these fourteen teachers identified themselves specifically as early years teachers. They preferred to teach the younger children and regarded themselves as being specialists in that area. This strong identification with early years had career implications for teachers. Some had dismissed the idea of becoming a headteacher because they did not wish to relinquish this early years focus. Furthermore, there was a feeling, based upon their own observations, that teachers of young children were at a disadvantage when it came to promotion in comparison with Key Stage 2 teachers.

What is it then about teaching young children that creates such a strong attachment to that sector of education? The following two chapters examine what early years teachers seek to achieve and the satisfactions they obtain from their work.

### **Early Years Teaching: Conceptions and Misconceptions**

We try very hard to recognise the importance of primary school teachers, but I don't think you can compare the task of someone teaching a class the GCSE or the volume of work, particularly in practical science and so on, with the volume of work that goes on at primary school level (Education Minister Angela Rumbold, 1986).

This chapter looks at the way fourteen early years teachers conceptualise their work, and contrasts their views with their experiences and understandings of how others view the work they do. The teachers I interviewed were very aware of the ways in which they and their work were perceived by others and their accounts include many stories relating to the way society views them and their work. This awareness was developed largely through their interactions with others, for example with colleagues, headteachers, friends and family, but comments made by politicians were also cited.

Such experiences are important because a teacher's self image is influenced not only by their own understandings and perceptions but also by the understandings, perceptions and expectations others have of them and their work. In chapter 4 I examined the dominant discourses of early years teaching and the assumption that teaching young children is 'easier' than teaching older children. The misconceptions about early years education, that early years teaching is not very demanding and that its teachers do not need to be very intellectual, were also highlighted. The first half of this chapter is concerned with the ways in which early years teachers come to be aware of the misconceptions others have about their work. The early years teachers in this research felt that little status was attributed to early years teachers and teaching and that their work was misunderstood by many people. Their stories were all about the negative ways in which early years teaching is often perceived. The second half of this chapter turns to early years teachers' own perceptions of their work. It identifies the aims and purposes of fourteen early years teachers and discusses the relationship between academic and non-academic aims in early years education. The stories of three early years teachers are then used to show how teachers bring their own personal values and beliefs, values and beliefs based on their biographies, to their teaching.

#### Early years teaching and its teachers - the perceptions of others

*The status, pretty low mostly. I mean again I get very punchy about it and I go out there telling everybody that it's actually the most ..... So I*

*mean I'm not terribly depressed or resentful or anything else but I do believe it's terribly low. (Pauline)*

Teachers recalled many negative comments which had been made to them about early years teaching. These came from several sources including friends, parents, colleagues, government ministers and the media. They indicate the understandings early years teachers have of how others see them and their work. During her teaching career Anne has experienced negative views and comments about her work with young children. Based on her experience she now regards much positive comment as rhetoric:

*Well, I suppose I've always felt that there should be equality right throughout the teaching profession but unfortunately more and more it seems that there certainly isn't and I think from all aspects, from the public and the media, politically, there's a lot of lip service paid I think but basically people still see it as child minding. - - - Yes, by almost everyone, by people from you know, from almost every group, from parents through to teachers of older children, not necessarily much older, head teachers, education officers, politicians, the public. All this idea that you're there just childminding. (Anne)*

Helen too points out that early years teaching is often regarded as childminding rather than education:

*I think there's still this old stereotype, especially with people who work with secondary age children, that oh well they can always play all day, it's an easy option, play all day and paint, they've got to mop up sick and wipe bottoms. You know, that image is still there and I don't know how you can get rid of it.. For too long infant schools have had the impression, hardly any academic work, so I would like to see the status of early years educators given a higher profile. (Helen)*

Miller (1992), commenting upon Steedman's account of her experiences as a primary teacher, highlights the way in which such work is misconceived. Miller noted that Steedman was seen as 'the watchful mother of other people's children, but never as the intellectual worker her occupation and her responsibilities made her' (p.24). Even before Sheila became a teacher she had acquired ideas about the way early years teaching and its practitioners are perceived from the information she received at school:

*Not academic I suppose. Um, that they were practical, not seen to be intellectual I suppose which is the message I got from the form that they sent which said what you had to do to be a primary school teacher. - - - Yeah, it almost seemed to be a second-rate career really I think, not seen to be like a lawyer or a doctor or a ..... Nobody ever encouraged me to do it. (Sheila)*

Early years teachers also felt that the government misunderstood the demands and complexity of their work:

*A bit like, you know John Major, whoever it was, that you know, you can get these people off the street to come and teach it you know. But I mean I don't think hearing headline news like that helps. (Judith)*

Comments made by parents were often seen as representing the belief that teaching younger children was less demanding than teaching older children. Parents often considered a move to teach older children as a promotion.

*When I went to reception (after working in nursery) a lot of the parents said 'Oh you're going up'. (Pauline)*

*I've had said to me on many times by, many different people, I mean on parents' evening, a parent, well lots of parents, but some parents have said oh what year you teaching next? Oh our so and so is coming into your year group. And I've said oh no because I'm going to teach in reception. Oh dear, well never mind dear, if you work hard enough they might let you teach the older children. (Judith)*

*Well I know a lot of parents think that you start off in nursery and work your way up through the school till you have more experience. A lot of people have that view. (Mati)*

### Teacher colleagues

Even within the teaching profession, nursery teachers are seen as having less pressure and an easier job with children playing all day rather than engaging in real education. The abilities of young children and the demands upon teachers have been seriously underestimated (Smith, 1994, p.33).

Comments made by friends and parents were considered to be based on a lack of understanding about early years work and what it entailed. However, negative comments from other teachers were resented much more because early years teachers expected their colleagues to be better informed about their work than those outside the profession. The following selection of quotations from early years teachers indicate their experiences:

*- - - he was in reception initially and they (the teachers) moved around the year groups and he went to year 2 and one of the teachers came in and said oh I see you've got a promotion then. (Dave)*



*The old story that if you change year groups, or the possibility of changing year groups, that if you move to an older age group you're being promoted or that you're on the way up. - - - I even heard someone who works within the school say it. You know, people turned around and couldn't believe that she was saying that sort of thing. (Anne)*

*I mean even in my school you see references constantly that the junior teachers have a lot of marking to do, you know they've got to update books every night, um and they know full well I haven't got that because you know my marking is done immediately, there and then with the children. And then they'll say oh but you've got lots of preparation to do haven't you, well yes I have but they still really don't take it on board. (Helen)*

*I know one or two secondary teachers and I'm sure they don't value what I do as much as what they do. I've got the impression from one or two friends who are teaching infants in infant\junior schools that the infants aren't really high priority. You know if the hall is needed for something it's for the juniors and the infants don't get the same opportunities. Pauline*

*- - - even within the teaching profession they're (early years teachers) valued less. (Sheila)*

In Judith's experience such views were not explicitly referred to, though one particular experience confirmed to her the misinformed views teachers of older children often held of her work. Judith also stressed that not all colleagues held these views:

*Colleagues, colleagues in the junior department in, not all instances, but in some instances think that teaching early years is not an important job in the school. An example, my daughter is just going into teacher training and she's going to go into secondary, she doesn't want to teach little children and she's come into my reception class and she said I just don't know how you do it mum, I just do not know how you do it. I wouldn't know what to do, blah, blah, blah. And she spent some time in a year 6 class and said to the year 6 teacher, oh I don't know how they do the little ones and the year 6 teacher said words to the effect, oh well they don't, you know, it's not very exciting, not good but you know they just play, and that you've just got to watch them play, watch them play and watch them doing this, that and the other. You know it's far more interesting teaching older children. So I mean I know that from the horse's mouth, what she's said, although colleagues haven't exactly said that, but you can, it sounds silly to say, it's like um you're going paranoid but you can sense it with some colleagues but most certainly it isn't all, most certainly it isn't all. (Judith)*

Helen too had come across negative views about early years teaching from colleagues. She felt that the mothers of the young children she was teaching often had a better understanding of the work of early years educators than teachers of older children:

*Well, I think one of the big things that came out with me going down to reception class was the fact that a lot of people, and you know people in education themselves, said oh you're going to wash the paint pots, they think you play all day. As an overall view, I think the status of early years education as a whole needs an uplift, needs a new image. I don't think, I think mums have a better idea of what early years educators do with their children than teachers who work with older age groups and I think it's ignorance on the teachers' part. (Helen)*

Dave found that his headteacher's comments and actions often reflected negative views of early years teaching. Dave believed this resulted from the head's junior training and classroom experience:

*And certainly I don't think that the (early years) teachers have as much status in her (the head's) eyes as the junior ones, the junior teachers do. I think part, just from staff meetings and stuff and things that she says that, she may not mean to say them in the way she does but sometimes the way she comes across can almost dismiss the staff in early years sometimes. Um, just trying to think of, I don't know, things around, there*

*have certainly been times recently where she's suggested that the educational assistants who work further up the school go on to training courses whereas at the moment the early years ones don't need to because you know, almost like they don't need to know about maths really. And I'm not sure that she means that in the way that she says it but it comes across that way. And it's that kind of, continuous, those tiny little things that she might say and I don't think that she does value, value the early years staff as much but that's probably because of where she's coming from, top down (reference to head being junior trained and experienced). (Dave)*

Dave's reference to his primary headteacher's junior training and teaching experience being with the older junior children echoes my own experiences. During my twenty years as a teacher I worked for six primary heads. All were men and all were junior trained and had taught junior age children. They often admitted to knowing little about early years education and generally they were content to leave those of us working with the younger children to get on with the job showing little commitment to gaining either theoretical or practical experience in the early years. Their greater interest in the work of the older children often resulted in greater autonomy for those of us working with the younger children but it served to reinforce the importance and status attached to those teaching older children. Thus the very organisation of primary schools reinforces negative stereotypes.

The low status of early years teaching and its teachers.

The teachers' stories about their experiences also included explanations which accounted for the low status of early years teaching. These teachers thought that society was misinformed about early years teaching and that it was perceived as being less intellectually demanding than teaching older children. Hurst (1991) claimed that the perception of many people is that the education of the youngest children makes no intellectual demands on the adults involved, a perception early years teachers were aware of:

*I know early years people are not valued as much as they should be but that's because people are ignorant isn't it really? - - - Well, people think you don't need to know so much I don't suppose if you've got nursery than if you've got 11 year olds or 16 year olds. (Pauline)*

*I still think people have this idea that it's a more demanding, and that you're more intelligent if you teach secondary because you used to have to have a degree in the subject. (Anne)*

*I do think there is still a tradition of people thinking well you don't actually need to be terribly, what does a three year old know, you don't need to be terribly bright to teach a three year old. Oh A levels yes, you need to be really bright and actually I think that the um, the academic discipline of the development of early learning and all the philosophies*

*that underpin it are incredibly academically challenging and you do need actually quite a good academic background to deal with it really well. But I don't think that's necessarily generally recognised, it's only recognised by early years people. The minute you step outside of that world you know a little smile and a pat on the head. So yes it's very low status. (Karen)*

*So they do think I think that because you teach little ones you're not as well qualified, and that um somehow you don't need to be so well qualified to teach little ones. (Judith)*

In addition, some teachers thought that early years teaching might be seen as less demanding in terms of time demands and that, linked to this, it might also be thought more compatible with family life than teaching older children:

*I still think people have this idea that it's a more demanding, and that you're more intelligent if you teach secondary because you used to have to have a degree in the subject and perhaps people think you have to work longer hours, I don't know. I mean the idea is that young children go home at whatever time, 3 o'clock and therefore, that the day starts at 9 and finishes at 3. I think it's still the traditional idea of the woman teaching those children and sort of flying off, forgetting about them at 3 o'clock to go and see to husband and family, you know sort of fits in with*

*children's school hours and that those infant teachers don't stand up and say, hey that's not how it is at all. (Anne)*

*People still think, yes that's right, that's it's, the hours are very short, that you don't have to mark books as an infant teacher and therefore you're not doing anything else. They don't think about the preparation, and the, well you know, I mean one just doesn't know what people are thinking of, that you know can you walk in at 9 o'clock and just decide what the children are going to do? I don't know what they think, how they think you go about it but certainly they think that because you're not marking books there's nothing else that would have to be done. Just go in there to take 30 four year olds for the day and it's nice and easy.*

*(Karen)*

### Misconceptions about early years teaching

Clark (1988) argues that 'there is an urgent public relations exercise to be undertaken by those concerned with early education' (p.278). This is certainly the stance taken by the early years teachers in this study. Teachers took responsibility for society's misconceptions about early years education. They believed they were at fault for not articulating the value, importance and demands of early years teaching to others. Karen thought that early years teachers were responsible for ensuring that others better understood early years education and believed this was the route to improving their status:

*I mean I think that's the other thing, I think there's a huge need for early years practitioners to be articulate about what they are doing. (Karen)*

Judith thinks some early years teachers are their own worst enemy, devaluing themselves and their work in what they say:

*I think in some, not all, but I think in some instances I think that's early years teachers own fault. It's a bit like a woman saying I'm only a housewife, I'm at home looking after children rather than saying (changes voice and speaks next 16 words proudly) I'm a housewife doing the most important job in the world looking after the future generation, and a lot of early years say I only teach the younger ones rather than I teach young ones. So I think to some degree it's the, a lot of it is the teachers own doing in some respects. So I think there is this all this, perception around that early years is, well what is it all about and I think it is because nobody has sort of said look this is an academic thing to do, nobody has stood up, and you hear on the telly all the time including the prime minister, well you know the youngest children, you know we've had all this thing about oh they don't need teachers do they, all they need is nursery teachers or these specially trained people that can go in and don't need a degree or whatever. So you've got it from all angles and then you sort of, people do believe what they're told rather than*



*somebody say this is the most arduous task (sentence unfinished)*

*(Judith)*

Why is it that society is still ill-informed so about early years teaching? While teachers tended to blame themselves for society's misunderstandings of their work, not one referred to structural constraints which might explain their low status. The explanation according to these teachers is that early years practitioners have been ineffective in explaining their work to others. While greater information about early years education might be helpful, it does not address the fundamental inequalities relating to early years work, inequalities relating to women's work and the position of women in society. It is likely that while early years teaching remains almost exclusively women's work it will be accorded lesser status than work associated with men. Furthermore, its caring/nurturing associations undermine its status in a society that privileges the academic over the non-academic. The low status attributed to early years work and its practitioners also has power implications. Those with low status in society are generally marginalised, denied a voice and lack power. It may be that early years advocates are less successful in disseminating positive messages about early years education because those in education with powerful positions, and hence voices, are not from early years backgrounds.

Another, or additional, explanation might be the absence of a suitable/appropriate language in which to talk about early years work. As noted earlier that privileging of men's ways of conceiving education and in particular the status attached to the 'male'

academic discourse might limit the ways early years teachers talk about their work and how it is received by others. Is there a discourse for talking about social/emotional/personal that acknowledges the value of these, that gives them equal status alongside the intellectual?

Women need to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the (masculine) social contract (Kristeva, 1979, cited by Andrews, 1994, p.3).

#### Early years teaching: a view from the teachers

Because teaching is a moral craft, it has a purpose for those that do it.

There are things that teachers value, that they want to achieve through their teaching (Fullan and Hargreaves 1992, p.5).

Early years teachers are well aware of the perceptions others have of their work but what are their own understandings of the work they do? The following section examines what early years teachers aim to achieve through their teaching, the roles they envisage for themselves, their educational values. It is important to remember that these teachers were teaching at a time when rapid policy changes in education were changing the roles of all teachers. Teachers are now more accountable, have greater

responsibility for delivering a National Curriculum and for assessing, recording and reporting children's progress. While some teachers may be in agreement with the changes, others may consider them inappropriate. Inevitably, the fact that teachers are required by law to implement these changes means that their professional freedom and autonomy is curtailed. How then do teachers relate these new priorities to their own educational beliefs?

Furthermore, the dominant discourses of early years practice, child-centredness, the role of experience in learning, the integration of the curriculum and a process approach to learning, do not sit comfortably with many of the recent changes. Although the National Curriculum does not apply to children under five this sector has not escaped its effects and many early years teachers have felt the impact of the recent government initiatives. Sylva et al's (1992) research on the effects of the National Curriculum on nursery practice found the most cited drawback in nurseries was the pressure placed on both teachers and children to achieve, followed by a lessening on learning through play (cited by Siraj-Blatchford, 1993). Teachers working with the under-fives felt the downward pressure of the reforms and the recent introduction of the standards expected of children about to enter compulsory education (Desirable Outcomes, 1996) has extended the National Curriculum downwards. The Government's stated priorities can often seem conflicting. The introduction of the National Curriculum with its aim of entitling all children to a broad curriculum has recently come under threat from statements proposing that teachers in primary schools, and especially ones having

difficulty meeting assessment targets, should concentrate on the 'basics'. Pollard (1985) argues that the teacher's role is ill-defined:

The first fundamental issue that teachers face concerns the purpose of education itself. We lack, and perhaps have always lacked, a stable and coherent and generally acceptable specification of educational aims. Should we focus on the child or the subject, on creativity or basic skills, on independent thinking or 'straightforward' knowledge, on individual development or on socialisation into groups? The dilemmas are endless (p.1).

What then are the aims and purposes of the early years teachers in this study, where do they place their emphases and what are their dilemmas? When primary teachers talk about their work, two major themes repeatedly surface (eg Nias, 1989; Cortazzi, 1991; Thomas, 1995 and Evetts, 1990). One is a concern for children's social, physical and emotional well being, the other is a concern for their cognitive development. All of the early years teachers I spoke with interpreted their role in very broad terms identifying aims relating to both academic and non-academic areas and I have used these two categories as a way of organising and reporting my findings. As Nias (1997) says:

One way and another, in the course of the last two centuries it has become customary to assume that primary teachers will willingly accept

responsibility for all aspects of children's welfare and development  
(p.53).

The following section looks at the way early years teachers perceive their roles as teachers of young children. It identifies the broad range of aims early years teachers consider to be their responsibility and examines what each aim means for different individuals. Whilst I have categorised teachers' aims as academic and non-academic their aims were much more interrelated than such categories imply. The interrelationships between aims are apparent throughout the teachers' accounts and I have tried to acknowledge this whilst writing under separate categories to provide a framework for comprehension. These teachers did not view their work as less demanding than teaching in any other sector of the education service. They also rejected the view that their work was 'childminding' as their aims and purposes detailed below show.

#### Academic aims

The interviewees did not privilege academic aims over non-academic. This section comes first purely for reasons of clarity. Academic and non-academic aims were seen by the early years teachers as interrelated and interdependent as a later section will show.

a) learning the curriculum

This domination of the primary curriculum by English and mathematics over a long period of time is well documented (Campbell, 1993) and the PACE project (Pollard et al 1994) found a continued emphasis in these areas. While acknowledging the importance of a broad curriculum, as now enshrined in the National Curriculum, Susan and Karen identify their priorities as:

*I suppose my more specific aims are that I do feel it is very important for them to learn the basic skills of reading and writing and maths. I do feel that's crucial at that stage. (Susan)*

*- - - but at the end of the day what we do need to do is to say for example to be able to read, and to write. We do need to be able to count and what we need to do is to give children the experiences so that they can begin to discover about their world. (Karen)*

Judith too aimed to provide children with a broad curriculum but she also gave emphasis to literacy, seeing it as the cornerstone to later educational success:

*- - - but the bottom line is if they can't read and they're not literate, then really to be successful with our education system that's what you've got to be able to do. And if you're not successful at it you're not going to*

*succeed and then as a teacher you're not doing the best by them.*

*(Judith)*

Helen, working with a reception class in an independent school was more specific:

*In the environment I'm in at the moment with my small class of 20 children my aim is that by the time the children leave me, from an academic point of view they are well on the way with the school scheme, they've all sort of passed the stage of flash cards and they've entered the realms of phonics and word building, and in maths that they have an excellent understanding of numbers to 0 to 10 and they're working on addition and subtraction within 10. (Helen)*

#### b) learning how to learn

When discussing their academic aims most teachers talked less about teaching 'bodies of knowledge' and more about developing particular skills and qualities in children which would enable children to learn in any curriculum area. Teachers gave more time to discussing these 'transferable skills' in their accounts than to subject related aims. As

Paul said:

*The purpose is, you're equipping them with the tools to learn. I mean you're teaching them how to learn. You're sort of culturing, what's the*

*word, you're imbuing them with the culture of learning and whether they can I suppose start writing their names and being able to recognise numbers and so on seems to me sort of contingent. What you're doing, you're teaching them how to concentrate and how to, it's sort of Vygotskian idea and it's, very raw stage. You're teaching them how to hold a pencil, how to sit down at a table and concentrate on something, we're encouraging them to sort of finish tasks, you're encouraging them to be critical about things, to reason, you're beginning to give them the culture of education. It's a very artificial thing isn't it really? (Paul)*

Developing children's ability to think for themselves, to question, to make decisions about their learning and to take responsibility for their learning were considered an important aspects of their work.

*I'm just thinking, just to make them more independent, more aware, more knowledgeable, more able to think for themselves, more able to reason, more able to question, more to notice things, see patterns.*

*(Mati)*

*You see I think it's to encourage them to want to ask questions as well, to want to find out things. (Sheila)*



*But I do think too that it isn't just about reading and writing, that it is about life skills and that's the other thing I like about the Highscope because what it does is it says what are you (the child) going to plan to do. And once you've planned what you're going to do you take responsibility for that and you're expected to ensure that that in some way happens or if you can't manage it and you have to change your plan you articulate or think about why you need to change it. (Karen)*

Alison was also committed to developing independent learners but felt such qualities were often not valued as the children progressed up through the school:

*I think that one of the major purposes of our early years team at school is to give the children that come through our hands the confidence to be able to make a choice, to make a choice about an activity that might be on offer around a theme, whether it's directed or undirected activity, is to give the children the confidence to make that choice. - - - and if they decide to make a choice about some work in the nursery or reception that they complete that choice. I hope that we're giving them responsibility, I think one of the problems that I see because of the pressure on teachers of the National Curriculum and OFSTED in early years often children are given a lot of responsibility but when they become involved in, when they move into age groups, perhaps year 2 upwards, that responsibility often is eroded because teachers have so*

*much pressure on them to um, what they're asked to do by OFSTED, by the National Curriculum, by the management of the school, that that responsibility sometimes is eroded because it's easier to direct the children um, for the teacher to direct all the activities in the classroom , and certainly I've seen that happening. (Alison)*

The Primary Assessment, Curriculum and Experience Project (PACE) study , a study of the implementation of the National Curriculum in primary schools in England which explored the feelings, behaviour and experiences of both pupils and teachers following the 1988 Education Reform Act, reported a similar finding:

Evidence from interviews with pupils and from classroom observation indicates a steady decline in pupil autonomy as they moved from Year 1 to Year 4 (Pollard et al.,1994, p.156).

### Non-academic aims

As noted above, non-academic aims were not considered secondary to academic aims.

Both were viewed as important as Helen indicated:

*- - - the fact that you know children get left out of games, there's always a child who doesn't mix as well as the others, the fact that they then start to integrate with the group and join in activities to me that is equally*

*important (as the academic) because that first year in school is their foundation. (Helen)*

a) Social development - learning to care for others

All the early years teachers cited children's social development as one of their aims. More specifically they aimed to enable children to initiate, build and maintain relationships with their peers:

*But socially I think my aim is that those children come into school, some of them have come in as only children and my aim by the time they've had their first full year in school is that they're well and truly adjusted to school life, school routine, they're mixing with their peer group, they're learning to share, it's not all egocentric activities, it's not all me, me, me that they are turn-taking, happily turn-taking in activities and they are beginning to see a need in their friends. If somebody falls over and hurts themselves they'll go over and look after, bring them to the dinner ladies, bring them to me. (Helen)*

*It's really, it's to do with getting on with their peers, co-operating, taking turns. (Paul)*

*Well, getting the children to learn to mix with each other, and share. That is one of the biggest things that I find, you know that they just*

*haven't got any concept of anybody else and anybody else's feelings and they find it very difficult really to work alongside or with other children.*

*(Pauline)*

*I mean I think they're very much developing, a huge amount of my work goes into social development at that age. They're learning to be with other people, they're learning to share and relate and be away from the home situation they've been so used to. (Susan)*

*How to cope with relationships, friends. (Sheila)*

Not only were non-academic aims viewed as being as important as academic ones, but some teachers also regarded children's academic progress as being dependent on non-academic aims. Teachers wanted the children to get along with each other and viewed this as an aim in its own right. However, they also viewed learning as a social process and, therefore, saw children's social development as influencing their intellectual development. Thus, good relationships with peers were seen as contributing positively to the learning process. For example, Anne and Dave both saw the children's academic development as being dependent upon their ability to relate socially with peers and adults in the learning environment:

*- - - if they haven't got the skills to communicate with other children or to deal with other children then I don't think they're ready for sitting*

*doing the more formal work. They need to have had the space and the opportunity to learn how to deal with their peers and with adults before, I would say before they can go on to the more formal things of what reading's about, and writing ..... (Anne)*

*I just think for me I think that I can concentrate so much more on the whole child because you kind of have the social skills and as I say those are fundamental to me, they are the most important thing. But inevitably knowledge comes from that ..... (Dave)*

#### b) Emotional development - learning to care for themselves

While several teachers talked of children's emotional development it meant different things to different teachers. For Karen enabling children to acknowledge their feelings and learn to deal with them was an important part of her work:

*I mean the other part of the curriculum too I think which is my other bee in my bonnet, is about denying feelings. I think we are so much a society that which denies feelings and certainly educationalists, I don't think have even begun to look at it but again that's something I'm trying to educate myself into so that when somebody comes into the classroom crying you don't say, oh but you're fine aren't you. You say you're obviously feeling sad, tell me why you're feeling sad today. Or maybe they can't tell you why they're feeling sad but at least you accept their*

*sadness. And if they're hitting somebody over the head you accept their anger. I mean that isn't necessarily the way to deal with it and you try and give them different strategies to deal with it, but you are allowed to feel anger. We all feel cross and angry sometimes and it's about accepting feelings and so on and trying to be empathetic towards other people's feelings. I always think that's incredibly important. (Karen)*

Developing children's self-esteem was important to Susan, Sheila, Judith and Diane.

Again it was seen as necessary for promoting children's intellectual development:

*But I was more thinking of things like that like, um to enable them to have the opportunity to, you know, things like self-esteem and things like that, making time to encourage children to feel more confident and things like that. (Sheila)*

*I would say a confidence is crucial. A confidence in their own ability is absolutely crucial if they're then going to develop their learning to its full potential. I mean I think yes they will learn basic skills if they're not very confident or happy but I think if they're going to want to go on and develop it and go on you know as an adult, read up you know and go off on your own way, sort of independent learning, I think they've got to feel confident about it. (Susan)*

Like Dave, Susan's views of teaching and the kind of teacher she wants to be relate to her own experiences of school. Her aims for promoting children's self-esteem and enjoyment of school are influenced by her own negative schooling experiences:

*I don't think I enjoyed, I was so pleased to leave school, secondary school. I mean primary school I just remember being scared all the time, you know that you'd done something wrong, you'd stepped out of line by mistake and were going to get blamed for it. Secondary school I can just, I don't ever feel, remember feeling very confident about learning and I can remember feeling that, well not feeling but looking back that the teachers weren't doing anything to increase my confidence in my learning. And looking back I feel quite cross about that because I feel that confidence is crucial in learning. I mean we had some good teachers, one teacher that I remember was, well that was the one about wild flowers and the other again was quite a cranky teacher but really enthusiastic and obviously loved her subject, it was English, and I remember her. But perhaps that was a time when she was allowed to be, go off on her own way and allowed to be really enthusiastic and you know we benefited from that, yes. But to go back to your point, yes it is, the way I feel I relate to children at school at the moment is influenced by memories and not particularly enjoying my own school days and feeling it should be better. (Susan)*

Judith's belief in the importance of self-esteem also appears to relate to her own experiences of school. While she was strong enough to overcome negative comments she believes others might not be:

*Um, when I was at school I'd got a dying ambition to be a pathologist and the teacher looked at me, and I can always remember this because I took two 11+ exams and failed. So I went to a secondary modern school, didn't do any exams or anything and she looked at me as if to say, don't be so silly you can't be one of them 'cos you're not clever enough sort of thing. And that's always stuck with me and I felt very unintelligent I suppose. - - - I can remember all sorts of negative things said by teachers at secondary school. - - - but I suppose I'm a bit of a bolshi person really and thought, oh who are you to tell me what I am sort of thing and I suppose it never really, well I suppose it must have struck down 'cos I'm able to repeat it aren't I, but at the time I can't say I felt, um, I think it makes me aware as I'm a teacher now how, the power you have and you have to be very careful not to abuse that power and I think perhaps I was fortunate that I wasn't the sort of person that, I thought oh damn you sort of thing if I ever thought that but it didn't bother me. But there are people it would have bothered and so I think that makes me aware you don't abuse that power because that's something precious to that person. So I think it's a case of being sensitive to their needs and not to knock them down. (Judith)*



Diane's experience of teaching, and of her own daughter's schooling leads her to believe that the educational system has become more pressurised and undermining of children's confidence:

*I think there's a lot more pressure on children in the system than there's ever been at any other time. A lot more pressure on children. I see it with my own daughter. I'm horrified at what happens to her in the system and you feel sometimes as a parent powerless to help. But if you feel you can give something to children to help them along the way um, you know it's about their confidence, that they can succeed and they have got every right to succeed, and that's the way forward. (Diane)*

In the same way that teachers saw social development as contributing positively towards intellectual development Mati stressed the importance of a child's emotional well-being for development in other areas:

*Well, I think that in order for children to achieve academically, socially, emotionally, they need sort of an inner sort of peace really and I think so many children go through life just sort of coping, just managing to pull together, hold together, but um, they never achieve at school as a result. I think if people were you know, sort of happy about themselves as a person and happier about their home situation, more able to cope*

*emotionally, I think you're more able to take on more in terms of skills, new knowledge. But if you've got things on your mind all the time they're stopping you progressing. (Mati)*

### The relationship between academic and non-academic aims

Many writers and practitioners see the role of early years teachers as one of caring for children's development in all areas of development. Children's cognitive and their social and emotional development are seen as interrelated. Barbara Tatton (1997) writes:

You often can't fulfil a moral responsibility for pupils learning, that is teach them, if those children are unhappy, asocial, or neglected in a personal sense as these areas are foundations upon which intellectual development needs to be built (p.76).

The teachers in this study valued both academic and non-academic aims. Areas of affective education were seen as being important in their own right and as a way of making intellectual development most effective:

*Having the opportunity to have interaction with adults, be supported, you know their self-esteem, their emotional development just as equally balanced as any other aspect of their development. - - - I mean I think*

*there's an element about you know, wanting to care for young children but there's also the whole other issue of wanting to educate children and ensure you have you know that two way role. (Diane)*

Susan and Judith both saw social and emotional well-being as important for promoting academic learning:

*I mean if you're thinking of social development in terms of being comfortable away from parents I don't think they can develop in other ways until they are fairly comfortable in that situation. (Susan)*

*Well, obviously, the aim is to teach them the school curriculum, whatever school it is that you're working in but I find it hard to divorce the academic from the personal and social because I think it's via the personal and social you get the academic across. (Judith)*

It is important to note that teachers saw children's development in an holistic way. Academic and non-academic areas were regarded as interrelated and interdependent. For the purposes of clarity I have identified particular categories separately; however it is important to remember that teachers invariably spoke about their aims in an integrated way. The following quotation from Judith exemplifies this integration. The teaching of young children is often thought of in terms of caring for them, of caring for

their social, emotional and physical needs. Judith acknowledges these aspects of her work but also broadens the concept of caring to include the academic:

*Yes, and also their social development, personal and social development. You know not just this business that school's just academic, but school's about a lot of things. I said (to an advisor) if you want the reception class to be a reception class then there's got to be a knowledge that the children have got to be socially and physically cared for as well as academically and that the physical and social caring feeds the academic caring but without the other I mean they wouldn't be any good academically. (Judith)*

Thus, intellectual development necessarily involved provision for social and emotional needs. Equally, social and emotional development required attention to the academic because the intellectual dimension has implications for our emotional and social well being.

#### Balancing the academic and non-academic

While teachers acknowledged the importance of children's social and emotional development, both in their own right and for promoting intellectual development, some teachers said they found it difficult to find sufficient time for non-academic aims:

*There's always that tension. There shouldn't be a tension really because it should be a seamless web shouldn't it but there is because there is the basic skills, there's this idea of basic skills, that on the hierarchy that's at the top isn't it? You can actually show that a child's learned to write all their numbers, they can write their name and there's this feeling that if time is short, as it always is, then some things gets scrapped and it's never the writing and the maths ..... (Paul)*

Teachers felt that the introduction of the National Curriculum had put pressure on the time available for non-academic aims. The lack of recognition of the importance of children's social and emotional development over recent years and the priority given to academic aims was seen to have given greater status to academic development. Teachers felt pressured over academic expectations of children and time constraints resulted in them paying less attention to non-academic areas than they would have liked. This situation was made worse by the advocacy of more formal teaching approaches.:

*I think in a sense it's (introduction of National Curriculum) put more pressure on the social and emotional because I feel that that needs an awful lot of time and an awful lot of teacher energy and time put aside to actually explain say rules, why we have rules. I mean if I notice my time with children an awful lot of it is managing them, you know telling them not to sit on top of each other and you know why and explaining the*

*social rules takes a huge amount of time and I feel if I'm going to do that properly that is in a sense conflict, in conflict with the amount of time I'm required to spend on the National Curriculum, on the prescribed sort of academic skills really. I think that's the difficulty that I find. I want perhaps want to spend more time in circle time, in other ways of getting them used working with each other and take my time over it more but I feel very much under pressure to cover areas of the National Curriculum. (Susan)*

*I think it should all be going on hand in hand in a way. You know there are times, perhaps there are times when it's not going on at all or not particularly, the sort of socialisation, there's more of the actual teaching but I think with the younger ones, and this is a problem I think with the National Curriculum and the putting things into subjects thing, that it's quite difficult because I think you need to be talking with the children and allow this sort of more laid back approach to be going on. I do feel that it's not allowed for (time for social\emotional), with the formal teaching, if you've got a head or whoever above you who doesn't understand that children need to have been through certain stages before they can write for example. You know if they've never held a pencil and probably not even had enough toys sort of that they've been building with or the experiences of you know space and that sort of thing and then for me to be sort of challenged and said well why is this child*

*not writing I can say well they can hardly hold a pencil never mind do anything with it. They've got to be allowed to go through those stages, and a lot of other stages, you know as I was saying the socialisation, how to talk to other children, how to learn to take turns and so on. If they've just been at home presumably parked in front of the television set and not talked to and not given anything to play with or to develop these skills. So there is the pressure time wise of people saying well surely you shouldn't be talking to them, you shouldn't be sort of playing with them or they shouldn't be playing, they should be, why are they not writing their name or why are they not doing this, this and this. (Anne)*

*I think in the climate I started to be a teacher in and continued to be a teacher in, particularly the last two years, that was just so much forgotten about (social/emotional) and perhaps that was not good but you're continually thinking about the academic side rather than the socialisation of the children. You're purely thinking of the children as wanting them to learn, to read, to be able to operate mathematically. The ideal I suppose is to wait for them to share together and that they value friendship but the time, even in reception class, the time that you felt you could give to that was so little in comparison to teaching them to read and, I think that went to the wayside ... But you just feel the pressure that you just can't do it, and you can't justify because you've got this whole chunk of the National Curriculum you've got to do and there isn't the*

*time left to do that sort of thing. So if a fight's gone on in the playground or something like that you do it, rushed, all the time you're talking to the kids you're thinking I've got to get on with what I'm doing, I've got to get on with what I've planned to do and if there wasn't that pressure you could spend the whole morning maybe devising a set of rules for how they should behave, or making a book about it or something like that, as it arose. But you just don't, you just feel that pressure all the time of what have they got to achieve, who's coming round to test them, that sort of thing. What are the parents going to say if they know we're doing this?*

*(Sheila)*

Even though these teachers were teaching the youngest children in school, and for some the National Curriculum was not a requirement, they still felt the pressure:

*- - - the pressure starts at the top you know and is squeezed right down through the whole system and it's squeezed right onto those, the children, because you know, we have got to do this and we have got to do that and we've got to do this. (Carol)*

Susan spoke of the way her holistic view of a child's development clashed with the view implicit in the National Curriculum. She felt the National Curriculum should take into account children's social/emotional development and the interrelationship between intellectual and other areas of development:



*I mean I think, in a sense, the National Curriculum assumes that children come to school all nicely balanced, settled, socialised, able to cope with this totally different situation that we're putting them in. I mean it just makes no allowances. (Susan)*

However not all the teachers experienced such difficulties with the introduction of the National Curriculum. Judith felt confident in her existing practice and was able to fit the National Curriculum into this. The change for her was in the amount of extra paperwork required by the reforms:

*And I thought well it (existing practice) must be all right because I'd been, two different schools I'd been inspected, I'd been watched by an HMI, and nobody had ever said to me well I'm sorry dear but you'd better pack your bags and go now. - - - I can't see anything unadaptable in the National Curriculum personally. - - - Despite the National Curriculum I don't think I've changed my own way of what I think is good about education and really the paper work's changed but I don't think my approach has changed in the classroom and I've not made it a big issue to myself. So I thought well, it's a National Curriculum, National you know, millions of children in England and Wales, you know it's not going to fit unless the teachers make it fit and you have to make it your own. I still believe that the National Curriculum is a 'national'*

*curriculum and you have to mould it to fit. I follow it in the way I think it is relevant. (Judith)*

When discussing their aims teachers did not include children's aesthetic and physical development. This doesn't mean that children were not engaging in any art/musical or physical activities in school as these activities are mentioned in various places throughout the teachers' accounts. The fact that early years teachers did not include them when talking specifically about their aims probably reflects the lesser emphasis placed on these areas of children's development in comparison to children's academic and social/emotional development. Paul was an exception giving importance to children's physical development. Like many teachers of young children Paul adopted a cross-curricular approach to children's learning:

*I also find it's very important at this age is getting them to use their whole bodies. I'm very interested in the physical side of things. If you, you can do so easily with the young children, if you're teaching them something you can teach the whole body, sort of holistically, it's quite a Steiner idea. I always have my PE lessons, they're always linked to the English lessons or maths lessons so that they're learning with their whole bodies 'cos. what's really exciting about this age is the physicalness of it, you know reception class they're wandering around, you've got to allow, you've got give them space to, free movement haven't you? (Paul)*

c) promoting positive attitudes - learning to care for education

Early years teachers felt very responsible for developing in children positive attitudes towards school and learning. They were aware that as children's first school educators they were in a position to influence children's views of schooling and believed that children's early experiences of school could have a lasting effect on their school career:

*What am I aiming for? I think, obviously I want children to have had a very good experience, an initial good experience, a very positive experience, that would be the overriding factor. (Diane)*

*I think it really goes back to what I said before, you know it's not so much at the very beginning what they're learning it's giving them the love of learning, it's making them want, that's what you're initiating really, you're not giving them any list of kings and queens who've been on the throne since you know 1800, you're actually wanting them to learn about history or, to go back to their parents and say hey we did this in school today, you know I want to talk to you about it and um so it's almost laying the seeds for the future, for their future in school and almost ... yeah and almost you're the key to it, if they don't enjoy it in the reception class then they're very often not going to enjoy it the whole secondary, the whole school career. So if you can actually set that feeling and make them enjoy it from you know the teacher you are and*

*the way that you teach, want to enjoy school then I think you've almost been very successful. (Sheila)*

*Well, I suppose for those very early ones my main aim would be actually fun, excitement, enjoyment so that um, so that within those criteria they're actually wanting to learn and are learning things I think. Otherwise education's an absolute killer and hopefully that should run on for quite a long time but I'm not sure that it does. (Carol)*

*They've got a heck of a long time ahead of them in school and if that first year isn't a happy year then I've failed. I think it's extremely important that as the class teacher of the reception class children at the end of the year I've to look back and say yes I've achieved the academic aims that I set out and objectives within the core subjects. But also that I know that those children had an extremely happy start to their school life and if I can look back the children hadn't achieved that then I'd be very upset, because they have got a long time in school, 6 years in primary school and 5 years in secondary school, years and years ahead of that but if they don't want to do things, they don't want to join in things er at this age then somewhere along the line somebody is going to inherit that. - - - They don't see it as um oh I've got 11 years ahead of me but as they go through school I think eventually it will dawn upon them oh I didn't like that teacher but I liked this one. If I can send them on knowing that*

*overall they've had a wonderful time in reception class great. - - - I think in that reception classroom you're a figure head of what school's going to represent for these children. I think if they come in and they come in the door and they're full of the things, they want to come to school then through your activities if you can achieve that then you're setting the foundations for a successful school career for them. (Helen)*

### Happiness

My analyses of the transcripts highlighted the significance early years teachers attach to children's happiness in school. They wanted the children they taught to be happy in school and to enjoy the tasks they were engaged in. Great emphasis was placed on the importance of children enjoying school and schooling and that the experience be a happy one:

*- - - but I think the crucial thing is that they're happy in school. (Susan)*

*I am there to make that environment so educationally friendly and happy for those children that they automatically want to do it, they want to have a go. (Helen)*

Children's happiness was regarded as important for two reasons. Firstly, as with other non-academic aims, teachers thought that children's happiness was vital for ensuring academic progress. As John Masefield wrote, 'the days that make us happy make us

wise' (cited in Bartlett, 1980, p.760). Teachers believed that children would learn best if they enjoyed what they were doing and were happy in school:

*- - - but it just seems, I don't know, it seems to me fairly common sense that you know if someone isn't happy, you know especially a five year old, then um they're not really going to be in the best sort of learning situation. (Carol)*

*I think if they don't enjoy coming to school, if they don't want to come to school, then there's no way that you can engender that, that wanting to get on, wanting to achieve. I think if you've got them enjoying it then you've at least got them on the first way to learning things, to enjoy doing things. (Sheila)*

Carol draws on her experience with her own children to explain why children's happiness in school is important for her:

*I mean I, yes I'm absolutely certain that if a child is not happy or is bored or is not finding it interesting they're really not going to, you know switch on to - - (last couple of words unclear), I would think the majority of children and um it's you know that sort of thing when you've had your own children, you know what an influence a school day, life has on them and I think if they've got to come everyday um one likes to*

*think that they would go home and think that they've, you know you can't say it for everyday and it's not, you know, not for every child, but they have enjoyed coming to school and it hasn't been a nightmare and that they haven't been afraid to come or you know, or, so I suppose that's one of my overriding aims for those, you know. (Carol)*

Secondly, the teachers were very keen to develop positive attitudes in children towards learning and school. They saw the early years of schooling as crucial in setting the scene for future attitudes to education. It was important to them that children were happy in school so that these positive attitudes could be fostered.

Anne also mentioned the benefits to teachers of children enjoying school. When children are happy in the classroom it creates a positive environment for both teachers and children:

*Yes, it's difficult really to see just why one would go more for being with those, that age group rather than the older, and yet I think it still, it still comes back to the enthusiasm and the fact that they love being there. You get, you know it's a cheerful place to be isn't it I think, a nursery or a reception class and I do think, er when people come in they tend to, you know into the early years classes, they tend to say oh you know everyone's very cheerful and lively. (Anne)*

Children were regarded as more likely to learn if they were happy in school. This happiness depended upon providing interesting and enjoyable activities for the children and upon attending to their social and emotional needs. Happiness was also necessary for promoting positive attitudes towards schooling, attitudes which would also influence children's learning. The acknowledgement of the interdependence and interplay between aims was a strong feature in these early years teachers' accounts.

### The introduction of the National Curriculum - some tensions

I have already indicated how early years teachers felt the introduction of the National Curriculum, and its associated changes, created tensions between their aims and those imposed by recent educational reforms. Time constraints meant some teachers felt pressurised to concentrate on academic requirements sometimes to the detriment of children's social and emotional development. Teachers spoke of other tensions resulting from the introduction of the National Curriculum. Susan felt strongly that the introduction of the National Curriculum had changed the nature of the job itself:

*It has changed the job I think totally. I mean I feel personally that it's, it's made the job lose some of the creativity that it had before in that before the National Curriculum I knew that my job was to teach children to read and write and do maths, those were the sort of, the core skills and then I could use my own judgement, my own interests, coming from the children's interests as well, to develop from there and doing as much reading, writing and maths as I felt was necessary to, for children to*



*acquire those skills. I feel I've lost both the creativity and the use of my professional judgement in a way because we're required to teach so much of the other curriculum and put so much time into history, geography, science etc that I'm quite sure used to come up anyway. I'm sure I've always taught these subjects, with the exception of IT (information technology), but it used to arise more naturally. So I feel the job has changed and that's something that I suppose I do find difficult. (Susan)*

Susan was concerned that the National Curriculum prevented teachers capitalising on both their own and children's interests and enthusiasms with implications for children's, and teachers', happiness/satisfaction with school:

*I think the job does lose something. I mean I can remember in my junior school, one of my teachers, and I'll always remember her. She was mad about wild flowers so we really spent, and I mean this is extreme and you wouldn't necessarily want this, but we just spent the whole year really bringing wild flowers in, every single week, identifying them, learning about them. And she was so enthusiastic she really taught you about the beauty of those flowers and that has stayed with me throughout my life and now the interest in gardening and still in wild flowers. And I think that was so valuable and I think losing enthusiasms like that and specialities like that I think is very sad. Because I think, with early years*

*in particular, if you're prescribed to teach something you can get enthusiastic but maybe not to quite the extent that you used to, you'd go on a country walk, you'd bring things in and you'd share that sort of wonder about nature and you'd share things not because somebody else told you to but because you felt it. And I think, I really do feel that teaching, you know early years teaching has lost out on that. (Susan)*

And similarly with children's interests:

*I mean we're more or less telling children in schools now, please don't bring anything in because we don't have, we don't have time for doing you know showing and telling as we used to and then, that sometimes you used to have the freedom to then spend a whole morning looking at something or doing work around it if a child brought something in. You know a bird's nest or whatever, now you don't and children are more or less told not to bring things in and I think that's very sad. (Susan)*

The PACE project characterised this as the 'dead pigeon' syndrome as, prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum, if a child brought a dead bird (or anything else) to the teacher's attention this would be used spontaneously and teaching developed around this particular incident whereas now 'the pigeon might have to be consigned to the waste paper basket as an unwarranted distraction from the specified curriculum' (Evans et al. 1994). It may be that Susan saw school work based upon

children's and teachers' interests as a way of promoting children's happiness and fostering positive attitudes towards learning. The threat, by the National Curriculum, to children's enjoyment of school was something Carol was also concerned about, particularly because of the way her school had interpreted the teaching of the National Curriculum:

*But this particular school they seem to have it, this was the way that you do your 9 areas every week, so when you've got Year 2 and you've got to do, you know a bit of history, a bit of geography, bit of science, bit of technology, a bit of RE, they're actually on a roller coaster of learning and they get so tired and it's not possible I don't think. And I don't think it's a very good idea to flip from one quickly to another with year 2's, some of, maybe one or two with special needs within that band. I don't think that package is the best way of doing it and um, I think the children get exhausted, the teachers get exhausted and um, that's where your fun and excitement start going out of the window. (Carol)*

The PACE study, which looked at the impact of the National Curriculum and its associated assessment arrangements on Key Stage 1 teachers, found similar tensions arising from the introduction of the National Curriculum:

There appears to be quite clear evidence here (PACE) that Key Stage 1 teachers had felt compelled to narrow their priorities to concentrate on

basic skills at the expense of broader academic and non-academic objectives (Osborn 1996, p. 46).

The PACE study showed a significant increase in the importance accorded to basic skills from 48% in 1990 to 58% in 1994 and a decreasing emphasis on happiness and enjoyment in learning (65.3% in 1990 down to 54.4% in 1994), social skills and co-operative attitudes (41.7% down to 25% ) and independence ( 40.3% to 0.0%) over the same period.

#### One other important aim - linking home and school

A further feature which is distinctive of this early phase in a child's education, and which has a fundamental effect on the educational experience of young children is that of the home/school interface. At no other stage of education does this meet so sharply, or impact so heavily, on a child's educational attainment (Pascal, 1989, p. 8).

The promotion of good home-school links was important to the early years teachers in this research. Two main elements comprised this aim. Firstly, teachers recognised the change to children's lives that schooling involved and aimed to make the transition from the home to the school environment as smooth as possible. When talking about home-school links teachers invariably referred to 'parents'. In discussing their views I have adopted their nomenclature, however references to 'parents' almost certainly

include 'principal carers' who may not be the child's mother or father. In addition, teachers' references to parents probably refer to mothers in most cases. Readers are asked to bear these points in mind when reading the following section.

*- - - and never have this feeling ideally of it being a big step into the unknown. I mean it is in a way but you want it to be a smooth step so that it's an enjoyable experience and one that's you know never looked back on as being you know the awfulness of leaving home or leaving something to something that they didn't enjoy. I want it be, um that school always being seen as something worth doing, so that you're keeping the enthusiasm and building on that rather than them coming in and sort of thinking well who are these strangers and what am I going to do now and if I want the toilet what's going to happen, you know it's from the initial days of them starting school and before starting school, of them feeling secure and safe and understanding what's going on or if they don't understand then having the security of being able to ask someone in the knowledge that they won't be shunned or they won't be seen as being in the wrong, that you know if they've got questions they will be answered and everything will be um done smoothly with this feeling of security, that no-one's going to think that they ought to know things but everything will be explained over and over again if necessary.*

*(Anne)*

*One (aim) was around school life and the kind of environment that the children, a lot of children are unused to even if they've been to a nursery or playgroup it's often not attached to a school and you know it's very separate and it's just a small group that have quite a lot of space and support and when they come into reception a lot of times it's quite a big shock and one of the things was offering them some comfort in trying to get used to the environment in school because it's going to play such a huge part in their, certainly in their early life. (Dave)*

Susan and Pauline were also aware of the impact on parents' lives of their children beginning schooling:

*It's a huge break I feel for children to come from their world of home to the world of school and I see very much the role of the early years teacher is enabling children to cope and helping with that. And I mean you know talking to parents as well, enabling parents to cope as well because that's difficult and worrying as well isn't it? (Susan)*

*We spend about the first two weeks of term doing home visits. It gives the parents a chance to perhaps air any worries and anxieties they've got because a lot of them have little worries or sometimes quite big ones to them, you know about their children starting school. It's the first time they've often left their child. (Pauline)*

Secondly, the involvement of parents in their children's schooling was important to these early years teachers. They encouraged parents to join in with class activities:

*We have the parents in after Christmas to actually come into the nursery and be with us and help us or just be a fly on the wall if they want to be. - - They come into Harvest and Nativity plays at Christmas and then in the summer again you know the parents would be in helping us, being with us if they want to be and they have opportunities to come on trips, that sort of thing. So lots of opportunities really for them to be very involved. Pauline*

*I mean one of the first things I did having come obviously from a team which was working with families was to introduce a home, a parental help rota and to devise all sorts of ways of involving parents. (Karen)*

Another way of involving parents in their child's education was by informing parents about the school's work:

*As part of my job at this particular school one of the things that I do is work closely with community education and we do provide in the summer term before the children start nursery and reception in September, we run a series of workshops for parents on maths, English and we have, my colleague and I do those together. We do one on*

*pre-reading, one on the importance of, what happens when you come to school and the change from nursery into reception, first of all looking at pre-reading, you know what we do in nursery, what we do in reception, looking at a published reading scheme, showing all the things that we have in the classroom. (Alison)*

*We would have meetings about shared reading and the maths that we were doing to explain. (Pauline)*

Only Karen included the provision of information to parents about their child's progress when discussing the involvement of parents in children's schooling. Perhaps as this was routine, and mandatory for children in compulsory schooling, teachers took it for granted and did not feel the need to mention it.

*I have them in every half term to see the children's work and so on.  
(Karen)*

These early years teachers saw their role in very broad terms. The role they envisaged for themselves was complex and extensive. Like the English primary school teachers in Broadfoot and Osborn's research (1993) they placed considerable emphasis upon children's social and emotional development. Their aims for the children they teach can be summarised as: learning the curriculum (subject aims), learning to learn (developing skills for learning such as independence, perseverance, questioning, reasoning,



decision-taking, responsibility for learning), learning to care for others (social development, relationships with others), learning to care for oneself (emotional development, promotion of self-esteem), caring to learn (developing positive attitudes towards schooling mainly through ensuring children are happy in school and enjoy their work). In addition, teachers aimed to develop positive home/school relationships.

Thus, these early years teachers felt responsible for broad areas of children's development. They saw their job not solely in terms of children's cognitive development. Their commitment to children's social and emotional development was seen as important both for their own value and for setting the preconditions necessary for effective learning. As Nye (1997) argues:

... just as William Booth the founder of the Salvation Army believed you couldn't preach effectively to people who were hungry, you often can't fulfil a moral responsibility for pupils' learning, that is teach them, if those children are unhappy, asocial, or neglected in a personal sense as these areas are foundations on which intellectual development needs to be built (p.76).

However, the holistic way in which these early years teachers conceptualise their work is not a model shared by everyone. Not everyone agrees that teachers should take on such a comprehensive role and, as pointed out earlier, Campbell (1997) argues that teachers should concentrate on children's cognitive development:

- - - teachers' work being progressively focused on teaching in its narrow sense, and a range of non-teaching para-professionals being allocated the responsibility for such matters as home-school liaison, pupils' welfare, and social development (p.31). - - - If, as is likely, the priorities (referring to new competencies for teacher trainees) become placed more exclusively on cognitive objectives, so much the better for their pupils, and probably for themselves (p.33).

Drummond, herself an early years specialist, claims that those like Campbell and Woodhead who are dismissive of affective aspects of education have misconceived ideas about 'holistic' education and misunderstand primary teachers' commitment to an ethic of care. Drummond (1997) argues that for Campbell 'professionalism is synonymous with the authoritative distance of the subject expert, and care is synonymous with an enveloping and unthinking intimacy' (p.41) and she goes on to detail an alternative and more positive version of the care ethic. However, while the academic continues to be highly valued in our society and work concerned with caring/nurturing remains undervalued early years education will be of low status. Early years teachers conceive of their work in both academic and affective ways which has implications for how both they and their work are valued.

Neither do the early years teachers I spoke with see it as a choice between the cognitive and affective areas of development. For them the various areas of development are so interrelated and interdependent that it would be unthinkable to focus entirely on the

cognitive. While early years teachers value both academic and non-academic aims the contemporary context in which they work does not. The recent and continuing focus upon the curriculum has undervalued other important aspects of learning. The National Curriculum makes little reference to the affective dimensions of learning, an important area for all teachers, and especially for teachers of young children. As Kelly (1990) argues:

It has been claimed (Eisner,1982) that traditional forms of education in the Western world have discounted the affective aspects of experience and have thus been limited and diminished in that they have ignored a number of the forms of representation he has posited as essential to full cognitive functioning. Yet it must be pointed out that it is exactly those affective aspects of education which are at risk in a curriculum whose core consists of technologically useful subjects, which is fundamentally instrumental and which is to be assessed by forms of testing that are likely to emphasise the more simplistic and readily measurable aspects of learning (p.93).

Current views of what education should concern itself with and recent educational reforms have focused narrowly on the curriculum and subject knowledge. Many other important areas have been ignored in these discussions and legislation. In a discussion about what counts as valid knowledge for children, Gammage (1995) argues that knowledge is much wider than the curriculum and should be concerned with attitudes,

dispositions and processes, about self-knowledge and responsibility. He insists that attention should be paid to the 'really important accompanying traits and dispositions which excite and encourage a permanently enquiring mind and which 'hook in' the children' (p.99). Gammage's view is echoed by the early years teachers in this study with their emphasis on other areas in addition to the cognitive. As Pollard et al (1993) ask:

Is primary education only to concern itself with academic achievement?

What place is there for the development of the person, for the social development of children? This issue has certainly received little public attention in recent years (p.32).

A restricted conceptualisation of education which emphasises subject knowledge conflicts with the way early years teachers envisage their work. The recent introduction of the National Curriculum caused problems for many teachers. Several reasons have been put forward to account for these difficulties. These include increased teacher workload and the National Curriculum's subject basis and its hierarchical view of learning. However, it is possible that, for early years teachers, trying to implement the National Curriculum was like trying to fit a piece into a jigsaw puzzle, a piece which had been developed in isolation from the other pieces. Early years teachers do not see academic aims and intellectual development in isolation from other areas of children's development. For them academic aims and non-academic aims are interrelated and interdependent and they construct their aims and purposes in an holistic way. To

address one area without reference to the others risks undermining the coherence of the whole. The importance of taking into account teachers' aims and purposes when introducing educational reforms is made by Sikes (1992) who argues that while imposed change may have value in addressing issues of equity such impositions are likely to result in backlash and failure if they do not take into account teachers' aims and purposes, their work contexts and cultures, and their personal and professional experiences and perspectives. While Sikes was commenting on the TVEI initiative in secondary schools her argument seems applicable to the recent imposition of the National Curriculum which took little account of teachers' perspectives.

Furthermore, some teachers were concerned that the National Curriculum threatened children's enjoyment and happiness in school, an aim to which teachers attached great importance. The requirement to follow a prescribed, detailed curriculum was thought to reduce the opportunity for developing children's own interests and capitalising on those of the teacher to the detriment of enjoyment. As children's happiness was seen as important in its own right, as a way of promoting learning, and as necessary for promoting positive attitudes towards education, teachers were very concerned over anything which might endanger it.

Fundamental to these early years teachers' understanding of their work was the responsibility they felt as children's initial school educators. They saw their work as both providing the foundations for the schooling that followed and for developing positive attitudes towards education. Furthermore, they were concerned to make the

transition from home to school (or nursery) as smooth as possible both for children and their parents.

While teachers, in talking about their work, spoke in similar terms about many issues and many commonalities emerged, as the preceding account demonstrates, it is important to remember that each teacher's story is unique. Teachers' backgrounds and experiences differ and the contexts in which teachers live and work also vary. In Chapter 4 I showed how teachers' past experiences influence the decision to become a teacher. Writers like Bullough et al (1991), Casey (1993) and Sparkes (1995) show how teachers' biographies, their social class, gender, family background, childhood experiences and schooling, play a part in the kind of teacher individuals aspire to be and become. Biographical experiences, as illustrated by my own story, influence the ways in which teachers conceptualise education and teach in the classroom. Teachers' beliefs and values about teaching are rooted in their past experiences. These values are then developed in relation to the particular contexts in which they live and work. As we have seen, teachers' biographies, training and professional expertise intersect with changes resulting from the 1988 Education Reform Act. Teachers respond to these educational changes, either positively or negatively, depending on the degree of match between their own values and those being imposed upon them, and on the extent to which they can reconcile new ways with their existing professional values.

The following three stories show how the 'generalised' account, given above, of how teachers see their work translates into the lives of real people. They illustrate the way

biography influences how early years teachers think about their work and how teachers bring their own personal values and beliefs to their teaching.

### Alison's story

Alison teaches in an inner city school which serves an area with high unemployment rates and high poverty levels. Her own upbringing, both in terms of her political awareness and her childhood experiences have contributed to Alison's commitment to work with less advantaged children and their families. She recognises the positive opportunities she had as a child and believes all children should have access to the kinds of experiences she enjoyed:

*I was brought up in a very political home, my parents were very active in the Labour party and I, myself was very involved in, not particularly in the Labour party but in CND in the 60's and I got very involved in all sorts of left wing activities but I don't think then though that I realised how much deprivation there was and I don't think that I realised it until I started teaching, how desperately deprived some of the families that are in inner city areas of big cities and I think that that seemed then to tie up with the sort of, not with my own childhood which wasn't in the least bit deprived although my parents didn't have a lot of money they focused all their attention and you know gave me all the things they didn't have as children. But I think when I started teaching it seemed to link up with the*

*sort of activities I'd been involved with as a teenager, I was arrested, I did all sorts of things to do with my beliefs, demonstrating against Vietnam, and against, as part of CND, and er I just felt, although I did it because I believed what I was doing was right and I still believe that, but once I started working in areas like that I could see how pernicious the Government policies were and how they actually did affect people to such an extent that children come to school with no food in them, they don't have adequate clothing, the parents are very young and don't understand themselves about the needs of young children, and I just felt that that was probably the best way that my skills should be used. Having said that I don't see myself as a social worker and I do believe that as a teacher it's my job to provide kids with the best of everything and I believe, particularly in the area that I teach in, that these children are entitled to better than best because they have nothing some of these children, both my parents and one of my aunts who was then a teacher in Hertfordshire where I come from, they all, they were miners' children and they, miners always had this great passion for education and my parents themselves were very keen that I would be exposed to as much, I suppose different experiences and I was fortunate because I was an only child I was given quite a privileged, I had quite a privileged upbringing, living on the outskirts of London I was taken to concerts and art galleries and all sorts of things that my own parents didn't have experience of themselves and I just feel that these children, all children*



*wherever they live, should be given the opportunities, that seems to be the most important thing in education. (Alison)*

Alison regards her work partly as 'compensating' for the experiences children have missed out on before school:

*- - - I'm horrified still by the level of poverty in the country, particularly in this city which is no, is typical of most cities in the country, and I feel, I do feel passionately that these children are getting raw deal from the moment they're born and that our job, and we have very limited resources, but our job is to try to open up to children, really to give these children the experiences particularly in literacy which they are not going to have. And this is why I feel it is so important that all the children have nursery experience. I feel that, what I like particularly is giving the children the sort of experiences they should be having when they come into nursery and reception and because I teach in a social priority area a lot of the children have had no appropriate experiences or, I don't wish to sound patronising but no quality parenting, through no fault of the parents but because of the social situation they find themselves in and I feel that our job in early years is to provide a wide range of experiences for small children around an integrated, if it's in reception particularly which is the bit I've been teaching for the last five years, around a structure of um, allowing children to make choices for*

*themselves. And of course with nursery similarly but not even as formally as reception. - - - I do believe that as a teacher it's my job to provide kids with the best of everything and I believe, particularly in the area that I teach in, that these children are entitled to better than best because they have nothing some of these children. They haven't got any toys and if they do have toys they're not appropriate toys often and they don't have books, they don't buy books, the parents don't have, they don't have the money to buy books. They often don't have the understanding of how important it is for children to be exposed to things like this. (Alison)*

#### Karen's story

Early years teachers stressed the importance of developing good relationships with both children and parents, and between children. In the same way that children's happiness was regarded as fundamental to ensuring children's development so too were positive relationships. Karen gave high priority to the importance of developing good relationships with both parents and children. Originally a secondary school teacher Karen believes teaching younger children depends much more upon the quality of relationship between teacher and child than does the teaching of older children and this greater emphasis on relationships was the reason she gave for preferring to work with the younger children:

*Well the difference I think between that (teaching the younger children) was that it became less and less subject orientated and more and more relationship orientated I suspect, with the young child the more, the younger you go the more the actual quality of the relationship matters and I think, I think that's what it was, that that was what I wanted to do.*

*(Karen)*

Karen also believed it was important to be informed about the children's lives out of school and she was keen to involve parents (mothers) in their children's schooling:

*I think you can not properly work with the children unless you're aware of the context of their family and work in some way to be inclusive to those families, to be open to those families, to know about those families and to see children as part of those families. (Karen)*

Like Alison, Karen saw her work partly as compensating for experiences children had missed out on before schooling. She was aware that this could be interpreted as a middle class judgement upon working class parenting and so aimed to take a non-judgmental approach to children and their families:

*I don't think that our role as early years educators when we go out first to meet the parents say on a home visit, it's not our role to be out there saying, look I'm the professional. I'm the one who knows, this is how it's*

*done, if you want to educate your child come and copy me. I actually think that first you have to go out and discover about each child. I mean some homes are more user-friendly for school. If it's a home which has books instead of videos, if it's a home where people talk to children, I mean all the things that we all as teachers know about, obviously those children are going to come into school and find a context for learning that which is already fairly familiar to them, they're going to slot in. And the tendency has been that teachers have found those, the user-friendly, the easy to work with, the ones you respect type children and families, and what I would like to feel that I'm trying to do, and there's nothing, there's no talk of success here I have to say, but what I would like to feel I'm trying to do is to say to all families, all right you have a different child-rearing style from me, I'm not making a judgement about it, it does frankly still remain true that child-rearing style A matches more closely to school type learning and context, but child-rearing style B is equally as loving, there is no sense that the child isn't loved, cared for, adored, just as much as the other but it is something to do with their child rearing style that doesn't fit as well as well into the school. Well then it's for us to go out there and create the bridge, to find out where that child is, and to, if you possibly can those are the parents you want to have in school, those are the ones you want to say you know, come and join me because they need to feel comfortable in school. They are probably the parents who've have had a very bad school experiences and who are*

*very anxious about teachers altogether. And I remember back to my pre-school days (when she was working with the pre-school team) there was one family I worked with where she was one daughter in amongst brothers, most of her brothers were in prison, her father had been murdered, she had worked as a prostitute prior to having her children, and she hadn't any ..... I'd been working in that home about nine months when one day it cropped up, and I said of course when I used to work in a secondary, she said you're not a teacher are you? And she had not realised that I was, now I took that as the most enormous compliment and I think that's in a way what I'm trying to say. Obviously everybody here knows that I am a teacher but there should be something about the way you meet as human beings first and teacher and clientele if you like, whatever you want to call it, second which means that you can find ways of meeting through a relationship and then through that relationship work in the best interests of all the children, not just the children who are effectively the easy ones to work with because they come ready to do what you want them to do anyway. And that is the challenge to me of early years work . (Karen)*

When Karen talked about her relationships with both children and parents she frequently used the word respect:

*Well, I mean I think that key word in it all is respect. Now you can not respect people, and you can include children or adults in this, you can not respect people without respecting the baggage and so on, emotional and everything, that they bring with them. And it doesn't mean to say you have to necessarily like it all, or all approve of it all but you have to somehow accept that that is the way they are and try to accommodate it. Which is not to say I don't think there are absolutes in terms of right and wrong. I do think that there are but I think that those are few and far between and that in between there are lots of negotiable areas where, depending upon your own life experiences, you are bound to bring a difference with you. (Karen)*

Karen believed it was important to allow children to make decisions about their learning and to take responsibility for those decisions. She emphasised her view that if a teacher encourages a child to make choices then those choices must be respected and any subtle manipulation of the child's choices was dishonest:

*And I mean that's where Highscope comes in 'cos if you're going to say I'm going to let you choose you must respect that choice and what's more you shouldn't manipulate that choice. If you want to say, look you've done that everyday this week, I try not to say what I think teachers would tend to say which is, would you like to play in the sand today, you haven't done that for a long time and then children because*

*they're willing will say yes. You've manipulated that child, it would actually be much more honest to say, look you've played in the water all this week and actually if you wouldn't mind I'd really like you to do me a painting today, will you do me a painting please? Well, not even will you, today I would like you to do a painting, you can choose the rest but today ... so in other words I am actually taking your choice away. And every now and then your professional responsibility means you are going to do that because of breadth of curriculum and all of that. But if you are going to do that you shouldn't pretend you're still respecting children's choices 'cos. you're not, you've allowed another principle to come in play, which Highscope wouldn't do of course but I would, you've allowed a different education principle come in play but then you should, the relationship should be open and honest enough with the child to say, look now I'm withdrawing that choice, you can have this much choice but I'm not offering the choice. And we don't. Mostly that isn't the kind of relationship that happens in school. Teachers do say things like, wouldn't it be lovely if, and children will say oh all right then, and they may not think it would be lovely at all but they try to please you. And it's not honest, it's not open, it's not respectful and I'm really bad at it but that's what I'd like to be trying to do, that's the challenge to me.*

*(Karen)*

Karen's determination to develop relationships with parents and children which are respectful stems from her religious beliefs. As she explained to me:

*It (Quakerism) is a religion, it's a non-credal religion arising out of Christianity in the 17th century and the sort of tenet that they have is that there is that of God or good, whatever you want to call it, in everyone and that sort of says it all doesn't it. That in everybody there is that spark of light, if you can only find it and the only way to find it is to be respectful, to come alongside and to look for it and to know that it's there. And obviously in a, the mass murderer it's pretty hidden isn't it? But in other words my philosophy would be that you disapprove of the act, you can hate the act but you do not hate the actor and that therefore when you are dealing with people you try always to find that which you can relate to rather than just that which you can't. (Karen)*

Karen describes herself as an idealist. She saw both Quakerism and teaching as a search for perfection and that in the course of that search one would inevitably fall short sometimes. For Karen teaching was 'like walking a tightrope', a situation in which she was continually making adjustments in order to match practice to theory.

*I mean it's (Quaker religion) about an idealism really but I've always liked idealism, and I've always thought there was a place for idealism and that it might be impractical nonsense but there's a place for the*



*idealist because without ideals we will only slip backwards and you need some, it's like again with pacifists which you know, tell me about Hitler and I don't know what to say but I still think that as a stance it's a useful stance to take. And I suppose that does inform my teaching in the sense that when I talk about this line and so on, that's the same kind of philosophy. That you should always be aiming for perfection and know that you never get there but at least, you keep being dragged back if you articulate a philosophy. I mean sometimes it's all a bit ivory tower and in the nitty gritty of changing pants and all of the rest of it, some of it goes by the board. But if you at least know about it, you at least identify when you're falling the wrong side of the line and I think that's what it's about. I mean I just think practice is never perfect and it's about a balancing act on a tightrope and one day you do fall off one side and one day you fall off the other side and you overcorrect yourself and then you find you've overcorrected yourself in that direction and you overcorrect yourself again. What you need is to be informed so you know how, how far away from the perfection you've actually fallen and which way to pull back again and it's a see-saw then. (Karen)*

### Dave's story

Dave too emphasised the importance of relationships in teaching and developing positive relationships with the children he taught was central to his conception of

teaching. Dave believed it was vital for children to build positive relationships both with their peers and with their teacher/s and that such relationships were necessary to promote academic development. I first spoke with Dave when he was in his final year of teacher training and he was keen to build very positive and close relationships with the children he taught. Dave's views about the kind of teacher he would like to be were influenced by his own schooling experiences. He felt that his teachers had been distant from their pupils and regretted the fact that he was not seen as an individual at school. Dave wanted to relate to children more personally and saw the early years sector as providing the greatest opportunity for this:

*But I guess my philosophy is, is completely opposite to how I perceived my teachers in secondary and that might be a conscious decision. - - - and you know I had no relationship with them at all. (Dave)*

One particular secondary drama teacher provided a role model for Dave:

*Much more personal, much more, she was a person rather than a professional. Obviously a professional person but there was a different emphasis there. She was much more, she was interested in you as a person, as an individual. She recognised that you were a person in your own right, you weren't just someone on the register whereas sometimes other teachers did deal with you like that. I mean, I can always, looking back at old school reports I can always tell the teachers who knew me*

*and the teachers who didn't because it's James on the reports by teachers who don't know me and Dave by teachers who do. And I think that's really interesting because, you know, you can look back on some of them which had like bog standard comments, but these would be much more personal and you know everyone would be different there wasn't even a phrase which would be similar for everybody, it was, you know she knew you as people. (Dave)*

When I interviewed Dave again during his first year of teaching I took the opportunity to ask him whether developing strong relationships were still his greatest priority. Dave had not changed his mind but he told me of the constraints he had experienced in the school situation in putting his ideals into practice:

*Um, it's still top of my list, whether it's still top of my list in practice is a different matter I suppose. Well, I kind of feel there are lots of pressures on to make sure that you know they've done some work in this book and that book and this book by the end of the week and listened to them read and all that kind of stuff. But I'm not sure that's true actually. I'm just kind of thinking that even, when I'm working with them I'm still only working with seven at a time, just the way that the organisation works, and I do think that I've got, have managed to build up reasonably good relationships where most of the kids do feel safe with me, do talk to me about things that I wouldn't always assume that they'd want to talk to me*

*about and I don't know, just seem happy to share little insignificant things but they share them and I guess there must be some kind of relationship there for them to want to do that. It's difficult to do it in a more structured way now. I don't know what I mean by building relationships in a structured way, but kind of having that as, you know, the aim of the lesson if you like. I'm finding that difficult. In my dream world it would have been easy to do and we would have done it all of the time but ..... I'm, I was really pleased in the first couple of weeks that I'd actually started to get to know the children individually, more than just their name. You know I'd actually learned that, I learned a bit about them and where they were coming from as people which was really nice because we'd had time to chat. And the other good thing was that when we were kind of doing Baseline Assessment a lot of that was observation which meant that I could sit and observe and chat to the kids quite a lot and that was you know, that was my structured activity if you like but that was, I was still able to chat and talk to them. See I think that, the relationships are still very important, I think I'm having to go about it in a different way now. It might look to be secondary on my planning now as against the primary aim that I wanted it always to be. (Dave)*

I began this chapter by discussing the misconceptions people often have of early years teaching. The following section looks at the perceptions society has of men who teach young children and the experiences of two early years teachers who are male.

## The experiences of men early years teachers

As argued earlier, the assumption that early years teaching equals women has implications for the whole of the early years sector in terms of its status and the way in which the work is conceptualised. It also has particular implications for men who teach in this sector of the education service. Because early years teaching is conceptualised as women's work and thought most appropriate for women then, by implication, men are considered the least appropriate teachers of young children. There are very few men in early years teaching. They comprise only 2% of qualified full time teachers in infant schools and less in nursery schools (DFE 1994, cited by Smedley 1996). As Dave found, there is an assumption that teachers of young children are women even when the evidence disproves it:

*We had an assembly the other day and er, it was an early years assembly and the person who was doing it said something about your teacher and she mentioned 'she' a couple of times until I kind of cleared my throat and she amended. (Dave)*

Dave also felt that because early years teaching is almost synonymous with women his suitability for the work came into question. He told the story of one parent questioning, as he saw it, his professional ability:

*With parents sometimes um again nothing really explicit was said. There was one time when a mother came in, she was an interesting character,*

*and her daughter had been doing some art and craft and her sleeves had been rolled, pulled up but the buttons hadn't come undone and she'd gone home with red marks and her mum came in to mention it which is fair enough and she just said well I think you could tell him and the teacher said who, Mr West, and she said yes the man who's in the classroom and she said, oh but she was working with someone else that day she wasn't working with him and she obviously hadn't asked her daughter anything around that because she, she, maybe I'm being harsh but at the time it sounded so much like you know it's because he doesn't know what he's doing and so therefore it must be his fault and it's those kind of things that I'm, I am quite sensitive to them because I think that it undermines what I'm doing, what I'm capable of doing. (Dave)*

Paradoxically, while some parents were concerned about his ability as a man to do the job, other parents had a preference for a man teacher as they were thought to be stronger disciplinarians, a view that Dave resented as much as the one that men were not capable of working with young children:

*I think it's also strange because some of them actually wanted their children to have a man because they saw the kind of um, control thing - -  
- I went into the nursery before I started work, to meet some of the children and one of the parents asked if I had her son in my class and I*

*said no. And she said, oh that's a shame because he needs to be kept under control. (Dave)*

Dave did not want to be cast in this 'traditional' male authoritarian role:

*And another thing is because, that I don't want to be the one who shouts too much because I know, I don't want them to think it's because it's the man trying to take control. And I know that's such a, it's my own hang ups not theirs but I just have this real horrible feeling that they're going to think it's this man trying to come in and take over, does that make any sense? (Dave)*

For Paul being a man in a traditionally women's job was a contradictory role. He found he was given status because he was a man while at the same time his views and ideas about early years teaching were little valued. While his colleagues may have dismissed his views because of his inexperience Paul clearly linked it to the fact that he was a man:

*Well it's a bit of an ambiguous situation really. On the one hand you're sort of given quite high status because of your, because you are a man you're given that kind of, particularly by educational assistants. You know how men get treated differently, they're given a bit more status aren't they generally. But on the other hand there's this thing that, just play the game and don't, sort of if you step over this invisible line then*

*you're sort of, to be castigated and isolated. If you come up with ideas you're very quickly slapped, I find myself very quickly slapped down or put down, oh this is the way we've always done things, oh we don't do it like ..... (Paul)*

Allan (1993) claims there are two 'explanations' used by people to explain the presence of men as teachers of young children. Firstly, that they are seen as not being committed to teaching young children but are prepared to spend a short time working in that sector because of the career advantage it gives them. In other words, it increases their chances of headship. Dave was aware of the advantages of being a man in primary education but there was no indication in his accounts to suggest this was the reason he had chosen to teach younger children. Indeed, at the time of interview he said he had no desire to become a head:

*I went to have some advice from someone in careers and I told them that I was planning to be an infant school teacher and they kind of looked up and said oh in six years you'll be a head. That's not, I mean I don't see myself ever becoming a head, ever. I don't want to be at this moment in time I just look at the role of headteacher now and just think I don't want it. It's all managerial now because of the expectations that the head has I don't see myself doing that. At the moment the reason I'm going into teaching is because I want to teach, you know I don't want to sit behind a desk and ..... (Dave)*



Paul too, as we saw earlier, had no ambition to become a headteacher. So while it may be true statistically that men teaching young children have a career advantage over women, and that this is often used to 'explain' the presence of men in early years teaching, it was not an explanation adopted by the two men in this study.

The other 'explanation', according to Allan (1993), is that men teaching young children may be seen as 'sensitive to the needs of young children and find fulfilment in 'women's work', but are (it must follow) effeminate or unmasculine' (p.115). Men teaching young children may find not only their professional ability called into question but also their masculinity and their sexuality:

The fact that some men opt for teaching which is seen as a 'soft option' in the list of male occupations and add to that by focusing on primary education which is seen as particularly feminine, then further compound this by choosing to work with very young children, raises questions about their masculinity. (Skelton 1994, p.91)

Furthermore, it is not just their sexuality that may be questioned but also their motives. As Aspinwall and Drummond (1989) point out, while teaching young children is seen as a 'natural' occupation for women then men who want to work in this field will be seen as 'unnatural'. Skelton (1991) points out that one interpretation of the 'unnaturalness' of such work for men is that they must have a tendency towards paedophilia.

These were sensitive issues to discuss with the two men teachers and I have to acknowledge a certain reluctance on both my part and theirs. These difficulties are reflected in the extracts below where issues were often referred to obliquely and some sentences remain unfinished. Skelton (1994), referring to her interviews with early years men teachers, points out that 'the issue of child sexual abuse and them, as men, continued to be there in the background of their daily work but was never directly confronted' (p.90). Dave addressed these issues in more detail than Paul and this was probably a reflection of our relationship. I had taught Dave during his final year of teacher training and we had developed a good working relationship whereas I only knew Paul as a participant in this research. It is also possible that they may have felt more comfortable speaking about these issues to a male interviewer.

Dave was aware of concerns about men working with young children and was aware of the need to protect himself from allegations. He believed his school's open plan organisation was an advantage:

*A lot of it is I think, I mean some of it is around perceptions, you know the horror stories that you hear in the papers. I mean that's another reason actually, that horrible sinister reason is another reason why I'm happy that I'm working in open plan at the moment, it makes me so much more secure because I am, you know, I'm never alone and I can never be ..... (Dave)*

Skelton (1991) noted that men teachers of young children had concerns about the degree of physical contact it was appropriate for them to show to children. This was an issue for Paul:

*I haven't picked concerns (from others), but I do have quite a lot of self censorship in the way I work. I'm not as touchy feely as the women.*

*(Paul)*

Dave was more confident about the physical contact required by his work. However, while he accepted it as part of his job he recognised that others often had concerns about it:

*It makes me very angry, it also makes me very upset really 'cos I think, I really, I really do get upset if I think that people are questioning my motives because of, you know things that have gone on in the past, and media coverage of things that happened. It's difficult, I mean don't know how regularly they do happen, it's difficult to say um but I get really angry and I get really angry when people suggest that I won't be able to cuddle children if they're feeling upset and I think that's just not true.*

*(Dave)*

And from a class teacher on teaching practice:

*But her attitudes towards my sex were very interesting. I mean she was very much, like someone had wet themselves one day and she called in the educational assistant to do it while she was looking after somebody else and she just kind of said well sometimes this happens and I thought yes I have been in a reception class before and she said of course you won't have anything to do with that and I was like, why and she said well you know you need to change them and you know I didn't actually say anything, I was just gob smacked and just thought for God's sake this is ridiculous and it's little things like that. (Dave)*

Whilst Dave was understanding about parental concerns he found it much more difficult to rationalise concerns about his gender from other teachers. Dave was also aware of the need to take care to prevent himself from allegations about his conduct:

*But on the other hand I'm also very aware in the classroom that if I do want to cuddle a child I need to make sure that it's where there are lots of people around, preferably another adult and most definitely not on my own. And I do actually sometimes, and I would hate myself for it but I sometimes feel quite uncomfortable if I'm left in the situation where it's just me and one child because whilst I know what my motivations are, I know that they could be misinterpreted quite easily and that upsets me*

*and that angers me because I have to change my behaviour in a way that women probably don't have to, or they're not as, you know having a child sitting on a women teacher's knee probably looks quite natural whereas if a child's sitting on my knee then often questions are asked and my answer is well the child was upset, they needed comforting. And I kind of, I get quite defensive about it but, in that I say well why shouldn't I? But on the other hand I obviously know that there is something there because I don't let it happen very often and when I do I make sure there are others around because I'm aware that interpretations may come back. But I do find it really upsetting and I find it, one of the things that really upsets me more I think is that I can actually, whilst I don't agree I can actually understand a parent feeling slightly ill at ease with having a man in early years because it's something new and ... but the thing that upsets me more I think is the attitudes of some professionals who hold the same things and I just think, that's what really angers me because I you know I think I'm quite sensitive to the thoughts of parents and I think you know you're giving over your child for so many hours a day to this you know individual and you need to be certain that you know everything's as it should be. But on the same thing though I think that parents should be thinking those things whoever the teacher is, whether it's a man or a woman. I don't think that happens but I think it should. But for the staff to think that that's when I get really angry because I think that they should be aware, aware of motivations and I think that if*

*teachers are aware of those then my integrity shouldn't have come under question and it does. (Dave)*

For Dave concerns about his appropriateness, as a man, for early years teaching have resulted in him being more thoughtful and articulate about his work. Because he is more often required to explain himself he has developed a confidence in himself and his work and he feels able to answer his critics.

*I think that a lot of it is around um is around confidence, to be able to stand your ground really. Maybe it's endurance rather than confidence, to stand your ground. You're right you do have to be quite certain of what you're doing 'cos. I kind of like think that when you get the impression that people are questioning you, whether that's explicit or implicit, it does take, sometimes it can take its toll and you can start questioning yourself and whilst I think that questioning yourself is sometimes quite good, quite a good experience, I also think that it can be quite wearing at times and I do think that I question myself more than perhaps my female counterparts would because they're not often questioned by other people. But, I mean it sounds quite corny but in some ways I think that actually makes me stronger in my convictions because I question them and I do justify them to myself and therefore I*

*can justify them to other people. But yes I do feel you have to be, not always just strong but quite thick skinned as well. (Dave)*

Over recent years there has been a call for more men to be involved in the teaching of young children. This is based on a perceived need for male role models for young children resulting from the increased number of single parent families. Dave regarded this as an important aspect of his work:

*One of the big things for me is like now I go into schools and in most first or infant schools there aren't any male teachers and if there are they're a head teacher or deputy head with no, hardly any contact time and a lot of the kids I work with now come from backgrounds where there isn't a positive, permanent male role model and that's one of the other role models I like to be. (Dave)*

However, there is as yet no research to indicate that having a teacher who is male improves the education of boys (Allan, 1993). Gold and Reis (cited by Coulter and McNay, 1993) note that 'most of the arguments and research in this area have not attempted to use a theoretical construct, but have relied upon common sense, an alluring but sometimes untrustworthy guide' (p.495). Their review of research concludes that claims for male elementary teachers as important same-sex role models are not

supported empirically; boys who have male teachers do not have fewer problems in school nor are they better adjusted.

We also need to ask what kind of male role model is being proposed. It seems likely that where the aim is to ‘compensate’ for absent fathers a traditional male role model is being invoked but Goodman and Kelly (1988) argue that ‘the need is not for men who simply pass on the traditional male-centred culture unproblematically. To make a significant difference we need more men who will mediate culture from an anti-sexist perspective’ (p.1). Certainly one of Dave’s comments suggests this is an aim for him:

*- - - and I just think they need to know that anybody can do the same things. (Dave)*

This chapter has examined the way fourteen early years teachers conceptualise their work. It shows how these teachers viewed their work holistically, with academic and non-academic aims being valued. Teachers were committed to children’s intellectual development and to their social and emotional development and they saw these areas as interrelated and interdependent. As children’s first school educators they felt responsible for ensuring children’s early school experiences were positive in order to make learning more effective, and so that children developed positive attitudes towards their schooling. While there was much consensus about their work, their stories indicate how teachers’ personal beliefs and values, arising from their biographical experiences, are brought to their teaching with the result that each teacher’s story is unique.



It also considered other people's views about early years teaching and the experiences early years teachers have of other people's views about their work. This was important because teachers' understandings about themselves and their work are not developed in isolation but are influenced by the perceptions and expectations others have of them. The experiences of two men who teach young children indicated that society still views women as the most appropriate teachers of the young and that they felt vulnerable to allegations about their conduct in a way that women did not. Ironically, while women are positioned as the most appropriate teachers of the young, it seems, from the comments the teachers received, that their work was not considered as that of teachers working with older children. The teachers were aware of their low status within the teaching profession through both their personal and professional contacts. They felt that society was misinformed about their work and felt that it was their responsibility to provide greater information about their work. They did not address the more fundamental issues around women's work and the position of women in society.

### **Job Satisfaction**

I showed, in Chapter 3, that while some people become early years teachers as a result of a long held ambition to do so, for many others the decision results from more pragmatic concerns. Despite their original career intentions, and their experiences relating to the low status of early years teaching, all fourteen teachers spoke about their work with commitment and enthusiasm and, as noted earlier, all except two saw themselves specifically as early years specialists and preferring to teach the younger children. I was therefore interested to explore what it was about teaching the youngest children that these teachers enjoyed. Their accounts provide some insights into the satisfactions of teaching young children.

Many teachers acknowledge that their relationships with individual learners lies at the heart of what they do. As the previous chapter highlights, they see teaching as an interpersonal process. Several studies have indicated that contact with children provides the primary source of job satisfaction for teachers of young children (Nias 1989, Campbell et al. 1992). Nias' (1989) study of primary teachers found that teachers' satisfaction with their work was strongly related to the actual nature of the work they did while dissatisfaction was related to the conditions under which they worked. The affective rewards of being with children, giving and receiving affection, talking and laughing together, sharing common interests proved to be the greatest source of

satisfaction for primary teachers. The early years teachers in this study were no exception and cited their contact with the children as a prime source of job satisfaction:

*I actually enjoy working with young children. (Karen)*

#### Teacher/child relationships in the early years

As noted above, teachers gain much job satisfaction from their relationships with the children they teach. The teachers I interviewed believed there was greater opportunity to develop close relationships with younger, rather than older pupils, and they greatly valued this aspect of their job:

*I find it a lot easier to talk to them I think, a lot easier to be on their wavelength I think than the juniors. It's easier to talk about their families and things like that. It was easier to get a little bit more personal maybe than it is with older children. (Sheila)*

*Yes, yes that's what I mean about the more directness, they are, the majority of them I suppose, more up front more quickly um, and it's very easy to, to talk and sort of get involved in their little lives fairly quickly. Whereas you know past that sort of 11, 12, you're moving into very different sort of area which I know isn't my, my area of wanting to teach.*

*I just actually enjoy the closer contact with younger children that you don't get with 11, 12 year olds. (Carol)*

*I would imagine that teaching the older ones, say it was year 5 or 6 or something, that you'd have more of this, perhaps not, more of the sort of teacher\ pupil feeling, you know them and us in a way. (Anne)*

*There is a stronger relationship I guess than most secondary teachers have with children, just because you are with them all day, all week. - - - I mean the more obvious differences I guess in relationships is that with primary children you're with them generally all day so therefore you've got the chance to build up more of a relationship, you get to see the whole child. And that's very much where I come from, and the expectations of the children are I think different, they enjoy listening to what you might have done at the weekend and see how it compares it to what they did whereas, you know I wasn't particularly interested in most of the teachers I had at secondary school because of the way the relationships happened then, I saw them you know a couple of hours each week and you know went away and did my bit and then left the classroom and forgot about them. (Dave)*

## The children's qualities

Teachers also talked about specific qualities they associated with young children, qualities which they appreciated. In particular, younger children were seen as being enthusiastic and eager to learn. Working with children who were enthusiastic learners was central to the satisfaction these early years teachers got from their work. It was mentioned frequently in their accounts:

*I think it's their overriding enthusiasm for life. (Sheila)*

*- - - their enthusiasm, I really enjoy that. (Susan)*

*I like it when they want to know, you know everything. (Helen)*

*- - - the sense of enjoyment and enthusiasm that they have for learning. This, you know they're just, just so keen. They just want to soak it all up and they're desperate to read and they want to do this and they're so interested in everything. And I think you know year after year it's still there and with all the children really, it's their enthusiasm. They are all so keen. Even with the formal things like reading they're always, you know I can guarantee that 100% of the children would want to come and read at any given time, they're desperate to come and read. I mean they see, because they feel that they're achieving something they enjoy doing it. And it's the same with anything, you'll never get, or very seldom get a*

*child saying oh I don't want to come and do that. You know if it's art work, whatever it is they want to, is it my turn to come and do the Ginn, you know, can I come and do some work? It's almost always like that. Now perhaps because I haven't taught the older ones perhaps I'm assuming that that doesn't happen with them, um whereas I suppose it must do and yet when you see you know in the papers oh you know what happens about the reading or the number work, presumably there is a point at which children sort of think I don't want to do that or I've had enough of reading or perhaps it's because they've reached the point where they're having problems with it or something but I suppose that's still what draws me to them. You know you get the, but when you've been on holiday, half term or something the children come back and say oh you know I've missed school and you know I've missed you and I wanted to do this and oh I want to do my reading and oh can we do this. And that's nice really isn't it? You know the fact that they, well sometimes you'll say oh we're not coming to school tomorrow because it's Saturday or something and they'll say oh I wish I was coming to school. But on the other hand sometimes they sort of say oh that's nice you know I'm going to see grandma or something so. I think it's just this general sort of feeling that, that they have got this overwhelming enthusiasm and they haven't yet reached that point where work is seen as something they don't want to do. (Anne)*

Susan's decision not to teach English to secondary-aged children was influenced by her wish to teach enthusiastic learners. Like Anne, Susan felt younger children were more enthusiastic about schooling than older children. She also believed her own enjoyment of English would be jeopardised by teaching it to children who were not enthusiastic. Her own school experience seems to have played a part in this perception:

*I just really enjoyed literature, and I still do, and I felt that teaching it under, teaching it to people who didn't want to learn would have wrecked it for me. I think I got so much on a personal level out of literature I wouldn't have wanted to, to sort of spoil that, because I remember my school days and I was pretty horrible at school (laughs) and I think secondary school teaching, I wouldn't want to do because of the lack of motivation, that's why I like the young children really.*

*(Susan)*

Several other characteristics which teachers associated with children were mentioned when they talked about why they liked working with young children. Helen and Carol both spoke of young children's openness and uninhibited nature:

*The fact they come in and they're open. Basically with the children there's very few inhibitions. You might get the odd child that's got a problem, who isn't forthcoming for whatever reason and then yes they*

*need extra support but the fact that you have your show and tell sessions, you have your conversations and everything comes out. (Helen)*

*I like their, I suppose directness and, I don't know, the sort of things that they're interested in at that age, up to about sort of eight, the type, the sort of fantasy type world of storytelling and the things that they enjoy playing with. I mean they're, I suppose, (pause) I mean they can be sort of, very, that sort of thing that they haven't been, as yet, too influenced by, they come up with you know the most wonderful you know, sort of endearing, charming sort of things, of all sorts of you know, which I just, I just love. (Carol)*

Susan too spoke of young children's directness in addition to several other qualities which she valued:

*I think it's to do with their energy, their curiosity, their newness with, I love the imagination, the chaoticness in a way, the anarchy of young children. They, I just like the way they, I like the different approaches to things they have and the kind of unsophisticated nature of them I think. The fact that have a totally different way of looking at things sometimes, that they go their own way. I mean it makes them very, very hard work to teach and very difficult to teach. And I don't mean anarchy (mentioned earlier) in the sense of sort of subverting things I mean they perhaps*



*haven't got the kind of sophisticated guidelines other, you know social guidelines and, that older children and adults have and I enjoy that. Yeah, and I also find, I'm amazed sometimes by the sort of clarity of their thought, you know by the way, by the potential at that age when I think they've only been alive sort of 5 years or whatever I think, it constantly surprises me and I like that as well. But you probably get that with older children perhaps, I don't know. I enjoy being with young children. I think they're funny. You know I like, I mean they drive me mad as well but I like the atmosphere that they create, as I said the energy and the enthusiasm. (Susan)*

For Paul too the spontaneous nature of young children was an aspect he enjoyed:

*- - - the thing that I'm talking about is, about Year 3, Year 2/ Year 3, you see a change in kids don't you, much more self-aware, much more censorious of their behaviour, you just don't get that in reception, you don't get that in the early years, they're straight up front. They don't really have to explain their actions, and that's really exciting to teach that, they're much more spontaneous, there's much less gap between what they think and what they say, there's very little gap there. (Paul)*

It was clear that teachers liked being in the company of young children. They particularly their enthusiasm and what they saw as young children's more spontaneous ways of behaving.

### Power and influence

Several teachers made references to the satisfaction they got from being involved in the early stages of a child's schooling, of being in there at the beginning. The start of schooling was seen as a vital time for children and teachers felt they were in an important position being responsible for building the foundations for future learning and for fostering positive attitudes towards schooling:

*The feeling that you're the first, that you got there before anyone else got there and that you can have some influence on the way they learn and what they learn. (Sheila)*

*I suppose, well I think that people who teach older ones have missed out in a way. They're perhaps getting something else from teaching older ones but I think they've missed out in seeing with the likes of the reading, you know seeing how exciting it is to go from a child who, you know, has no idea about books or what they're going to get from them to seeing you know, the formal side of it. The fact that they are able to read it and can tell you about what they've read and to see them informally with books and telling another child what's going on in the pages or picking out*

*words. - - - The fact that you've introduced the reading and the writing and the number work to a lot of them, not to all of them of course. That to a lot of them it was something completely new that they'd never done before and to see that they've picked up on it and really progressed under your influence. (Anne)*

*I mean I still think that one of the biggest changes that happens during the reception year and it's so much easier, I find it easier to actually see the change, um that's continually but I don't think it's so easy to pinpoint because the foundations are there and the foundations do make a huge difference and then there are just slight changes that carry on. (Dave)*

In chapter 4 I showed how early years teachers come to be aware of society's perceptions of their work. It is interesting that while they knew that their work was not highly regarded by many others they themselves felt they were in a very important and responsible position:

*- - - and things like the status we've talked about I know early years people are not valued as much as they should be but that's because people are ignorant isn't it really. You know that's, it doesn't worry me at all because I know what I'm doing and I'm confident that what I'm doing is just as important as what somebody else is doing in a secondary school. (Pauline)*

## Children's progress

Not surprisingly the teachers got great satisfaction from seeing the children in their classes make progress:

*Well, I think the job satisfaction is terrific right and seeing the terrific progress that they make in that year in the nursery. You know I can just picture one or two nursery children who've come in with no confidence, can hardly speak, absolutely lost and at the end of the year when they've become changed children with their confidence and their language and they're mixing and they're happy, just to see that gives me terrific buzz and satisfaction. - - - it's seeing them move on and that gives me such a lot of satisfaction. (Pauline)*

*I suppose children achieving things, seeing the progress over a period of time, and that is a long period of time sometimes. (Susan)*

For Sheila the progress children made was an indicator of her own success and expertise. Other teachers may well have interpreted children's progress in a similar way, although they did not specifically mentioned this.

*I think when you can see children and they click. - - - And it's just so fantastic when you think you've succeeded in getting them to learn something. (Sheila)*

Early years teachers got satisfaction from seeing the children in their classes make progress and they believed that progress and achievement were particularly noticeable in the younger children. As such the satisfaction gained from seeing children achieve was potentially greater for early years teachers than for those teaching older children:

*- - - then you get to see them changing so quickly, that's one of the things I love about reception is that you get them at the beginning of the first term and then by the end of the year I mean they're almost different children, they've changed so much. I mean I still think that one of the biggest changes that happens during the reception year and it's so much easier, I find it easier to actually see the change. (Dave)*

*Also I love it when it gets to Easter and they're starting to read. They come in in September they're like little empty vessels most of them, some of them can do this that and the other but um you work with them and it's constant repetition, it is constant repetition and you feel you're going over and over and over again and then it gets to Easter and you get them to the summer term everything starts to click and I just love that summer term when they all start to take off and by the time I send them up to the next class they're all reading and their handwriting has improved, its got a bit nearer to sitting on the line and the letters are mostly ..... (Helen)*

*- - - the tangible, you can actually see how quickly they are coming on because they're learning from such a low level you can see when they begin to write their name you can actually see what's been achieved which is enormous isn't it, so the relative gains ..... (Paul)*

*Now there must be an element of that with the older child, well there must be an awful lot of it with the older child, perhaps not so much with the reading you know within one year group, I don't know. And seeing this progress, all this sudden sort of oh now I understand what this is about, maybe in another subject um but I think to see it happen with the young ones is quite thrilling really. And to look back at this point in the year to what they were able to do at the beginning and to realise how much most of them have moved on is a very nice experience really.  
(Anne)*

Teachers also spoke of the satisfaction they got not just from seeing the children make progress but also from enjoying their schooling:

*I think when you can see children and they click and the joy and they absolutely love being at school and you can tell by the way they act and they're relishing what you're doing with them. (Sheila)*

*- - - that they enjoy coming to school. (Helen)*

### Home/school contact

In addition to the job satisfaction achieved through their relationships with children teachers also cited their contact with parents as a reason for enjoying early years work and several spoke at length about the strategies they used to foster such contacts. As before, I am adopting the term used by the teachers, that of 'parents', in the following discussion. Teachers tended to use the word 'parents' when in fact they were almost always referring to the mothers of the children they were teaching. I am also aware that using 'parents' excludes any principal carers who were not the children's parents. Despite this, for purposes of clarity, I have retained the teachers' own definitions.

*More contact with parents and families. (Pauline)*

*I mean I actually think that that is, that is the difference between this phase of education and the older you get the less that becomes a focus of the work (being involved with families), rightly so, but that at this stage, the two years you're talking about (I had mentioned I was interviewing reception and nursery teachers) is the two years I'm talking about too, is that I think you can not properly work with the children unless you aware of the context of their family and work in some way to be inclusive to those families, to be open to those families, to know about those families and to see children as part of those families. And to me that's just so much more interesting than having little bodies on desks if you like. So yes that's very much why I like this area of the work. (Karen)*

*I like looking at the whole child really, across the whole curriculum but also looking at them as part of their family. I really became very involved with the idea of working with the family as well as with the child and have ended up, my particular job at the school I'm at is working with parents, that's what my allowance is for. So I saw at an early, I think at an early stage that I got a better picture of the child working with the family. (Alison)*

#### Greater freedom/autonomy

In the previous section I analysed the role these early years teachers envisaged for themselves and indicated the tensions that exist for some teachers between their educational values and purposes and those of recent policy changes. Sikes (1992) points out that 'imposed changes which affect the things they value most can mean that teachers can no longer find a match between their aims and purposes and those prevailing in schools and cites the introduction of comprehensive education in England and the TVEI initiative as examples of this. In the light of recent educational reforms early years education was seen as an escape, albeit partial, from the National Curriculum and moves towards more formal teaching approaches. Some teachers felt they had been able to retain their preferred ways of working to a larger extent than their colleagues teaching older children had been able to do:



*I think it's partly the freedom one has in the nursery, no National Curriculum. More time to talk to the children. (Pauline)*

*What was so nice in nursery was perhaps not having the pressure of having them do all of these formal things. One had the time to do the art and develop the art and see a lot of that going on and see them getting a lot of different experiences and to have this opportunity to talk or to observe and to see how they were developing, the children. And to see that even if a child didn't seem to be doing anything the fact that they were standing and watching someone else and perhaps talking a little bit about what they were watching um and therefore you'd be able to see that they were progressing in a different way, taking things in and questioning things or learning from what they were watching whereas if you weren't watching the child you might assume that they'd been standing there doing absolutely nothing all day, literally wasting time. 'Cos I often feel guilty if I turn to a child and say oh you know you're not doing anything go and do this whereas perhaps they were getting a lot more from watching another child doing something or listening to other children. (Anne)*

*I think there is a difference. I'm not sure how great it is. I think there has to be a difference these days, there has to be more emphasis on academic things once you get further up Key Stage Two. The expectations on both*

*child and teacher are great and that's one of the things I don't like. I don't feel I can spend enough time you know just chatting and sort of talking to the children about things they might do or you know finding out about them. (Dave)*

*Because the nursery curriculum is more sort of child centred. As they get older it's more of a prescribed curriculum and the freedom, the flexibility, the spontaneity sort of goes out the window and it's much more rigid and I'm just, sort of person who is a more freer, flexible person so it just suits me. And I feel, looking around I feel that a lot of nursery\reception children, reception teachers are quite formal and I think children need a sort of, more flexible approach. (Mati)*

Karen also values being able to develop her own philosophy\practice in the nursery without the constraints of the National Curriculum. This greater autonomy/flexibility she believes is now under threat:

*What I also like about it is the fact that, I mean sadly we're moving away from it with Desirable Outcomes (SCAA, 1996) but it has been the area where you have still, and reception class is not included here which is why I think it is so hard for them, is that as a nursery teacher one has had the wonderful luxury of being able to read research, develop a philosophy, and then try and put it into practice without any of the*

*constraints of curriculum legislation which may or may not be misguided but which has, you know you have to spend 20% of your time on this and 20% of, you haven't been able to be creative and responding to philosophy and so on. This has been, the nursery phase, the most exciting phase to work in in that sense and that's why I feel very sorry for reception class teachers because as you were saying I think they would like to be doing that too but the constraints are beginning to come down on them and um, it's just been therefore the most personally satisfying area to be in because you can go out there, read about it, find out what the researchers have found and then try to put it into some sort of practical format. Um, wonderful, but I mean I'm not sure we are going to be left alone much longer but to date that has been very satis .....*

*(Karen)*

Alison too values the greater flexibility in teaching approaches that are possible when working outside National Curriculum pressures:

*I think what keeps me with the early years particularly is that I'm not happy with um, the constraints of the National Curriculum and I feel that, well in the particular school I'm in at the moment fortunately we haven't been sucked into the route of the National Curriculum, we have managed to still keep um giving the children a broader range of experiences. We are not as tied as the teachers in year 1 upwards. That's*

*one of the reasons I prefer early years and I just think that it's a very exciting time for children around 3,4,5. - - - And also I think that children become so um, taken in, involved in the fairly tedious routines of the school day and when you're in the early years you don't always have to adhere to that, you can let your day, your sessions, obviously 'cos. we have sessions in nursery education now, we have to finish at the end of the session, but you're not constrained by a timetable as much, particularly in nursery, more so in reception. But I like that, I don't like the idea of having to finish, I like the idea that if something happens that looks interesting then you can proceed with it. (Alison)*

#### Early years teachers' aims and satisfactions.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that there is relationship between these early years teachers' aims and the job satisfactions they identify. Individuals are likely to gain job satisfaction from being able to fulfil the aims they identify. It is also likely that anything which prevents early years teachers from achieving their aims, and the constraints identified by teachers relating to current educational reforms have already been noted, will have negative effects upon the satisfaction they get from their work.

One of the teachers' aims was to develop positive relationships with both children and their parents and these relationships featured strongly in teacher's accounts of what they liked about their work. In addition, teachers aimed to foster positive attitudes towards

education in young children and they spoke of the satisfaction they got from being in a position, as children's first school educators, which allowed them to influence children's attitudes towards schooling. Teachers also gave great importance to children being happy in school and cited the achievement of this as a source of job satisfaction.

## Conclusion

**The past is not lost: it is not even past.**

(William Faulkner, cited by Aitken, J. L. and Mildon, D. A. [1992])

The aim of this research was to provide a picture of what it is to be an early years teacher in the 1990's. I deliberately took an open-ended approach to the research because I wanted it to reflect the interests, concerns and passions of the early years teachers I talked with and the result is necessarily wide-ranging. As Casey (1992) writes:

The open-ended format which I have employed in my own research allows the interests of the narrator, rather than those of the interviewer, to dominate (p189).

It was also a personal journey, a journey which has led me towards a greater understanding of my own experiences as an early years teacher. As Sikes (1997) says of her research with parents who teach:

I wanted to hear other parent teachers' stories because I had the idea that hearing these and attempting to understand them would help me to better understand what had happened to me (p.134).

On reflection I believe the methodological approach adopted for this study of early years teaching has proved effective. Using life history enabled me to collect rich, in-depth data relating to teachers' past, present and future lives as well as information about their personal and professional lives. I used life histories to trace professional and personal biographies and to relate these to the contexts in which teachers were living and working. This proved effective as their stories indicate the complex relationships between these different aspects of their lives. Furthermore, the methodology enabled teachers to talk about their work from their own perspectives and to contribute to the research agenda. It highlighted the way teachers' previous educational, career and life experiences shape their views of, and experiences of, teaching and acknowledged that teachers' lives, both in and out of school, are important for how they see themselves.

I make no apologies for the small scale and subjective approach of this research. As argued in Chapter 2, my intention was to tell the stories of fourteen early years teachers from their perspective and as Plummer (1995) claims, it may be that "a huge debt is incurred by all those myriad little studies of social life ..... cumulatively they often add up to a more sensitive and politically engaged understanding of the world than many of the multi-million dollar surveys that standardise, and get lost " (p.xi).

The approach taken has enabled me to portray the many shared experiences and discourses of early years teachers whilst at the same time preserving the uniqueness of each individual's story. It also highlighted the contexts in which early teachers were living and working and showed individuals negotiating a path through life. Not only has it provided me with a way to acknowledge each individual's experience but also with a means to preserve the 'messiness' of real lives.

The symbolic interactionist approach underpinning this research enabled me to show how the meanings these teachers gave to their work were developed through shared and negotiated understandings. As Nias (1989) points out, 'by interacting with others, we become aware of the attitudes they hold towards us and this in turn shapes the way we see ourselves' (p.20). This is particularly evident in chapter 5 which shows how early years teachers, through their interactions with others, come to understand how others view them and shows how their identities are developed within a social context. Many of these interactions involved the expression of negative attitudes towards early years work but several teachers also mentioned the strong early years community of which they felt a part and no doubt this provided them with more positive experiences. In other words, we 'internalise the attitudes not just of particular people but also of organised social groups (e.g. churches, political parties, community groups, work forces)' (Cooley, 1902 cited by Nias, 1989, p.20).

Using both the literature currently available and the life histories of fourteen early years teachers, this study has explored several aspects of early years teaching. So what have I



found out? Firstly, through my reading and by listening to these early years teachers stories I became aware of the strong influence ‘time’ has on early years teaching and its teachers today. Secondly, whilst each teacher’s story is unique, several common themes emerged from their stories relating to their experiences and the meanings they give to their work. The influence of ‘time’ on early years teachers’ lives, work and careers will be considered first. This historical dimension involves three time scales; the historical development of early years teaching (historical time), teachers’ biographies (personal time), and the particular period of time in which teachers live and work (contemporary time).

## **A The Influence of Time**

### **1. Historical time**

This study has shown that the historical development of early years teaching has implications for how early years teachers conceptualise and experience their work and for how society views such work. The expansion of public education in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in women joining the teaching profession in increasing numbers and, as the number of women teachers grew, they came to be increasingly associated with the teaching of young children. I have argued that the assumption that women were, and still are, the most appropriate teachers of the young has implications for how early years teaching is perceived today and for how early years teachers, both men and women, experience that work. The low status of early years work and its teachers derives from the continued gendered nature of early years work and the stereotypical/traditional role of women as ‘carers’ in society.

The fourteen teachers I interviewed, along with other early years teachers, have inherited this legacy from the past, a legacy which persists today. They were well aware of society's perceptions of them and their work. Through their social interactions with others, they had come to know that their work was often considered less demanding, less intellectual, than that of teaching older children. They rejected such views. These early years teachers believed their work to be as demanding as that in any other sector of teaching. They regarded their work as being as important as that of other teachers, maybe more important, as they saw later schooling as being based on what they had achieved. The teachers' stories included explanations to account for their low status, explanations which focused on society's lack of knowledge about their work. Teachers tended to blame themselves for society's lack of understanding about early years education. They believed they were at fault for not articulating the value, importance, complexity and demands of early years teaching to others and felt responsible for ensuring that others better understood early years work. Greater dissemination of information about their work was seen as the route to improving their status. While these teachers accepted responsibility for society's misunderstandings about their work they rarely referred to the structural constraints which might explain their low status. The provision of more information about the work of early years teachers would no doubt be helpful but it does not address the fundamental inequalities relating to early years work. These inequalities, which have an historical background, relate to women's work and the position of women in society. I believe a greater awareness of this historical legacy, a legacy which early years teachers today inherit, is needed by early

years teachers, and others, in order to address the low status of early years education and society's misconceptions of early years work.

## 2. Personal time

I have also argued that early years teachers' biographies are influential for the way they conceptualise and experience their work as teachers of young children. I have used my own life history, and the life histories of fourteen early years teachers, to show how the 'personal' has significance for the 'professional'. Teachers' biographies have been shown to play an important role in the decision to become a teacher and for the kind of teachers we become. The ways in which early years teachers think about their work are influenced by their past experiences. Childhood experiences of family and school influence our beliefs, values, and understandings and we bring these beliefs and values and understandings to our work in the classroom, as my own story and those of the fourteen early years teachers in this research indicate.

Furthermore, personal time influences not only how early years teachers understand their work in the classroom, but also the way in which they view and experience their careers. Their stories detail the way teachers' personal lives impact upon their career development. While many of the issues that arose relating to career are more usually associated with women's careers, there is some evidence, although the sample this small, to indicate that men's experiences can be very similar. For example, several women teachers in the study had had their careers interrupted due to geographical moves resulting from their husband's work. Such interruptions can be detrimental to

career progression and are traditionally associated with women's careers. However, one of the men teachers (Paul) had experienced difficulty obtaining a suitable teaching job after moving locality as a result of his wife's employment. Similarly, women are traditionally assumed to be less ambitious for promotion than men but this did not appear to be true of the teachers I interviewed.

### 3. Contemporary time

The particular time period in which teachers live and work is also influential for how early years teaching is conceptualised and experienced by its teachers, and by others. In Chapter 3 I argued that life history is well placed to explore not only biographical factors but also the contemporary contexts and constraints within which teachers live and work. Analysis of the teachers' accounts showed contextual influences to be particularly important in two areas. Firstly, the continued gendered nature of early years education has implications for how that work is viewed, conceptualised, and experienced. I have argued that the position of women in society and the status of women's work is of great significance for early years teaching, for how these fourteen teachers experienced their jobs. The assumption that women are the most appropriate teachers of young children, and thus by implication men are not, still persists despite recent societal changes and the emergence of the 'New Man'.

Secondly, I have examined the current context in which early years teachers work, and in particular the educational changes resulting from the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), to argue that the recent reforms pose challenges to the preferred practice of

many early years teachers. At any point in time teachers' personal understandings, beliefs and values intersect with those at institutional and national level with varying degrees of match and mismatch. For example, I began teaching at a time when my own educational values, values informed by my past, corresponded with those advocated by National Government and I left when I felt they were in conflict.

For many of the early years teachers I spoke with, recent changes, resulting from the introduction of the National Curriculum, have proved a challenge to their own pedagogical beliefs and values. Two main difficulties emerged here. Early years teachers have been shown to conceptualise their work in an holistic way. Their aims were broad and they were also seen as being interrelated and interdependent. Non-academic aims were seen as important in their own right and also as a way of maximising academic development. The National Curriculum, which focuses almost entirely upon academic aims and largely ignores the importance of affective areas of education, does not mirror the way in which these teachers of young children see their work. For many of the teachers this created tensions between their preferred ways of working and the model they were being presented with.

Furthermore, the prescriptive nature of the National Curriculum had the potential to undermine one of early years teachers' most fundamental aims. Children's happiness in school was very important to teachers, again for its own sake and for fostering academic progress and positive attitudes to school. The National Curriculum was seen by some teachers as reducing the opportunity for teachers to develop both their own and the

children's interests, thus threatening children's enjoyment of school. Interestingly these concerns over the National Curriculum are slightly different to those identified by Campbell et al (1992). Their research with primary teachers found concern over the time demands of the new curriculum and, to a lesser degree, disagreement over the subject-designated nature of the curriculum rather than a more cross-curricular approach. It may be that Campbell's research reflects concerns which arose soon after the introduction of the National Curriculum and that the teachers I spoke with had had longer to become familiar with the reforms. Alternatively, it may be that early years teachers had somewhat different concerns to primary teachers in general, the focus of Campbell's research, particularly in relation to the responsibility they felt for children's initial attitudes towards schooling.

The influence of these three time frames, historical, personal and contemporary, on my own experiences as an early years teacher, and on those of the fourteen teachers in this study, suggests to me that a greater awareness of the influence of 'time' would be valuable for all teachers. As Middleton proposes:

Teachers, as well as their students, should analyse the relationship between their individual biographies, historical events, and the constraints imposed on their personal choices by broader power relations, such as those of class, race and gender (cited by Goodson, 1992b, p.243).

It might be beneficial for Initial Teacher Training to be reformulated away from the current competency based course with its narrow National Curriculum focus towards a model which includes the consideration of the three time frames discussed above. As Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992) argue:

Beginning teachers need to be helped to come to a reasonably full awareness of the conceptions they hold of themselves as teachers and of the origins of the meanings they hold; they need to recapture their histories (p.190).

Initial teacher training might include the writing of students' life histories. Such accounts would need to be used sensitively but could provide insights for students on the significance of our earlier experiences for the teachers we become. They might be focused upon how the student teacher experienced school and learning themselves and how these experiences are related to current understandings of themselves and teaching. Or, as in my own story, spread out to include other childhood and family experiences. Such accounts could be analysed and reflected upon and developed over the course of training and beyond. Such self-awareness, of who we are as teachers, might prove equally valuable for teachers in service.

- - - the small but growing body of knowledge about teachers' biographies suggest that it is not primarily the pre-service teacher education programmes that establish teacher identity but, rather,

previous life experiences as they relate to education and teaching (Knowles, 1992, p.147).

We might then be able to introduce a fourth time scale and use the past and the present to look towards the future. As Plummer argues, ‘the stories we weave into our lives play a hugely important task in reorganising our pasts, permitting the present and anticipating the future’ (cited by Measor and Sikes, 1992, p. 224).

It is also important that teachers who work with young children have specialist training in early years education. High quality early years education requires appropriately qualified staff (Dowling, 1988; DES, 1989; DES, 1990; Ball 1994). Five of the fourteen teachers in this study were not early years trained and Pauline and Paul both recalled their initial lack of experience in this area.

## **B. Common themes**

Research that is founded on teachers’ stories conveys a reality in a way that no theoretical formulation can, because storytelling is at the heart of human conduct (Schulz, 1997, p. 1)

As I argued in Chapter 2, stories are a vital and constant part of all our lives. All the time we are telling stories about our pasts, our presents, our futures, stories which enable us to make sense of the world. The stories we tell give form to our ideas and



meanings. While the fourteen teachers' stories in this research are accounts of individual, unique lives they also tell of certain shared experiences and understandings and during the analysis of their stories significant patterns emerged. Chapter 5 showed that there is a great deal of consensus about how early years teachers conceptualise their work; many shared aims and purposes. Like Casey (1993) and Sikes (1997) I also found that 'important common verbal patterns do emerge within the narratives of (a) particular social group of teachers in particular social circumstances' (Casey, cited by Sikes 1997, p.135). As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) point out:

.... the narratives of all of us are complex and contain various threads that knit a kind of continuity and unity in our professional lives (p.153).

Let us look now at some of those threads which were woven through the individual teachers' stories. When talking about their careers there was almost unanimous agreement amongst the teachers about the issue of headship. Almost all, men and women, had dismissed headship and two main reasons were cited to account for this. Firstly, headship was equated with less contact with children. As Chapter 6 showed, these teachers' main source of job satisfaction came from their relationships with the children they taught and they did not want to relinquish their contact with children to become headteachers. Secondly, and equally important, headship was also equated with a loss of their early years specialism as they would be required to take responsibility for a broader age range of children. Regardless of their original career intentions all but two of the teachers expressed a strong commitment to the early years. They had come to

identify themselves as early years specialists specifically and wanted to continue with that focus.

There may also be another factor affecting these teachers views about headship, their perceptions of who gets promotion. Their stories reveal a view of early years teaching as a cul de sac in promotional terms and I was often told that being a teacher of young children had a negative effect on promotion prospects. Though this was never given as a reason to account for their rejecting headship early years teachers are very aware of who succeeds in promotional terms in schools and they use these observations to inform their perceptions and understandings of career progression. There was a belief that being an early years specialist worked against them in promotional terms. The teachers believed that for Key Stage 2 teachers a lack of experience at Key Stage 1 would not be detrimental for promotion to headship whereas the reverse would not be true. Nursery teachers felt particularly disadvantaged in this way. However, it is difficult to unravel whether these understandings led early years teachers to reject ideas about headship because they felt they had less chance of being successful than teachers working with older children or whether the explanations they gave, of wanting to stay in the classroom and maintain an early years focus, were really the cause of their decisions to reject headship. It is possible that these early years teachers' stories are stories which enable them to cope with career disappointment.

Interestingly, in terms of questioning gender stereotypes, Paul was not ambitious for promotion and had opted to work part-time in order to share child care responsibilities with his partner, whereas Judith, a women, was the only person to declare an interest in becoming a head and was applying for positions at the time of interview.

When teachers talked about their work, their purpose in working with young children, they spoke in very similar terms. Their stories argue powerfully for an holistic approach to early years education, an approach which values both the intellectual and affective dimensions of early years education. Academic and non-academic areas of children's development were seen as being interrelated and interdependent. Their aims for the children they teach can be summarised as: learning the curriculum (subject aims), learning to learn (developing skills for learning such as independence, perseverance, questioning, reasoning, decision-taking, responsibility for learning), learning to care for others (social development, relationships with others), learning to care for oneself (emotional development, promotion of self-esteem), caring to learn (developing positive attitudes towards schooling mainly through ensuring children are happy in school and enjoy their work).

It is important to note that the interpretation offered here is my own. The teachers did not employ the above terms or categories as they spoke about their work. Indeed, it would have been surprising if they had given that I invited them, in the context of an informal conversation, to tell me about their work in the classroom and what they were trying to achieve. I did not ask them directly for their educational philosophy but used their discussions of their work to make explicit what was implicit in their accounts. It has been my job to make explicit the philosophy which underlies their practice and in telling their stories I have chosen to retain substantial amounts of their own words set alongside my commentary. This decision to include teachers' own words raises some

important issues and was taken for three reasons. Firstly, I felt that these teachers' spoke powerfully and eloquently about their work and I wanted to retain these qualities as far as possible in this account. Using teachers' own words was an effective way of achieving this. As Butt et al (1992) argue:

The notion of teacher's voice is important in that it carries the tone, the language, the quality, the feelings, that are conveyed by the way a teacher speaks or writes (p.57).

Secondly, I saw the inclusion of teachers' discourse as a way of demonstrating its legitimacy. Traditionally greater status is attributed to what we might term 'academic' discourse in relation to that of 'everyday' language. I wanted to argue that the language used by these teachers to discuss their work is appropriate to them and as valid as any other form. They talked to me in the way they would talk to other colleagues and to parents. As such it represents an inclusive way of communicating and one which allows teachers to use and make sense of their daily classroom experience. Whilst it may not be academically rigorous, their discourse demonstrates the conceptual framework in which they operate. As Harvey (1989) argues, 'all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate' (p.48). Goodson (1992a) claims that the 'sponsoring of this kind of teacher's voice is thus countercultural in that it works against the grain of power/knowledge as held and produced by politicians and administrators' (p.11). Certainly, some of the early

years teachers I talked with took the opportunity to be critical of current educational policy.

Thirdly, the inclusion of substantial amounts of the teachers' own words provides the reader with an opportunity to reflect upon the interpretation offered within these pages and to consider its 'trustworthiness'. No doubt other interpretations are possible. However, I see this as an advantage rather than a limitation. As Schulz (1997) argues, 'the texts of their stories are also an invitation for others to see and read differently, for the power of stories lies in their perpetual openness to further interpretation' (p.9).

Thus, many voices are to be heard in this account. There is my voice telling of my own personal experiences. There are the more distant voices of other writers and researchers. There are the voices of teachers telling their stories and my voice retelling those stories. At times the stories are unique and at other times they tell a collaborative story and, as Schulz points out above, there is room for other voices; the voices of those who may read this text and tell their own stories.

Finally, for me, the most significant and powerful message in these early years teachers' stories was their commitment to an holistic approach to young children's education. This approach, which saw the various elements of children's development as being interrelated and interdependent, has similarities to feminist pedagogy which promotes connectedness in the classroom and in particular:

... connection of the subject to society in general and the everyday problems associated with it; a connectedness between the community of learners, and connectedness of what is being learned to their experiences' (MacInnis, 1994, p. 8).

Significantly, these early years teachers were concerned with care and connectedness. While care and nurture have been largely written out of the public discourse on education, particularly in recent times, these teachers' stories serve to remind us that there is more to education than attainment targets, league tables and schemes of work, and that at the heart of the educational process is the relationship between child and teacher. At a time when the language of business seems to dominate educational thinking and reform we would do well to listen to the stories these teachers are telling us.

The educational philosophies, and preferred ways of working, of these early years teachers were often in conflict with recent educational reforms. The tensions which teachers referred to in their accounts might be explained by examining the philosophies that underlie both the National Curriculum and early years teachers' views on education. Whilst it is easy to oversimplify such matters, the National Curriculum, as argued earlier, can be regarded as placing its emphasis on preparing children for later stages in their lives, for adulthood and work. It does this by imposing a predetermined, academic curriculum strongly delineated into age-related expectations. This contrasts with the early childhood tradition and its emphasis on developmental approaches and

meeting children's needs. While few would disagree that it is important to prepare children for their adult lives, the debate centres on the best way to achieve this. Froebel, Montessori, and Steiner all saw childhood as much more than a preparation for adulthood and the Plowden Report (1967) argued that the 'best preparation for being a happy or useful man or woman is to live fully as a child' (para. 506). For many early years teachers, 'the best way to prepare children for their adult life is to give them what they need as children (Bruce, 1997, p.17) For the teachers in this research this meant meeting children's social and emotional needs as well as their intellectual ones, and ensuring their experiences of education were as positive as possible. They experienced difficulty when they felt the National Curriculum compromised their ability to meet the needs of the children they were teaching. At a time when education is becoming increasingly centrally controlled, and when its greater prescription threatens many of the features associated with good early years practice, we might do well to heed Grumet's (1988) words:

It is the female elementary schoolteacher who is charged with the responsibility to lead the great escape. At the sound of the bell, she brings the child from the concrete to the abstract, from the fluid time of the domestic day to the segmented schedule of the school day, from the physical work, comfort and sensuality of home to the mentalistic, passive, sedentary, pretended asexuality of the school - in short from the woman's world to the man's (p.25).

The philosophy of teaching articulated by these fourteen teachers clearly included many elements which are seen as contributing to the caring/nurturing role of early years teachers'. Their commitment to children's social and emotional development, and to children's happiness with school, were seen as important in their own right and for making learning more effective. However, early years teaching's association with nurturing, the links between early years teaching and women, and between early years teaching and mothering, are problematic for those who wish to see the status of early years teaching raised and greater acknowledgement given to the demands and complexity of the job. In our attempts to improve the status of early years education we must be careful not to underplay the importance of the affective areas in early years education. If we press only for the acknowledgement of the intellectual dimension of early years teaching the result may be the further undermining of the caring/nurturing aspect of the work. We need to argue that care/nurture, including the care of the sick and elderly (again work associated with women), is equally valued alongside the academic. Most importantly, we need to value the holistic approach adopted by these early years teachers, an approach which does not see care and education as competing elements. As Thompson (1997) writes, 'to emphasise the caring, interpersonal role of the teacher is not at odds with competent professionalism'. Maybe part of the problem arises from our definitions and understandings of 'care'. Smith (1994) argues that early years work is perceived mainly to consist of the benign and protective care of young children. For the early years teachers in this study 'care' encompassed a much broader and proactive role. They cared for children's academic development and for promoting positive attitudes towards education. They cared for children's social and emotional



development and for children's happiness. They cared for the kind of relationships they developed both with the children they taught and with the children's parents. They cared about the transition from home to school and were concerned to make it a positive experience for both for the child and the child's parents. Maybe the following quotation encapsulates what it means to be an early years teacher in the 1990's, for the experiences of these teachers derive from the way they see their work, the way others see their work, and the value society accords it.

**Care and education are inseparable, quality care**

**is educational and quality education is caring**

(The Early Childhood Education Forum, cited by Pugh, 1997, p.23).

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