

Child's play? Skills, regulation and reward amongst 'early years' workers

Abstract

The persistence of gendered pay inequality some 30 years after its formal prohibition raises questions over the mechanisms sustaining it. Recent contributions highlight the role of low skills visibility and valuation in maintaining pay inequality in predominantly female occupations. We examine the skills and rewards of early years' workers and the organisational processes that define them. We do so at an important juncture: when the importance and regulation of the 'early years' sector has increased significantly; and following extensive organisational restructuring aimed at delivering pay equality. We conclude that whilst the application of more systematic forms of skill measurement have improved the relative rewards of nursery nurses, highly gendered constructions of their skills, particularly those most closely linked to mothering, continue to impact negatively on their valuation. The presence of caring activities appears to eclipse their role in education. Complex institutional and organisational factors maintain important aspects of gender inequality.

Keywords (caring, early years', gender, grading, inequality, pay, skills, valuation)

Introduction

This article will address issues relating to the invisibility and undervaluation of skills in jobs traditionally undertaken by women. We begin with a discussion of how skills are valued, looking particularly at caring occupations. Having identified a dearth of research on the local dynamics of skills valuation in the UK, we present a detailed occupation and organisation specific case study of the skills and rewards of early years' workers (hereafter nursery nurses¹). We conclude by discussing the continuing impact of highly gendered constructions of skill and the role of organisational and institutional factors in challenging or maintaining gender pay inequality.

Valuing skills?

Recent debates continue to highlight the difficulties in defining, measuring and rewarding skill (Felstead et al, 2004; Bolton, 2004). Difficulties arise because the construct of skill contains both technical and social dimensions (Littler, 1982). Whilst the importance of 'soft' skills, emotional and aesthetic labour is increasingly recognised, the impact on skill definitions, job descriptions and remuneration policies is more uncertain. Many skills, particularly those associated with women's work, continue to be under-recognised or devalued (OECD, 1988; Gottfried, 2006, Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007), either through a failure to reward visible emotional skills and/or sufficiently acknowledge technical skills (Hochschild, 1983; Steinberg and Figart, 1999a).

Particular difficulties arise in caring occupations. Caring work comprises both 'caring for' and 'caring about'; incorporating both technical and emotional/interpersonal skills many of which are difficult to codify (Himmelweit, 1999; England and Folbre, 1999). The nature of care work, and the predominance of women as providers, has important implications for how it is rewarded. US evidence suggest the existence of a pay penalty in care work even after controlling for education, experience, occupation, industry and the stable characteristics of care workers (England et al, 2002)². This penalty is higher in childcare work, relative to health and education. Various explanations are offered for this: the limits on productivity improvement; the status of publicly-provided care as a good which requires altruism from taxpayers; the economic dependence of care recipients and the tendency for lower market wages in jobs with greater intrinsic motivation (Himmelweit, 2007; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). Further, the association of care work with motherhood may militate against its recognition as learned, skilled and valuable (Steinberg, 1990; Steinberg and Figart, 1999b; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007; OECD, 1998). Ironically, care work may be underpaid because it is too important to be fully commodified (Radin, 1996; Himmelweit, 1999).

Notwithstanding historical legacy in explaining pay inequality, its persistence three decades after formal prohibition requires further reflection on the mechanisms currently sustaining it. Low visibility and valuation of particular skills generate pay inequality, both for individuals and occupations (Hastings, 2003; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). Given the declining role of human capital explanations in pay inequality, the relative contribution of skills valuation is likely to increase, particularly intra-organisationally.

Whilst undervaluation of skill and jobs is inextricably linked to social and labour market processes, it is also a dynamic within organisations, embedded in pay systems which inadequately recognise particular skills (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). Yet as England and Dunn argue, “..sociologists have scarcely scratched the surface in exploring the larger questions of what determines wage differences that are interjob but *intraorganizational*” (1989, p245). We know little about the local dynamics of skills valuation and reward, and how organisational processes and actors produce, maintain or challenge undervaluation.

Steinberg’s *devaluation* thesis identifies organisational practices and labour market institutions as significant contributors to undervaluation and pay inequality. She advocates pay and reward redesign to highlight women’s skills and contribution, focussing on human relations and communication skills, emotional demands and efforts, and responsibility for client wellbeing (Steinberg, 1990; 1999). This is more than a call for ‘better’ job evaluation. Steinberg highlights the deeply embedded nature of skill invisibility and its role in pay inequality as well as the resilience of institutional pressures in resisting significant skill redefinitions. Redefining skills and rewards may create losers and winners (Crompton and Jones, 1984; Nelson and Bridges, 1999) and resistance from employers, business groups and male employees (Steinberg, 1990).

While pay equity campaigns have improved wages for millions of workers in traditionally female jobs, they have not delivered any radical re-definition of women’s work:

“... existing job evaluation systems emerge largely intact, are re-legitimated, and adjustments for wage discrimination turn out to be less costly than annual cost of living adjustments” (Steinberg, 1990, p471).

Recognising the undervalued skills of women workers raises difficult issues within trade unions (Acker, 1990; Blum, 1991; Abbott, 1993). Recent experience illustrates clearly the conflicting pressures facing unions in ensuring equal rewards for women (often a major plank of organising strategies), and defending existing (and often hard won) terms and conditions in male-dominated occupations. Steinberg (1990) notes the active opposition of some US unions to pay equity initiatives, and the trading off of pay rises for women to avoid reductions for men. A commonly used rationale is outlined below:

“ ... it is true that collective bargaining maintained more of the original gender gap than proposed by consultants ... This should not be viewed as negative to women but a victory for public sector workers by raising wages overall. It is doubtful that women could have done any better, and men could have ended up much worse off by any other process.” (Hallock, 2000, p35)

This approach is, however, vulnerable to challenge, particularly where the organisation and representation of women workers is increasingly important to union membership and organising strategies.

Routes forward?

There is a pressing need to improve the visibility of women's skills and analyse their valuation. In so doing, the design and operation of grading and reward systems becomes a crucial area of investigation. Steinberg's work, amongst others, envisages a potentially positive role for job evaluation (JE) in countering pay inequality. There is little doubt that JE is capable of uncovering significant gender inequalities in intra-organisational pay and that implicit pay policies are more susceptible to discrimination (England and Dunn, 1988). Yet critical scholars have good reasons to feel uneasy. JE is a management tool used either to rationalise organisational hierarchies (Acker, 1990) or to facilitate equitable remuneration (ILO, 1986). These disparate views are mirrored in equal opportunity legislation, where JE constitutes both a mechanism to ensure equal treatment of women and a defence for employers against claims of unequal pay (Gilbert, 2005).

There is a long-standing and extensive literature critical of JE and its discriminatory impact (Treiman, 1979; Steinberg, 1990). JE systems make a number of problematic assumptions: that jobs are 'empty slots' separable from their incumbents; that job complexity and responsibility are closely related to hierarchical position; that responsibility for some factors (e.g. financial resources) are more important than others (e.g. people) and that factors suited to describing managerial work are equally applicable to non-managerial work. Most significantly, the hierarchical principles in many JE systems are derived from existing (and gendered) job structures and hence rarely radically alter existing hierarchies. The definition of factors reflects choices about value that often produce gendered effects. Skills and demands associated with women's work (relational skills, the exercise of authority, emotional distress, responsibility for physical care) are either overlooked or insufficiently weighted relative to skills more prevalent in men's work (e.g. technical and managerial skills). JE systems are also susceptible to implementation error and the quality of the job description provided by a job-holder or arrived at by an evaluator is crucial. Evidence suggests that male job descriptions are more detailed and better reflect actual demands than those of women (Steinberg, 1990). Vague or brief descriptions leave greater scope for stereotypical assumptions about actual demands, and assessors may fail to recognise or appreciate skills culturally coded as female (England and Folbre, 1999).

These are not simply technical limitations. Notwithstanding broader concerns over imperfect information and bounded rationality, it is clear that JE practices could be improved by utilising a broader conception of skills that better reflect 'women's work'. Yet the design and operation of JE must be seen within a broader organisational and institutional context in which, as a "social document", JE reflects rather than challenges existing hierarchies (Acker, 1990). Despite these limitations, the procedures and practices surrounding JE tell us something about how employers set pay and organisational priorities (England and Dunn, 1988).

Case Study

Analysing nursery nurses' jobs provides an important opportunity to highlight the relationship between work, skills and reward. The context is noteworthy. Firstly,

recognition of the importance of early years' education and care is increasing, along with the need to address the skills, reward, career development and status of its workforce (Scottish Executive, 2002; 2005). Secondly, the study covers a crucial period when employers were actively redesigning reward structures to deliver equal pay and address a 20% gender pay gap (Hastings, 2003). Thirdly, nursery nurses in Scotland have undertaken sustained industrial action in pursuit of a systematic review and re-grading of their work following significant changes in provision, standards and regulation.

Methods

A mixed methodology was applied using five forms of data collection. Phase 1 analysed secondary data on gender, skills and pay and the public policy/regulatory framework. Phase 2 analysed pay levels. Phase 3 involved six focus groups with nursery nurses in three local authority areas to reflect establishment type and location³. Phase 4 comprised a postal survey of 2093 randomly selected nursery nurses who were Unison members⁴, stratified by local authority. 615 usable responses were received (a response rate of 31%). Respondents were predominantly female, white, and with a mean age of 44. More than 80% were basic grade nursery nurses; almost all had permanent contracts (99%) and most (71%) worked full time. Most held common entry-level qualifications at SNVQ Level 3, while 55% had, or were working towards, additional qualifications. Phase 5 involved the analysis of intra-organisational JE scores.

Policy and regulatory framework

The Scottish Government is explicit on the importance of early education and care:

“High quality early education, childcare and playwork help children to get the best start in life, promoting all-round development in the crucial formative years.”
(Scottish Executive, 2000a).

Provision and regulation has expanded considerably in the last decade, and pre-school education for 3-4 year olds has been mandatory since 2002⁵. The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 established the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (the Care Commission), responsible for inspecting all care services to national standards (National Care Standards Committee, 2005), and the Scottish Social Services Council, responsible for conduct and practice among social services workers and the registration of all Care Commission regulated staff. Pre-school education is also governed by curricular requirements (Scottish Executive, 1999; 2000b). The Care Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education jointly undertake annual inspections to monitor quality standards. In addition, establishments are subject to internal review processes. Taken together, these processes result in extensive and regular scrutiny of the sector and workforce.

The regulatory regime acknowledges the inextricable link between education and care for pre-school children (Scottish Executive, 2005a), and recent guidance for children aged 0-3 explicitly recognises that care and learning are inseparable (Scottish Executive, 2005b). The early years' sector bears greater similarity to the education than to the broader social care sector.

The early years' workforce

In 2002, around 22,000 workers were employed in private, public and voluntary-sector pre-school centres in Scotland. Most are women (Scottish Executive 2002; 2004; Rolfe *et al*, 2003). There is widespread acknowledgement that pay levels are low (*ibid*) and the sector is often viewed negatively as a career option (Scottish Executive, 2000c). However, local authority early years' workers are relatively privileged: they are better qualified with superior pay and conditions than their private sector counterparts. Their minimum entry qualification is HNC/SVQ3, a two year qualification combining theory and practical placements. The quality of the workforce is of concern to all stakeholders: staff experience and training are important criteria for parents when choosing childcare while staff qualification levels are positively related to educational and social outcomes for children and society (*ibid*).

What do nursery nurses do?

Survey respondents were offered a list comprising all key job components within existing job descriptions supplemented by future job components envisaged by a National Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce (Scottish Executive, 2006). Table 1⁶ presents data on the range and frequency of activities undertaken by nursery nurses.

Table 1 to go in here

While there is considerable similarity in responses, this is not surprising given the context of national regulation, standards and curricula. The focus group data align closely with the survey findings. A number of issues emerge. Firstly, there is significant emphasis on child development, learning and recording systems: over 90% reported promoting children's linguistic, social, intellectual and sensory development *all* of the time. Secondly, nursery nurses report making frequent and positive contributions to strategic and operational planning, curriculum planning and implementation. Fewer than 10% never did *any* of these tasks. Thirdly, activities outwith current job descriptions were highlighted as occurring at least frequently: communicating with parents; involving them in decisions; working with other agencies; involvement in individual child assessment; reporting; and responsibilities for nursery-school transition. Most had undertaken senior duties (56%) and specialised tasks associated with case conferences (64%). These findings offer a strong counter to the view that nursery nurses are engaged in basic childcare. Indeed, a majority reported spending around 20% of their time away from child contact.

Table 2 below outlines the key skills identified by nursery nurses and their relative importance.

Table 2 to go in here

The survey and focus groups highlighted the importance of an interest in children, in equity, an empathetic or caring approach, teamworking and good communications as key

role requirements. Other areas such as knowledge of child development, flexibility and the ability to take initiative are also prominent. In specifying their most important role requirements, respondents identified (in descending order) ‘an interest in children’, ‘understanding theories of child development and child care’ and ‘empathy, a caring nature and patience’. These, along with teamworking skills are foremost when the three most important preferences are combined.

Work experience

Table 3 below contains a series of attitude statements relating to nursery nurses’ experiences of work.

Table 3 to go in here

Both survey and focus group respondents endorsed the view that they were engaged primarily in education **and** childcare. Focus group participants criticised employers for failing to recognise their expertise in pre-5 education. Significant criticism was raised of the prevailing occupational stereotype of their role:

“...everything I do is about the education of that child...whether it’s about discussing behaviour management, plans, even toilet training, it is all about education ...” (NN, school, 10 years)⁷

“...if someone was to think of you as an educator that’s quite different from them just thinking of you just as a childminder ... because all they think you do is wipe their nose, wipe their bottom, feed them, read them a story as well and that’s it ... we do that, but we also do the education side as well..” (NN, school, 6 years)

“ ... we don’t get credit for delivering the curriculum in the same way a teacher does ...” (NN school, 15 years)

“ ...we are the ones who are trained in working with under 5’s but it’s not recognised” (NN, school, 6 years).

Survey respondents reported that their job requires higher levels of skill and demands than previously. Focus group participants identified an increasing need for administrative and ICT skills, additional accountability and responsibility; and demands arising from increasing numbers of children (and families) with behavioural problems and special needs.

Looking at work experience, most respondents reported greater responsibility, a greater need to use initiative, greater requirements in terms of concentration and working harder than previously. Most rated their job as stressful. Greater responsibility, increased effort and increased stress may be linked to the increased emphasis on regulation and administration in the sector. Most respondents supported regulation and inspection, believing it helped them provide a better quality service. However, many also felt that increased administration reduces contact time with children and that regulation and

inspection makes their work harder. Nevertheless, most felt that administration provides a positive opportunity to reflect on each child, highlighting that quality of service does not arise only from child contact activities.

Pay, status and career

Prior to industrial action in 2004, local authority nursery nurses in Scotland earned between £10-14k per annum. By January 2005, annual full-time salaries ranged from £17,436-£20,168 (with an average of £10.52 per hour). Notwithstanding an improvement in pay, nursery nurses continue to earn considerably below annual earnings for males (£25,100) and females (£19,400) (ASHE 2005). Dissatisfaction with pay, limited recognition from their employer and a lack of career development were most frequently identified by respondents as the worst aspects of their job.

Focus group respondents complained of an absence of career pathways (e.g. in leadership/management) in which to develop their expertise and abilities, in contrast to those available for other early years' workers such as teachers and social workers, and the lack of pay incentives for career progress. Senior positions were considered to offer poor rewards relative to their increased workload and responsibilities. Yet respondents reported considerable willingness to undertake further training. While most received training or Continuing Professional Development, an appreciable minority (40%) assess this as insufficient to their needs, while many (57%) report undertaking training in their own time.

In part, status relates to reward and prospects for career advancement, on which respondents reported considerable disquiet. Status also relates to perceptions of being valued. Almost all of the respondents felt valued by parents (95%), other agencies (85%) and line managers (83%). Relations with local management appear to be good, supported by shared occupational experience. However, only a minority (38%) feel valued by their employer, with only 4% feeling highly valued. In contrast, 57% feel valued by the public, a group that are thought to know very little about their work. Focus group respondents described the failure of employers to recognise, reward and develop them, and to treat them fairly relative to other employees. Only a minority of respondents reported high morale for themselves (37%) and colleagues (24%). While there is little evidence of turnover, many respondents (63%) report having seriously considered leaving local authority work.

Consistent with previous research (Rolfe *et al*, 2003), most nursery nurses agree that the most satisfying aspect of their job is working with children and seeing them develop and progress. This is a significant retention factor, thus prioritising their intrinsic vocational relationship with children over aspects of their contractual relationship (Bubeck, 1995; Himmelweit, 1999). Overall, the findings contrast with characterisations of childcare work as having a high discretionary content but low task range (Bolton, 2004). While this may not be typical of all early years' workers (such as childminders): as deliverers of education and care in a highly regulated workplace, local authority nursery nursing constitute a high discretion, high task range occupation, consistent with other professional occupational profiles.

Valuation

We have presented data on the skills, role requirements and job demands of nursery nurses. How are these linked to valuation and reward? Following a negotiated agreement between local authorities and trade unions in 1999⁸ aimed at delivering ‘single status’ terms and conditions of employment, national agreements and conditions of service have been replaced by authority-level agreements on pay and grading. A bespoke single spine, analytical scheme now determines the relative positioning of nursery nurses within each authority’s pay structure. The most common scheme comprises 13 factors with differential weighting. Table 4 outlines the factors, their descriptors and their relative weights. Job scores within each authority are not available to the recognised trade unions. We did, however, obtain factor scores for six representative authorities. There is significant uniformity of results, and thus we have presented only the modal score. Factor scores give an important insight into how nursery nurses’ skills and activities have been assessed. There are, however, limitations to our approach: we are considering outcome measures rather than direct data (observation or documentary). The process by which evaluators arrived at these outcomes remains a ‘black box’ in this as in most other JE studies. Further, we did not undertake detailed job analysis of other occupations.

Table 4 to go in here

Nursery nurses are rated at either the minimum point or one above on 10 of the 13 JE factors. They obtain their highest scores on the factors which impact least on the scheme (concentration, physical effort, dealing with relationships, working environment and physical co-ordination). Whilst they receive a mid-range score on the most heavily weighted knowledge factor, their scores are low on the remaining, more influential factors. We have concerns that the work of nursery nurses is being under-rated in important respects. Firstly, nursery nurses’ scores for initiative and independence appear to be considerably out of line with their reported activities and with the level of discretionary activity contained within the regulatory framework. Second, the score for communications suggests that communication with service users who have limited or no verbal skills is viewed as unproblematic, yet these can be challenging settings in terms of dealing with, developing and recording the needs of a wide range of children, including the vulnerable and those with special needs. Third, their score relating to responsibility for services to others may reflect the low level of importance attached to the consumers of particular kinds of services (Bolton, 2004). Fourth, there appears to be little recognition that pre-school children create a distinctly different, and arguably less pleasant, physical environment than that of school-age children. Finally, the ‘dealing with relationships’ score appears to reward those who deal with pre-5 children less highly than occupations dealing with older children, young adults and adults, despite the critical importance of the early years’ for children’s social and educational development.

Discussion

Our analysis of what nursery nurses do and how they experience their work provides a stark contrast to stereotypical portrayals of nursery nursing as little more than basic

childcare. Their role in delivering education is significant and appears to be increasing but without comparable recognition and reward. Nursery nursing is a highly regulated occupation, but one in which the nature of the task and of the primary recipient of the service requires considerable effort, knowledge, initiative and the ability to communicate and manage relationships in complex settings with a wide variety of groups and agencies.

Where re-grading has been fully implemented, nursery nurses have improved their rank position relative to some other occupations, yet questions as to their relative ranking remain⁹. Teachers working alongside them in nursery schools/classes provide an obvious job comparator. Without exception, our respondents reported little difference between their work activities and those of their teacher colleagues¹⁰, particularly following the expansion of nursery nurses' responsibilities for assessment, evaluation, recording, report-writing and inspection¹¹. Both occupations work to the same national regulations, curricula, and standards. Yet their pay and conditions of service are very different. Salaries for unpromoted teachers in nursery, special, primary and secondary schools in 2005 ranged from £19,059 (for probationers) to £30,399. While teaching requires higher entry qualifications, teachers are not specifically trained to work with pre-school children, undertaking a short endorsement course to work in nurseries. Conversely, nursery nurses are exclusively trained, qualified and experienced in working with pre-school children. The possession of a qualification is not necessarily a sufficient explanation of the considerable differences in pay between teachers and nursery nurses under European law¹². While few nursery nurses argued for equal pay with teachers, criticism of the magnitude of their pay differential was common. Despite sharing the same employer, teachers are not subject to JE.

In this context, it is not surprising that arguments for the professionalisation of nursery nurses are increasing. Notwithstanding concerns over possible negative consequences in reducing access to jobs (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007), the pursuit of professional recognition may enhance their careers, status and pay. Indeed, early years' workers are one of the few groups with direct responsibility for pre-school children who do not have professional status, a position they share with parents and mothers in particular. The first tentative steps in this direction have been taken with the acceptance by the Scottish Government of the Early Years' Review recommendation that the occupation be degree-led with effect from 2014.

We argue that nursery nurses are disadvantaged by an undervaluation of the skills involved in providing education and care: the demands of emotional work do not appear to be fully recognised; there seems to be little recognition of the complex technical skills underpinning the care and education of young children, and the demands of young children themselves appear to be viewed as unproblematic. Nursery nurses are also disadvantaged, however, insofar as the presence of a significant care element within their role appears to overshadow their contribution to children's education. Caring thus becomes the lens through which all of their work is viewed. The close association between paid childcare work and mothering appears to militate against appropriate recognition of the skills of nursery nurses.

The relative undervaluation of workers in pre-school education and care is not new. Steinberg quotes a 1974 study examining the US Dictionary of Occupational Titles which found “ ... *that dog pound attendant, parking lot attendant, and zookeeper were rated as more complex jobs than nursery school teacher and childcare worker*” (1990, p456). That dog wardens continue to be ranked above nursery nurses in at least one local authority some 30 years later shows that such undervaluation is also highly resilient with a strong currency in contemporary settings.

How do we make sense of the valuation of nursery nurses in an organisational context where the pursuit of equal pay has been an explicit high priority? Space precludes the presentation of a fully developed institutional analysis of those interests, structures and processes that have contributed to the current scenario for nursery nurses, but a brief consideration of key players and processes is useful here.

Government has played a crucial role in defining strategic priorities and operational parameters within the early years’ sector. The pursuit of wider economic and social objectives has expanded early years’ provision. To encourage take up and other beneficial outcomes, the quality and regulation of that provision has become a key priority, with attendant implications for defining appropriate skills and career pathways. The direction of state policy has thus been a significant pressure towards upskilling in the sector.

Yet the role of government remains one step removed, and expanding expectations of what nursery nurses will deliver has created particular difficulties for their employers. Local authorities’ dependence on the state makes them more likely to comply with government policy and regulation, yet they face conflicting pressures as they attempt to deliver on a broad range of priorities. The Scottish Government is committed to investing in training, accreditation and promoting career pathways. However, creating a more highly skilled and qualified workforce may exacerbate tensions between nursery nurses and their employers if funding of the sector does not allow for corresponding improvements in pay. Similarly, balancing their statutory obligations to deliver equal pay in the context of continued market testing of publicly provided services under Best Value restrictions has proved difficult, not least due to the considerable availability of inexpensive childcare workers currently employed in the private sector.

In complex organisations with high workforce diversity, implementing pay equity is a formidable challenge. The potential cost of pay equality is significant – both directly and in terms of the likely consequences of disturbing existing pay relativities between occupational groups. In negotiations preceding the 1999 agreement, local authorities argued successfully for the decentralisation of grading structures and pay to allow greater responsiveness to local conditions. Yet this decision has proved extremely costly: increasing the costs of pay equality, delaying its implementation and opening up individual authorities to legal challenge (Scottish Executive, 2006). Moving from national agreements and predominantly national bargaining may also have seriously diluted the expertise available within authorities and unions to undertake such an extensive and complex pay and grading restructuring.

Restructuring has also exposed enormous tensions within trade unions who have had to engage in a dangerous juggling act to balance the interests of women members in equal pay, defend the existing terms and conditions of many male-dominated occupations, and protect the union's institutional interest both in maintaining membership (especially in growing sectors of the economy) and in avoiding legal liability. Concerns have emerged within unions over the priority given to equal pay relative to defending existing pay rates, concerns that are now providing fertile pickings for 'no-win no fee' employment lawyers. There is little doubt from the nursery nurses themselves that despite significant concerns over absolute pay and its relative fairness, intrinsic reward from the job itself is important to their retention (Bubeck, 1995). This in part explains their commitment to remaining within local authorities and addressing their concerns through organisation and activism. Yet this has neither been straightforward nor wholly effective. Many of our respondents questioned the degree of solidarity within their own trade union during their industrial action. Further, whilst there may be significant benefits to them in an alliance with teachers and classroom assistants, their lack of shared professional status, the vested interests of teachers and separate union organisation has not laid the basis for greater solidarity across the education sector.

The extent to which the presence of a significant care element in the work of nursery nurses appears to colour recognition of their particular skills and contribution adds an additional dimension to the discussion of a pay penalty for workers involved in care, suggesting deeply embedded cultural perceptions which fail to recognise the complex skills underpinning high quality caring work. Nursery nurses appear particularly disadvantaged due to their strong association with mothering activities and skills. In addressing the undervaluation of care workers, a first and necessary step is to open up their skills to detailed analysis; a second is to subject JE systems to critical scrutiny. Here, we have considered attempts to redefine and fairly reward skills in a highly conducive context where the intersection of state, employer, union and legal agendas has created both positive and negative drivers towards establishing fair grading and pay. Yet organisational, institutional and cultural factors have heavily constrained progress. Skill recognition and valuation remains a contested issue for nursery nurses and more broadly for local authority employees¹³.

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Table 1: Job components and frequency of tasks

	Never %	Some- times %	Frequently %	All of the time %
Plan a curriculum programme for each child to HMIE and/or Care Commission standards	6	8	18	68
Implement a curriculum programme for each child to HMIE and/or Care Commission standards	4	6	14	76
Observe, record and report on children's progress/development	<1	4	9	86
Be involved in Individualised Educational Programmes	4	26	32	37
Set up challenging and stimulating indoor and outdoor learning situations to motivate learning and to help children develop a variety of skills	<1	3	9	88
Encourage children's development through listening, talking and responding to children in a range of learning contexts	0	2	4	94
Encourage children's language development and be aware of ways to stimulate language through play, books, stories and by personal interaction	0	2	4	94
Make positive contributions to strategic and operational planning	<1	4	23	73
Encourage children's literacy and numeracy	0	2	11	87
Encourage children's awareness of equalities issues	0	7	24	69
Adhere to the Scottish Social Services Council code of practice for carers	3	3	10	84
Liaise with tutors of nursery nurse students	10	33	31	25
Keep up-to-date with early years' initiatives/developments and participate in Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	1	7	36	57
Communicate with and involve parents in decisions	2	8	25	66
Liaise with other agencies (social workers, speech therapists, police, other establishments/schools)	2	18	39	41
Prepare and present reports for parents/carers and other agencies	11	19	34	36
Support, mentor or develop students, temporary or new staff	4	20	38	38
Assist in planning/follow-up to HMIE and Care Commission visits	4	16	31	49
Support vulnerable families and encourage them to access other agencies (i.e. health, social work)	6	26	28	40
Facilitate transition of children to school settings	3	15	27	54

Table 2 - Key Knowledge, skills, attributes and importance

Knowledge/Skill/Attributes	Very important %	Important %	Not important %	Most Important %
Understanding theories of child development and child care	82	18	<1	53
Understanding basic medical knowledge	35	64	1	
Understanding basic nutrition	36	64	1	
Good reading and writing skills	56	43	1	
Good numerical skills	41	54	5	
Understanding hygiene regulations	68	32	0	
Understanding safety regulations	79	20	<1	
Physical stamina	57	41	2	
Good team-working skills	94	6	0	37
Flexibility/adaptability	86	14	<1	8
Ability to take initiative	83	16	<1	
Good communication skills	92	8	0	10
A fair and consistent approach	90	10	<1	11
Creativity	37	60	3	
An outgoing personality	33	56	11	
Good 'people' skills	76	23	<1	
Empathy/caring nature/patience	92	8	0	58
An interest in children	97	3	0	54
Previous work experience with children	24	58	19	
Experience of other caring roles (eg being a parent)	10	50	40	

Table 3: Work experience

Statement	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
Educating children is the most important part of my job	48	24	13	11	3
My main job is childcare, not education	11	12	21	36	21
My job requires higher skills than it did in the past	47	34	11	7	1
My job requires more conceptual or thinking skills than it did in the past	34	39	18	8	1
I now have less responsibility at work than I used to	3	4	5	16	71
My job requires me to take very little initiative	4	5	11	38	42
My line manager allows me to take a lot of responsibility	26	44	18	11	2
My job requires high levels of concentration	53	39	6	2	<1
I work harder than I did in the past	43	29	16	9	3
I find my job very stressful	24	38	23	12	3
More regulation and inspection helps me to provide a better quality service.	16	36	27	17	4
More paperwork leaves me less time for direct contact with the children.	51	28	12	8	1
I now spend less time directly interacting with children that I used to	24	32	14	25	6
I now spend much more time than I used to on activities relating to inspection.	22	42	21	13	2
Involvement in paperwork gives me an opportunity to reflect on each child.	16	56	16	10	2
More regulation and inspection has made my work harder.	29	34	23	12	1

¹ The nomenclature for early years' workers varies. We use the generic term *nursery nurses* for ease of reading.

² There is no equivalent UK analysis. *A priori* we expect a lower UK penalty due to the minimum wage and greater public sector provision of care services.

³ Different establishment types provide early years services: nursery schools/classes are teacher-led and cater for children aged 3-5; extended day establishments can be nursery nurse-led and cater for children aged 0-5.

⁴ Union density is approximately 67%.

⁵ The Provision of School Education for Children under School Age (Prescribed Children) (Scotland) Order 2002.

⁶ The tables include all 615 useable responses with only small variation between questions.

⁷ All quotes designate the respondent's job, establishment and length of service.

⁸ Implementation did not begin until 2006. Few authorities have completed this process.

⁹ Space precludes a discussion of the scheme's pay assimilation rules, and earnings protections mean that downgraded occupations will retain their higher earnings for some time.

¹⁰ None of our respondents were teachers.

¹¹ Some authorities have re-deployed teachers out of pre5 education, and the Early Years Review recommends degree- (not teacher-) led establishments.

¹² *Brunnhofner v Bank der Österreichischen Postsparkasse AG* [2001] IRLR 571 and *Angestelltenbetriebsrat der Wiener Gebietskrankenkasse v Wiener Gebietskrankenkasse* [1999] IRLR 804 ECJ.

¹³ In one day in October 2007, 12,000 equal pay claims were submitted to the Employment Tribunals Service in Scotland.