

The 'Childcare Champion'?: New Labour, Social Justice and the Childcare Market

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Abstract:

Childcare as a policy issue has received unprecedented attention under New Labour, through various aspects of The National Childcare Strategy introduced in 1998. This policy focus looks set to continue, with childcare likely to be a major topic in the next manifesto. Early Years care and education is a productive area for New Labour as initiatives here can address several agendas: increasing social inclusion, revitalizing the labour market, and raising standards in education. The provision of childcare is seen as having the potential to bring women back into the workforce, modelling childrearing skills to parents understood as being in need of such support, and giving children the skills and experience they need to succeed in compulsory education. The existing market in childcare is a largely private sector one with the government recently introducing tax credits designed to make childcare more affordable and accessible to lower income parents. This paper draws on material gathered during a two year ESRC funded project looking at the choice and provision of childcare in London. It argues firstly that social justice in childcare is currently understood to be primarily a matter of access, and secondly demonstrates that even for privileged middle class consumers, the childcare market is a very 'peculiar' one, especially when compared to the markets of economic theory. We conclude by commenting on the lack of parental voice shaping the future direction and development of the childcare market.

Introduction

'You can't put a price on the safety and happiness of your child' (Grace, Battersea mother)

This paper is one in a series analysing data collected during an ESRC funded project (R000239232) on choice of pre-school childcare. One of our primary concerns in the project is to explore the developing and diverse market in childcare for the under 5s. It is our contention, that a consideration of the operation and nature of this market, far more mature (at least in our London research sites) than the quasi-market of compulsory education, can illuminate many of the problems inherent in translating market theory, the certainties and simplicities of economics into the messy realities of markets in practice. Additionally, the childcare sector is an important one to study as it is currently dynamic and developing, having experienced both massive expansion of private sector provision and high levels of government intervention. First of all we consider New Labour's recent initiatives in childcare and argue that social justice in childcare is currently understood to be primarily a matter of access, overlooking issues of form and content.

New Labour childcare policy

Until the advent of the 1997 Labour government childcare was a neglected area of public policy. As Denise Riley (1983) has noted, 'the very term 'childcare' has a dispiriting and dutiful heaviness hanging over it ... it is as short on colour and incisiveness as the business of negotiating the wet kerb with the pushchair' (cited in Brennan 1998 p.3). However, the rising number of mothers with small children who were returning to the labour market was a phenomenon that demanded a response. In addition, and importantly, early years care and education is a productive area for New Labour as initiatives here theoretically can address several agendas: increasing social inclusion, revitalizing the labour market, and raising standards in education. The provision of childcare is seen as having the potential to bring women back into the workforce, modelling childrearing skills to parents understood as being in need of such support, and giving children the skills and experience they need to succeed in compulsory education. Until recently the private sector has been the major beneficiary of the increasing number of women returning to work. In the period between 1990 and 2000 the UK day nursery market quadrupled, and day nurseries account for about 30% of registered places. The day nursery market is worth £2.66bn (Blackburn 2004) and in 2003, grew by 13%. The sector is currently experiencing a period of mergers and acquisitions among the larger operators, with Nord Anglia (its nursery division operating under the name of Princess Christian) buying two other major but struggling chains, Leapfrog and Jigsaw earlier this year. Asquith Court, the former market leader, and kidsunlimited also merged this summer to form the Nursery Years Group. More mergers and acquisitions are likely to follow, resulting, eventually, in perhaps three or four major players dominating the market (although independent small businesses are unlikely to completely disappear). However,

at the moment the private day nursery sector remains a competitive, fragmented market. Increasingly private sector providers are complaining that their viability, in a period of falling birth rates, is further at risk from Government funded Sure Start initiatives scooping up the limited numbers of children and staff in particular localities (Vevers 2004b, Blackburn's 2004 report also notes a rise in vacancy rate nationwide for the second year running).

Through the National Childcare Strategy, New Labour is committed to 'a longer term vision of the childcare market in which every parent can access affordable, good quality childcare' (Baroness Ashton DFES 2002, cited in Mooney 2003, p.112). This is to be achieved through a plethora of initiatives, particularly directed at disadvantaged areas and lower income families. However, the rhetoric is increasingly of universal child care for all, with services being provided through Children's Centres, (integrated services on one site eventually planned to be in every local community, but initially in the most disadvantaged areas)¹. The Chancellor announced this summer as part of the Spending Review that 2,500 will be open by 2008). The umbrella for many projects is Sure Start² which now incorporates Children's Centres and the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (designed to bring affordable care to disadvantaged areas. The Government has also made tax credits available to lower income families.

There are many praise-worthy initiatives here. The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, was hailed as a 'childcare champion' in March of this year by the pressure group and childcare charity The Daycare Trust. This was in response to the 2004 Budget which directed increased spending of £669 million on early years education and childcare by 2008, and the July Spending Review which saw an extra £100m for the development of Children's Centres. Thus the Sure Start budget will rise by 17% in real terms from 2004/5 to 2007/8.

The DFES five year plan published this summer also talks of a vision of integrated 'educare', with services available to families from 8am-6pm, 48 weeks of the year. The emphasis is clearly on one stop provision drawing together a range of health, education and welfare and care services available eventually to all families (there is of course a

¹ In Gordon Brown's statement to the House introducing the Spending Review in July 2004, he said,

But there is one additional reform that has the potential to transform opportunity for every child and be a force for renewal in every community, and on which the Government wishes to make further progress today. While the nineteenth century was distinguished by the introduction of primary education for all and the twentieth century by the introduction of secondary education for all, so the early part the twenty first century should be marked by the introduction of pre-school provision for the under fives and childcare available to all [.....] So that from the 269 Children's Centres this year and the 1,700 proposed in the Budget, we can now move the number of Children's Centres we build and open between now and 2008 up to 2500 Children's Centres – as we advance further and faster towards our goal of a Children's Centre in every community and in every constituency in our country.

² Sure Start is focused upon young children and their parents living in 20% most disadvantaged areas of the UK, there are 524 local programmes, and approx 400,000 children involved, Moss 2004) Expenditure will reach #1.5b by 2006.

considerable body of literature on the difficulties of inter-agency collaboration. For one recent review, see Campbell & Whitty (2002).

There has been concern expressed by those in the field that the expansion which seeks to improve access to care has not been thought through. A special report in practitioner journal, *Nursery World*, described the aims of the Spending Review and the five year education plan as ‘laudable’ but also noted ‘concerns over the level of funding, the absence of clear mechanisms for delivery, a perceived yawning gap in staff training and an unrealistic timescale with some warning that implementing the children’s centres proposal requires a ten year plan’ (Vevers 2004a p.10)

Particular difficulties are likely to be the perception held by some that the expansion focuses on access but avoids the much contested issue of ‘quality’ care. The recent BBC programme *Nurseries Uncovered*, (August 2004) dramatically argued that in three apparently reputable care settings, the quality of carer-child interaction and the levels of hygiene both left a lot to be desired. The undercover reporter found young children, toddlers in some cases, being shouted at and treated with little dignity by some staff. The issue of staffing in the sector is a crucial one. There is already a problem with recruitment and retention, as the young women who traditionally make up the bulk of the caring workforce can find better paid employment elsewhere. Presumably in recognition of this, OFTSED now allows providers to count 17 yr old trainees in staffing ratios (Evans 2004). Working with young children is exhausting and draining. Yet nursery assistants in the private sector receive an average starting salary of £4.50 an hour, going up to £4.80. Qualified nursery nurses earn £4.92 going up to £5.30 an hour. Even nursery managers’ top rates of pay bring them little over £8 an hour.³ Unsurprisingly, there are currently recruitment difficulties especially at the more senior levels with Sure Start research reporting 79% of settings having difficulties in recruiting supervisors⁴ As the number of nurseries has nearly doubled in the last five years, the need for new staff is intense. Sure Start estimates that between 175,00-180,000 new staff are needed in the sector between 2003-2006.

Affordability is another stumbling block to access. Childcare costs even with the various subsidies and funding streams in place are still high especially in London⁵. The Daycare Trust’s 2004 survey found that whilst a full time nursery place for an under two cost an average of £134 a week, or over £7000 a year, the inner London equivalent is £168 a week, over £8730 per annum. Another recent survey by the Daycare Trust into the impact of the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit (now the integrated Children and

³ The survey was conducted mostly amongst private day nurseries (90% private day nurseries, remainder not for profit community nurseries) and the maintained sector does pay a little better. It was conducted by IDS, the information and research service on employment issues in 2004. Reported in *Nursery World*, 5/8/04, p.6)

⁴ Sure Start report (2002/2003) Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey – Day Nurseries and other full day care provision, published May 2004).

⁵ The London Development Agency has recently produced ‘gap funding’ to allow the launch of over 30 Neighbourhood Nurseries, whose appearance was in jeopardy due to the high cost of land and building works in London (*Nursery World*, 15/7/04 p.5)

Working Tax Credit) on parents and childcare providers in the capital, found that the average cost of childcare in London is ‘significantly’ higher than the rest of the country, meaning that even with tax credits, childcare is unaffordable for many parents as families with two or more children receive a maximum of £140 a week (research reported at www.daycaretrust.org.uk).

A more fundamental problem, and one that the Government has seemingly yet to recognise is that many families, particularly working class and black and minority ethnic families prefer informal care, seeing formal childcare arrangements as not offering the ‘same degree of flexibility, trust, reciprocity that informal childcare arrangements can and do’ (Daycare Trust 2003a and 2003b, Lewis 2003, Land 2002, Scottish Executive 2004). There is a distrust of leaving young children with ‘strangers’ which is unlikely to be diminished by programmes such as *Nurseries Uncovered* or the recent screaming headlines that long hours in nursery care leads to emotionally damaged and behaviourally disrupted children. The preferences of many parents may be being overlooked by the rush to expand nursery provision at the expense of other alternatives. Maternity pay and leave for example have not been extended but remain at six months, although the Government is considering an extension to one year. We do not wish to debate the merits of day nurseries here, but rather to note the remarkable absence of parental voice in the recent expansion of childcare, a point to which we return later.

To sum up this section: the current composition of the market in childcare is likely to be altered if the Government’s proposals of ‘universal’ childcare reach fruition. A quasi-market in childcare, similar to those in education and health, may one day be the result. That seems a long way ahead. At the moment the operation of local markets is key in determining parents’ choice of and use of childcare (Harris et al 2004). Thus, we aim in the remainder of the paper to explore the ‘lived reality’ of the childcare markets in two areas of London.

The study and the respondents

Our project investigated choice and provision of pre-school child care, and the interactions of parents with the childcare market. We are focusing on professional middle class users, sometimes referred to as members of the ‘service class’⁶, a sizeable group of users in the formal market place where the costs involved in accessing care are high, especially in London as noted above. The research as a whole involves a respondent group of 71 parents from 59 families, composed of 57 mothers (20 of whom were re-

⁶ As Goldthorpe (1995 p. 314) makes very clear; ‘the service class is a class of employees’. The main problem of demarcation is that of distinguishing them from other sorts of employees. There are two elements to this; first, benefits of employment over and above salary; (pension rights and so on); second, some degree of professional autonomy and managerial or administrative authority. Despite on-going changes in the labour market these criteria do still provide a fairly robust basis for distinguishing service class employees from other middle class groups, specifically the ‘intermediate’ middle class. That is, those employed in routine, low-autonomy, white-collar jobs.

interviewed to track changes in their care arrangements) and 14 fathers, (interviewed only once). We also interviewed 21 care providers and 5 'others' (local council personnel, representatives of provider organisations). However this paper focus the first round interviews with mothers. We located the research within two inner London areas, one, Stoke Newington in North London and the second, Battersea, in South London (for a detailed explanation of this approach, please see Vincent et al 2004). The two areas both have sizeable service class populations, although of different kinds. Our sample in Battersea is dominated by private sector employees, especially those that work in households where one adult at least is employed in the City, whilst the Stoke Newington respondents are more likely to be welfare or media professionals (see table in appendix). Stoke Newington is an area which has been in long term but gradual gentrification and has perhaps a more distinct identity than Battersea. It has a nickname 'Stokie' and has a tradition of a regular street festival. The part of Battersea we focused on ('between the commons' of Wandsworth and Clapham), has experienced quicker and more complete gentrification. The residents here tend to be secure in terms of economic capital. The wider locality is also known as 'Nappy Valley' (due to the large number of small children) and there is a wide range of goods and services available for children including a large number of private schools (the latter almost entirely absent in Stoke Newington).

The respondents were recruited in a number of ways: we placed adverts in child friendly shops and cafes in the areas and in local area parenting newsletters and those of the National Childbirth Trust. We also 'snowballed' from our original respondents to others. Our original contact was in all cases, but one, with the mother, but in the later stages of the project we sought to include men's views, by interviewing them alone or as part of the re-interview with their partners (as they chose).

Our research cohort is a very particular one. They are mostly white (except three), mostly heterosexual (except one) and all are highly educated, the vast majority having a first degree (see tables in appendix). They are a skilled and privileged group of consumers, and in what follows we can see the deployment of social, cultural and economic capitals in their engagements with the childcare market. However, it is important to note that even these multiply-advantaged consumers sometimes struggled in their interactions with the market, their difficulties due to the particular characteristics of childcare services. This is, we argue, a peculiar market.

A peculiar market

Let us continue by looking at how the formal childcare market works and to explain what we mean here by a *peculiar market*. The childcare market is peculiar we suggest in a number of different ways. First, it just does not work like markets are supposed to. It is a practical market that is very different from a theoretical market - and it is very inefficient. Second, it is peculiar in as much that the services which are required by consumers are complex and unusual. As our respondents unanimously see it, they want 'safety, happiness and love'. They are willing to pay, in part for an emotional engagement: "You want someone who will kiss and cuddle them" (Grace, Battersea) and in part for a sense of security, someone you can 'trust'. This is a market which, as the quotation at the start

of the paper indicates, involves putting a price on things beyond price. This is in a sense an impossible market. The financial exchange is inadequate as a way of representing the relationships involved. Trust is at a premium and doubt, anxiety and guilt abound. It is a market that rests on multiple ambivalences. Thirdly, and related, this is a market as Lane (1991 p. 77) put it 'saturated with emotions'. The processes involved here are far removed from the concept of market rationality, with its assumption of 'a kind of emotional neutrality' (Lane 1991 p. 58), that is in this case 'totally unrealistic' (p. 58). Choice of childcare is both very rational and very emotional, as we shall see. Indeed for many families difficult compromises are involved which trade off emotional and rational responses to the market around both sensitivity to price and questions of access and availability – as one mother put it "If you really need childcare you turn a blind eye". Nonetheless, these compromises are unevenly distributed in relation to the ability to pay. Also as Lane argues, against economic orthodoxy, but again appositely in this peculiar market, the 'final goods' here are 'satisfaction or happiness and human development' (p. 3); although as suggested already parents are not, indeed cannot, be totally unconcerned about efficiency, utility and cost. Indeed there are repeated complaints about these aspects of the childcare market. Fourthly, there is little evidence of 'consumer sovereignty' in these local London markets. Partly because of shortages on the supply side, and partly because the consumer is often in a position of relative ignorance in relation to forms of expertise which are part of the purchase of services. As one of our pilot provider respondents saw it: "Parents are for want of a better term a captive market" (Chain Director). He went to describe the providers as 'price-makers' and was critical of what he saw as excessive profits being made by some nursery chains in London.

Fifthly, and again related, this is a highly gendered market. The main players in both supply and demand are women (97.5% of the childcare workforce is female, www.daycaretrust.org.uk). It is very much a woman's world. As Kenway and Epstein (1996) point out most literature on marketisation is silent on gender and also on the role of emotions. Again this challenges the traditional economic assumptions about the theoretical consumer. As Kenway and Epstein (1996 p.307) suggest 'the free standing and hyper-rational, unencumbered competitive individual who can operate freely in the morally superior market can only be an image of middle class maleness'. Several of these characteristics simply do not apply here. 'The reality for many families is that childcare is organised by women in order to facilitate their own entry and that of their family members into paid work' (McKie et al, 2001, p. 239).

Sixthly, as mentioned above, this is currently a highly segmented and diverse market, with many very different types of providers, both public and private. The segmented nature of the market is also related to social class and class fractions in terms of different life styles, working arrangements and child care practices and beliefs and of course price. The providers are clearly very aware of themselves operating in a hierarchical, classed market, and within this market relations are finely niched, and nuanced. In effect the providers are finely tuned to the family structures, life styles and child care practices of their family types. Furthermore, the childcare market also has a very highly developed 'grey market' sector - with many informal, unregistered, 'cash-in-hand', providers. Some

of these are avoiding tax, others are non-UK citizens, some without work permits. And alongside this there is in the population at large, although not in our sample, the extensive use of friends and family members to do childcare work. In some respects then there is exploitation in this market. However, this social care market, like many others, is regulated by the state (there are currently 25 quality assurance schemes accredited by the DfES as Investors in Children which are intended to provide reassurance to consumers). Providers are supposed to be registered, inspected, trained and subject to health and safety regulations. But clearly, as the previous point indicates only parts of the market are actually regulated (and the efficacy of Ofsted visits as a form of regulation has been questioned, with Ofsted themselves encouraging parents to inform them of any less than desirable practice which they witness, *The Guardian* 1/9/04) and some parts of the formal market are only lightly regulated e.g. nannies. Finally, parts of the child care market position parents as employers of individual service providers - nannies specifically - to work in their own homes. Again the relations of exchange here are very complex involving both personal/emotional and formal/financial aspects (we are developing these issues further in a paper on relationships between individual carers and parents). As Gregson and Lowe (1994 p. 190) put it 'the social relations of nanny employment are characterised by an elision as fundamental as that between the nanny as child care professional and as mother substitute ... [and] are constructed by and shaped through wage and false kinship relations'. A very peculiar market indeed!

So the remainder of the paper will sketch in the contours of the child care market from a middle class consumer perspective. We seek to illustrate its disorganisation, costs and inflexibility, the lack of choice, its 'grey' under-life, the role of 'hot knowledge' and the 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1973), the use of skilful engagement and pro-activity by consumers, the importance of luck and chance, and something of its minute segmentation. Also we will highlight its emotional character, the tensions between business and care, the role of 'gut instinct' and trust and the role of personal relationships between providers and consumers. We will conclude with some comments on UK child care policy and the particular characteristics and inefficiencies of the 'mixed economy' of child care in London and raise some basic questions, about the appropriateness of the market form for the delivery of childcare services either in terms of efficiency or as an embodiment of the particular form of freedom which market advocates assert.

The childcare market as a 'cockpit of emotions' [Lane, 1991 #294].

Our consumer data, interviews with 71 parents, mainly mothers (57), are *infused* with the language of emotions. That is with expressions of fear, doubt and guilt around the central issue of paying to replace direct parental responsibility for childcare - "entrusting your child to someone is a huge thing" (Grace, Battersea (B) – it means in effect giving your child away for part of the day, in some cases, "to a complete stranger" (Gabby, Stoke Newington (SN)). The emotions involved here are complex and difficult and shot through with ambivalences (see Pratt, 1997 pp. 168-69), especially those which arise around the

⁷ False kinship is a term Gregson & Lowe use to describe the positioning of nannies by many mothers as 'part of the family'. The risk to the nannies here was that such a relationship can be used to persuade them to do unpaid favours.

needs or best interests of the child as against the needs of the mother or parents. “I wouldn’t want to be sort of full-time [at home], it sounds awful, but just caring for children all the time, I think it’s important to have your own time” (Alice, B) These ambivalences and the attendant feelings of guilt are particularly acute for some mothers returning to work, and particularly if the child is young: “I felt very guilty, felt unsafe a little bit, was not quite sure what was happening at home” (Margot, B); ‘She was 4 weeks old ... I still feel guilty about it’ (Madeleine, SN); “I occasionally felt guilty that I had left her, you know especially on mornings she does not want to go ... but I know she’s happy” (Trisha, B); “I still feel really guilty that [daughter]’s been damaged, you know [by a particular care experience] that she didn’t have the sort of love and stability like [son] has had” (Connie, SN). Not all mothers shared these negative feelings – some were adamant that they ‘don’t have any of the guilt thing’ (Monica, B., also Felicity, B.), and those who worked all professed themselves broadly happy with their current arrangement. These mothers are struggling to resolve dissonant discourses. One discourse loads onto them moral responsibilities for childrearing, whilst another stresses, particularly to these highly educated mothers, ‘the obligation to participate in employment’ (McKie, Bowlby and Gregory 2001 p. 234), the ‘dual earner/marketised carer’ model (Raddon, 2002) and yet another which validates the attempt to escape from the simplicities of an identity based solely on ‘mothering’. Some were attempting to resist the pressures of the former: “I think I would have been worried if I’d just become a mum” (Grace, B), “I hate being marginalised, just being seen as a mother” (Felicity, B) – and were in danger as a result of being drawn into the tabloid narrative of the ‘selfish woman, who places her own needs before those of her children’ (Raddon, 2002 p. 395). Others were more than happy to embrace full time mothering: “it’s a really positive thing to be with them for the first 5 years” (Ann, SN.), “what’s the point of having children is you delegate all their care” (Anjali, B.). As Raddon argues these women are positioned and positioning, accommodating and resisting these discourses. But within all this is one way or another it is the mothers who “take the burden” (Hannah, SN.) of arranging and managing childcare (see Vincent et al 2005, in press); “the mother does the donkey work” (Grace, B.). The vast majority of fathers are very much on the margins of choice and decision-making: “I was the person who dealt with it ... I imagine he would’ve have wanted the same” (Vanessa, SN.); “he comes along to check out he’s happy (Nicole, SN.); “he’s very involved but not here very much” (Kathryn, B.).

There are also concomitant emotions which are evoked in response to the forms of provision on offer. Positive choices and rejections are usually based on a mix of rational and emotional criteria and typically determined by what is described as ‘gut instinct’ or “gut feeling” (Mary, SN.). “I was very wary of it [instinct] at the start, but once you actually meet people [ie providers] you realise that your gut instinct [kicks in]” (Elsa, SN). People or places ‘seem’ or feel right or wrong “[Nursery] gave me not a good feeling” (Monica, B.), where their “heart sank” (Linda, B.). This can be a reflection of class or cultural affinities (or dissonances) but is infused with affective judgements – “how the place felt really” (Rachel, SN.). In the case of nannies or childminders mothers talked about finding people they “instantly liked” (Katy, SN.) or who were “horrible”

(Elsa, SN.). Two of our respondents relied on gut instinct to employ a newly-arrived woman who spoke little English to care for their babies. ‘It was a good thing that they started out at 8 months because when she first arrived she spoke no English. So all I had to go on was the way she related to [child] directly’ (Madison, SN.) But complete certainty is difficult to achieve, and doubt remains, leaving, in the most difficult circumstances, the mother feeling “traumatised” (Connie, SN.). The most commonly used term in the interviews to describe the making of childcare arrangements was “nightmare”. All of this is beyond the rational. Rationality and calculation are totally inadequate to describe choice here which ultimately rests on a “leap of faith” (Isabel, B.). The key point is “you’re having to make assumptions about people on very little information” (Kathryn, B.).

So choice in this market involves some ‘guilt’ arising from the ‘giving away’ of the child, and fears about what might happen, and these have to be managed, rationally and calmly. Families make compromises, not always simply in the perceived best interests of the child but related also to cost, convenience and necessity. While unsatisfactory arrangements were terminated and changed, it is perhaps not surprising that positivity is strong in this field of choice, ‘good’ child care receives high praise, and maybe self-reassurance is an important aspect of the justification of choice. Anything less than good is more difficult to manage and justify emotionally but there were occasions when less than ideal arrangements had to be put up with. “There are ideals that you have for your children and what you actually end up with is very different, very different” (Kathryn, B.). What we are trying to stress here is the unstable mix of necessity and emotion that are invested in the market relations of child care which sometimes confront one another in having to “sort of make do” (Juliet, B.), as this mother explained “there are things about [nursery] that are very good and things I’m not so happy with ... I would much rather go to a smaller one ... [but] for us a big advantage is the flexibility”. The need to compromise is exacerbated for some families by the impossibility of finding the ‘right’ kind of care in the child care market. Talking about carers she felt behaved inappropriately, one mother commented “if you really need childcare you turn a blind eye. And I think that’s what these people depend on” “you have to compromise” (Connie, SN.). In part then compromises are made in relation to what is available in the market: “you lower your sights ... getting childcare for three children particularly part-time is almost impossible” (Kathryn, B.). But also we must not give the impression that all these middle class families had the same kind of disposable income. For some families, it is the cost of care that makes the achievement of an ideal care situation impossible: “At the end of a period of temporary arrangements, one mother commented, ‘I did feel as though [daughter] had a bit of a rotten time actually ... but it’s money” (Juliet, B.). While these are relatively affluent professional families there are still considerable income variations among them and the cost of care in these settings of a source of constant complaint (see below for more on cost). Overall, the Battersea families, mostly employed in the private sector were better off financially than the Stoke Newington families, more of whom were employed in the public sector (see tables in appendix). In some circumstances money was no object, but for others there was a pressure to choose quickly, and to choose within a price limit. As Ann (SN) explained, discussing her doubts about one private nursery her

child attended for a short time,

There was quite a lot of pressure to get something because I was going back to work, I found out about this one and we looked at it, and they had a place. So we took it, but I wasn't very happy with it... It didn't seem particularly clean ... there was a high staff turnover, they employed very young girls, and some seemed quite morose and disinterested ... it felt like a business ... I was uncomfortable ... I wanted it to be right, that was my circumstance ... It was OK. The nursery was fine and the money, it was the price as well.

Business-like/not like a business

In all market sectors of childcare - nannies/childminders and nurseries - there is a basic emotional ambivalence: you are entrusting your child to someone who gains financially for caring for them, but who may not fundamentally care for them in an emotional sense, who is 'only doing it for the money'. This ambivalence is most pointed, and most obvious for the families in this research in their relationship with private sector nurseries. Nurseries are more clearly businesses than are nannies and childminders, they have the 'signs', the paraphernalia of business, although, on the other hand, they also seek to ensure that the relationship with consumers is not over-burdened by the language of business. A particular product needs to be 'packaged' for presentation in the 'peculiar' child care market. Rachel (SN) born and educated in Israel recognised this starkly when comparing her experience as a London mother with the childcare systems in her country of origin, and in Sweden: "here in this country I think it's a business, and it's left to people's own responsibility, and I think that's quite tragic in many ways...".

Another mother with experience of Swedish childcare made a similar comment, arguing that a focus on the exchange relationship between the adults marginalizes and commodifies the child.

It's been a year before he's felt even somewhat comfortable [at his nursery]. And part of that, I think is the way that the staff relate to children, because he was accustomed to a nursery in Sweden where the relationship is between the worker and the child, the parent is peripheral, and all the nurseries I've ever seen here, the relationship is basically one of employment. The relationship is between the adult worker and the parent and the child is the business, and I think they sense that....I mean it's not that they're mean to the children. I don't mean that at all. It's just that they are in a way peripheral. It's small things like making adult jokes at the expense of children, or when you come in, asking what the child's name is, but not introducing yourself, not making sure that the child knows who all the adults in the room are so that they can relate to the adults (Madison, SN.).

Love and care are commodities in the childcare market, and in effect providers offer a 'fabricated' service rather than an authentic expression of emotional involvement. Parents also have an interest in investing in these fabrications, and subsuming the business exchange beneath a language of caring or service as a way of managing the

contradictions involved (Nelson 1989). There is a mutual de-prioritising of the business of care. The 'personal services market' has grown enormously in the last 20 years and the middle classes now have an extensive experience of 'paying' for personal care services, health and well-being of a variety of kinds, and negotiating the complex relationship involved in the cash nexus - intimacy and money are the key and somewhat contrasting main elements of many such care relationships.

The avoidance of the baser aspects of the cash nexus was especially marked in Stoke Newington which has a number of 'not-for-profit' community and co-operative nurseries (the latter not found at all in Battersea). Community nurseries were cheaper than the private sector, and they had no 'owners' or 'profits' as such. They usually have a wide mix of children and they typically value or indeed require the participation of the parents in care activities or management. In this sense the relationship between the parent and the care setting is unlike that of a classic consumer.

One of the things, once we found out about it that really influenced me was, it's a community nursery so a third of places are for children in the community whose families are on low income. And a lot of other nurseries around here because of the cost, are all very sort of white and middle class, and I felt I wanted to be part of the community round here...I'm the secretary [on the management board]...It's a nice feeling that everyone pitches in (Debra, SN)

A yet more decisive move beyond the market was taken by a small number of the parents in our Stoke Newington sample who sought to deal with some of the ambivalences of formal child care by setting up or participating in co-operative, home-based care (we found three examples). What appeals to these parents is partly the intimacy and smallness of scale, the children being cared for "in a home not an institution" (Ann, SN), but also involvement in the planning and organisation of the care setting. We can see evidence of a concern to develop a particular kind of controlled and 'classed' environment, with one mother who was instrumental in establishing a co-operative nursery stating that they wished to serve the children organic food, and avoid plastic toys, crisps or TV. Her reasoning reveals the dispositions of a liberal progressive middle class fraction, strongly visible amongst the Stoke Newington parents⁹.

We didn't want our children to be learning letters at 2 and a half because they're not prepared yet, we believe their minds are not prepared to be learning letters at that time, they should be playing, you know, yeah, going and exploring life, and as well our choice of toys that we have here, we try not to clutter with toys, there are places which are cluttered with plastic toys and it's overloaded with nothing, plastic tack, that's not doing anything for the kids, you know, all they need is a bit of mud., dirty and messy play, that's what they like, they don't need all this plastic. I mean I was terrified when I went

⁹ These concerns were mirrored in the comments made by some working class childminders in Stoke Newington about the 'foibles' of the SN middle class particularly around issues of discipline, TV, and food

to look at this nursery, and the children were eating crisps, oh they're having their lunch, and they were eating crisps and they were sitting in front of a television, and I just thought 'oh my God', you know, is that what I'm going to do, take my child to a place where they are allowed to eat crisps, I don't think so, and they sit them in front of a television because it's too noisy, no I don't think so, so in that sense we have a say [here in] what they should be playing with, but it's good, it's challenging, we're not professionals but we're, everyone brings their own experience (Alicia)

Parents' roles in the co-ops tended to be confined to the organisation and management of the setting, with, in our two most established co-ops, the responsibility for pedagogy being delegated to a dedicated early years worker.

Informal social networks and flows of information - social capital

We turn next to consider the informal networks of information and local intelligence operating around childcare. Information is a key feature of 'markets in theory', and is fundamental to making them work. Market information, of a kind, also plays a key role in the emotional intensity which envelops childcare choice. That is to say, some sorts of information provide reassurance. While there is a considerable and growing provision of 'cold knowledge' by local councils, and a range of quality assurance 'marks', parents worry about the accuracy and reliability of these. Nanny agencies, which offer some assurances, through the conducting of interviews and obtaining references, were not viewed very highly by the parents in our sample. For these middle class families what is most important is what we have called elsewhere 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent 1998). That is, first and second hand experiential knowledge. Things that were seen and known by other choosers, or told to them by significant others - family or friends. These are experiences that can be relied on, that tell it like it is, 'warts and all'. Hot knowledge can almost always be trusted, it is embedded in some kind of shared values and shared concerns. It cuts through marketing presentations to the heart of the matter, 'can I trust my child with this person, this organisation'? Horror stories told by others, or just bad experiences act to eliminate some possible choices, while personal recommendations are taken seriously. "Everyone had said 'ignore that [negative Ofsted] report, there's new people in" (Sally, B.). Hot knowledge is positive and negative - good choices and things to be avoided. It involves the circulation of 'reputation' and rumour within social networks. It is pre-eminently a matter of 'word of mouth' and this term recurred in our accounts of choice as the main and most reliable source of market information - it was used in 26 of the first 50 interviews conducted. And the importance of this was reinforced in the interviews with providers.

Q: How do you attract parents?

A: Oh God, word of mouth I think really. Which is very lucky for us. We've got quite a good reputation (Nursery BP1)

Mostly its just word of mouth. A lot of people know each other in this area, so you get, they know so-and-so who's coming here and they've heard good things.

So there's a lot of that, people meeting at NCT groups and things, sharing information (NurseryBP3).

I think it's word of mouth. Basically friends recommend each other. So they come knowing that it's been established a long time, (Nursery BP5)

We don't even advertise our telephone number anywhere because its all word of mouth. It's completely always been full through word of mouth ... (Nursery, BP4)

We don't have to advertise. We don't do anything at all (Nursery, SNP3)

The importance of this kind of market information in making choices cannot be overestimated. It circulates and gains its credibility within women's social networks; "I knew about [nursery] because a friend of mine uses it" (Judy, SN); "I knew somebody anyway from sort of classes, playgroup of something, who was actually about to start with her" (Barbara, SN). Emotional responses are rendered into practical solutions, assuaging at least some of the fears embedded in this decision-making, offering shared experience, support, and re-assurance. The networks are based on a set of common needs and concerns, what one respondent called a "grapevine of mothers" (Beth, B). Social capital, strong and weak ties are put to work, friends of friends are rung up, will help, go out of their way, share their knowledge: "through friend of son" (Linda, B.); "through my Yoga teacher I got this Czech woman" (Juliet, B.); "somebody else's nanny has been recommended to me" (Alice, B.); "a close friend" (Sheila, B). The interviews are packed with examples and there were several occasions where nannies were literally passed on from one family to another (and in Battersea the "Nanny-Mafia" also functioned to connect families with potential carers). In two cases families were able to employ childminders who had well-known local reputations. One was described as a "Stoke Newington institution" (Judy, SN) and the other as a "local pillar of the community" (Connie, SN). These networks function outside and around and complement cold knowledge. Clearly, not all families have equal access to such networks, but amongst our middle class respondents, there were very few who did not utilise them. The networks are forged within local communities, through friendships, and around nodal points of mothering - like NCT groups, playgroups and childrens' 'activities' and at the school gates¹⁰.

It has to be said that all of this indirect information is carefully supplemented by first hand data gathering, interviews, home visits, visits to nurseries, use of references, ringing up previous employers: "I canvassed all my friends, I was just terribly anal about it"

¹⁰ The NCT was of prime importance, both circulating information and experience. "I have a lot of mother friends around here from the NCT, and at the time when they were born it was like "which schools are you registering them for?" (Trisha). In our first round of 50 interviews, NCT-based relationships were spontaneously mentioned in 32 as a valuable source of information about childcare [Holloway, 1998 #1403] reports the importance of such networks in her study of middle-class Hallam, as does [Mackenzie, 1989] in Brighton, and Dyck, (1996) in a Canadian suburb. Among the Battersea sample this was virtually the only local membership group to which any of the parents belonged.

(Sally, B.); “I trawled loads and loads of other ones before finding this one” (Kathryn, B.). An enormous amount of time, effort and emotional energy is expended on trying to find the right childcare. Nonetheless, social networks and personal recommendations were frequently the key factors in arriving at a satisfactory childcare arrangement. There is a degree of orderliness about information gathering and there is a sense of obligation expressed about needing to ‘research’, ‘check things out’ ‘look at Inspection reports’; but in fact chance social encounters often superseded the orderly processing of information, many of the interviewees mentioned the role of fluke (3), luck (41) and chance (23) in arriving at their child care solutions.

Market skills - Pro-active in the market - cultural capital

Over and against luck and chance there were also plenty of examples of families taking the initiative in the child care market. As we noted earlier, these families are skilled users of markets, they are good at dealing with ‘people’, sorting out problems, making choices etc. and yet also in this market they are de-skilled to some extent. In particular first time mothers are inexperienced by definition,¹¹ their original ideas are loosely formed and often change as their maternity leave progresses. Also, they are vulnerable because they are handing over their young child to the care of others. Again emotions are to the fore. Nonetheless, they do bring a variety of generic skills to bear demonstrating the sort of cultural capital needed to ‘work’ expert systems.. Their skilfulness is evident in collecting information “I researched things thoroughly” (Lynn, B.), visiting and phoning providers; and simple persistence. One provider made the point that their ‘waiting list’ was partly susceptible to the persistence of some parents in repeated ringing for up-dates. Some have specific work skills, like interviewing or recruitment experience, which could be transferred, One respondent reported interviewing 40-50 nannies before finding a suitable candidate. Some are pro-active and advertise in various ways for the childcare they need. “Nanny agency cost too much – I advertised” (Lynn, B.); “I put a note in a shop window” (Kathryn, B.); “ I advertised in school newsletter” (Connie, B.); “I got the Hackney lists and looked and met a few child minders and put up a notice in [children’s clothes shop] and read all the notices in it” (Jackie, SN); Madeleine (SN) “put up leaflets”; Margaret (B.) put “advert in The Lady”; Sheila (B) on a “noticeboard in a cafe”.

Again all of this underlines the messiness and fragmentation of a market which is marked by scarcity of provision and high costs and again the peculiar levels of ‘commitment’ required from consumers to get the market to work for them. However, given all this, very few parents questioned the existence or effectiveness of such a market, or mooted the need for comprehensive state provision, although many were critical of the current functioning of child care provision. Those who made the most trenchant criticisms had experience of comprehensive welfare child care regimes in other countries (Madison, Rachel, Alicia and Gustavo).

Cost - economic capital

¹¹ Several talked about this as a learning process, and spoke of feeling calmer with the second child.

Given the structure of the market indicated above, and the high labour and infrastructural costs involved in running services businesses in London the high prices charged for childcare are not really surprising. London is one of the most expensive cities to live in the world. As against this, we need to reiterate that most of these families are relatively affluent, although their incomes varied enormously. They all referred to the high cost of care but the implications of costs varied among them. For some of the lower paid in our sample, particularly in Stoke Newington, the cost of some forms of care, like nannies and private nurseries, were prohibitive, as one mother put it: “unless both partners are earning 40 grand each its unaffordable” (Mia, SN)¹². A couple of contrasting examples illustrate the point.

In Battersea, Felicity who employed a full-time nanny explained that she spent between £35-40K per year on childcare “in fact it’s probably more than that”, commenting that “we can afford to do it this way”, and, Grace (B) who had a nanny-share said “I’m definitely prepared to pay the proper rates for somebody that’s good – you can’t put a price on the safety and happiness of your child”. Other parents had to do exactly that. Tessa, in Stoke Newington explained:

“I would love to have someone looking after [son] a couple of mornings, so I can have a bit of time for me ... and I can’t afford that at the moment”

And Angela, also in Stoke Newington

“We didn’t have much choice really. We managed to visit quite a few [nurseries] and some of them were too expensive, which is awful ‘cos we’re not outrageously wealthy, or well paid ... A lot of them had no spaces and couldn’t tell you if they’d have a space until the last minute, and I mean [childminder] had a place, that was how we made the choice. It wasn’t what we’d... I’m trying to think what to say here because I really like her and I think it was good for [son], but it wasn’t exactly what I would have chosen, it wasn’t what I thought would happen”

When she had her second child: I couldn’t really afford to go back to work ... because of the work I do it would be quite difficult to get a job that would pay for both of them to be looked after”.

One mother resorted to attempting to negotiate fees with local childminders; “ringing up childminders and saying, how much do you charge, then saying would you consider charging less than that, that’s awful but when you work it out I’m paying over half my salary towards childcare...” (Katy, SN).

¹² For a proportion of families in both areas cost ruled out Nannies specifically, the going-rate for a live-out day nanny being £350-400 net per week as opposed to £5-8 per hour for a child minder and up to £1k a month for a private nursery place. Hence for some, nanny-shares were a cost-effective solution, and for families with more than one pre-school child a nanny was more cost-effective.

Some of these families, again particularly those in Stoke Newington, were finding themselves having to settle for childcare arrangements which did not meet their criteria for ideal care, for “something acceptable and affordable” (Elsa, SN). As already suggested, for these families there is an on-going tension between wanting the best for your child and what you can afford.

A number of the mothers who returned to work, full or part-time, made the specific point that most or a considerable part of their salary (NB the *woman's* salary pays for care) was devoted to paying for childcare: “all my salary was going for one child” (Hannah, SN); Margaret (B) who had a nanny explained: “I work for my pension contribution that’s about it”; “almost my whole salary for one child ... more than we could afford” (Elsa, SN) “I was paying my whole salary for child care” (Mia, SN). Nevertheless, these mothers made the point that from their point of view this was money well spent. Kathryn (B) explained that as far as her salary was concerned “in many months it’s negative in terms of the amount of money that comes into the household budget because of childcare” but on the first day she left her child with a nanny “I was just in the car singing along to my own music, rather than bloody Wheels on the Bus, and thinking this is absolutely fantastic”. For these mothers paying for childcare is buying space and time, usually (despite the media reports of ‘domestic divas’, Booth 2004) to do work they consider important and satisfying (see Vincent et al 2005).

Getting in/finding a place/ lack of choice

In contrast to other areas of the country, both Battersea and Stoke Newington had an inadequate supply of childcare places. State funded provision was unavailable to these families in Battersea and heavily over-subscribed in Stoke Newington. One mother in our pilot study explained her failure to gain a place in a London nursery chain ‘they had closed the waiting list and said that people had put down their children prior to birth - baby X’. The remaining transcripts were littered with similar complains and amazement: “couldn’t find a nursery place - waiting lists” (Grace, B); “It’s a sellers market for childminders” (Madison, SN) “they were fully booked” (Marie, SN); “the nurseries were full” (Isabel, B); “I had his name down before birth” (Lynn, B): “There just aren’t many childminders, they are difficult to find” (Mia, SN); “private nurseries were full ... simply not enough ... waiting lists as long as your arm” (Elsa, SN); “I was in the market too late at 6mths pregnant” (Nicole, SN). The families in both localities were unanimous that it “sounds like a lot of choice but there isn’t” (Margaret, B). Indeed, when the mothers talked about “competition” they did not mean among providers but between choosers - “everything’s so sort of competitive around here” (Grace, B); “you always hope they will give you preferential treatment on the waiting list because you had a child there before, because its so competitive” (Madison, SN); “finding the right childcare is very competitive” (Rachel, SN); “everything is so competitive around here” (Alice, B).

The shortage of supply was linked by a number of the mothers to the attitude of providers and a market ‘complacency’; “take it or leave it... you got the feeling that they couldn’t really care whether you went there or not because they knew they had 10 more people waiting” (Alice, B); “they’re inflexible ... it’s sign up with us otherwise you go

somewhere else” (Jean, SN)

I found them [nursery staff] a bit complacent because they’re obviously so used, this is the trouble round here, all the schools and everything, they’re so used to having people queuing at the door, you tend to get shown round in batches, they’re so sure they’re always going to be full for years to come (Alice, B)

These accounts of the market were confirmed in our interviews with providers. They also talked about over-subscription, waiting lists, parents ringing and being turned away in large numbers. They also offer a glimpse of the inflexibilities that result, including fixed hours and having to pay for sessions not used or needed.

“people come when they’ve pregnant, looking for baby places ... we have to say “we cant’ and ‘there’s not going to be anything until this time”.. so its quite hard because the parents get quite upset, if it’s their first child they don’t know anything about the nursery situation ... sometimes we may offer parents days they didn’t necessarily want. they usually will take them ... Usually they are quite understanding - if you offer them a different day or if you say “if you take two days a third day will come up later on”. For under 2s is £42 per day, a fulltime rate is £805 a month, and 2 to 5s £38 per day, £624 a month” (Nursery BP3)

“We could have double, triple the baby places” (Nursery BP3)

“So at the moment, we have new babies who are registering [children start at 2 and a half] and we don’t have any places - at the moment on paper we’re fully booked up till September 2005 ... the morning session is £850 per term, eleven weeks, the afternoon is slightly shorter and they pay £650 per term, they have to pay for a full week whether they use it or not ... because the places were in so much demand it was easier...” (Nursery BP5)

we have far too many people to cope with ... I’d say we could probably fill the classes three times over at the moment... we have people knocking on the door every morning ... telling people who really want the nursery they cant that’s the bit I do find quite difficult” (Nursery BP4)

I told [caller] what our hours were, “it’s just three hours a day, nine fifteen till twelve fifteen.” And she had a real go at me, I think I must have been number ten, she’d been to all the other nursery schools in the area and asked about their hours, and obviously we weren’t catering for her needs. But I got- I got it in the end....She said, you know, “you don’t care about us working mothers,” (nursery BP2)

The degree of ‘compromise’ involved for parents to fit in with providers’ schedules varies according to the resources (money, time, energy) available to families and the constraints and urgency of their need – “I had to go back to work” (Madeleine, SN).

Participation in the childcare market requires a good deal of advance planning on the part of parents, those who do not plan end up frustrated, and it is often the families who have to be flexible in having to accommodate to the opportunities, timings and settings that do become available.

This is a market that does not clear. In that sense, in orthodox terms, it is inefficient. The overwhelming majority of the respondents noted the ‘lack of choice’, problems in finding nursery places, and childminders, although sometimes less so with nannies. Many nurseries had waiting lists, in Stoke Newington two years on waiting lists for council nurseries seemed to be the norm. The feeling of the parents was that their custom was not valued, that they were locked into a sellers market. The number of providers has been growing in both locations, but given the density of families with children, this expansion has not kept pace with demand. In part this may reflect the high costs of property and building land in the inner London settings of the research. Relatively few of the new and expanding nursery chains are represented in these settings. This may change somewhat through the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative which provides help with capital costs for an initial three years (although questions of sustainability after that period have been raised by some providers).

The grey economy and exploitation

One more response to the high cost of childcare, more common in Stoke Newington than Battersea, was to move outside of the regulated market and make use of the ‘grey economy’ of childcare or more informal ‘community arrangements’. This involved such things as: employing foreign women without the appropriate visas or work permits; using unregistered childminders; using carers who were in receipt of unemployment benefit, and paying ‘cash-in-hand’. There is, to a degree, a mutual satisfaction of interests here.

but [son] does actually have a morning with someone who really is our babysitter and is this very lovely woman, she’s not officially a childminder and I just feel so lucky to have met her that I don’t want to, you know, I want to somehow let him have a relationship with her so that I feel there’s someone I can leave him with and that’s worked really well, (Jackie, SN)

‘she’d been cleaning for someone and she was looking for childcare work (Connie, SN)

I just phoned around to people I knew and I think some people from a Yoga Class, ante-natal, yeah, and I said, “Do you know of anyone who’s available for some part-time work” and someone I didn’t know, a friend of a friend, said that she had a lodger who’d just arrived from Brazil. She could vouch for [her] (Madison, SN)

[Carer] was doing it because it was the only work she could get and we realised after a while she was working illegally.....Both times [we used agencies] the agencies actually sent us...people who don’t want to pay tax and National

insurance because they're fiddling their housing benefit claims' (Margaret, B)

By definition the size of the grey economy of childcare is very difficult to gauge, but despite the increasing efforts by government to regulate childcare it is likely to be very large indeed.

Conclusion

This is a first attempt to sketch in some of the contours and characteristics of the childcare market. This is a burgeoning market which is subject to increasing regulation. Large commercial interests are now major participants, but, as we have tried to indicate, self-employed nannies and childminders, and unregistered 'grey' workers also make up a significant part of current provision. The market is highly diverse and class segmented and spatially differentiated, costs vary enormously. At least in the locations under study, this is an inefficient, uncompetitive and unresponsive market. Despite government intentions to develop the childcare market as a way of ensuring that women who wish to can return to the labour market, the childcare market is difficult to negotiate and typically 'unfriendly' and unaccommodating to the needs of working mothers. There is a tension at the heart of policy, as (McKie et al , 2001) put it: 'The economic and legislative pressure for women to choose paid work is strong, but is a hard place for them to do justice to caring at the same time'.

These middle class consumers must be energetic, inventive, persistent, flexible and resilient. They have to deploy the full range of capitals available to them, economic, cultural and social, to achieve their purposes in this market but many have to compromise and re-work arrangements regularly. In part, as a result the parents, and mothers especially, experience high levels of frustration, anxiety and guilt. (And these are, of course, our skilled and privileged consumers. In a project to start in 2005, we will be investigating the choices and preferences open to working class families living in the same two areas of London, Battersea and Stoke Newington).

Even so, within all this the overwhelming majority of parents saw their current arrangements as adequate and often approximating their 'ideal' - although there may be at least some self-justification involved in this, it is difficult to admit that you have child care arrangements ongoing for your child which are unsatisfactory.

All of this suggests that this is a market which does not work as markets are meant to do, it does not guarantee quality or efficiency and it dispenses services in a highly inequitable fashion. As an instrument of childcare policy it is at present deeply flawed. In part we want to conclude by suggesting that these problems within the market are irresolvable in so far as there are important paradigmatic differences between the nature of market relations and the nature of the social relations embedded in childcare and brought to the market by parents seeking to 'buy' childcare. As Anderson (1991 p. 182) suggests

‘perhaps the most characteristic feature of markets is their impersonality’ and yet intimacy and commitment are key elements of these parents search for care. While we recognise that the form of such commitment may be to some extent ersatz, the expression of warmth, care and love, in some way as authentic, is both what is being paid for and in some circumstances is a sought after aspect of the relationship between parent and carer. This may be not only a peculiar market it may ultimately be an impossible market in as much that it can only function either as not a proper market or to the extent that it does operate as a proper market, it removes from childcare, by subjecting it to conditions of valuation, essential aspects of its social relations or undermines its integrity (Anderson 1991 p. 202). Many of the anxieties and dilemmas which the mother represented in this paper express can be understood as stemming from these dangers.

Thus, and to return briefly, to New Labour: the politics of distribution and redistribution – the concern with access to care – are not sufficient to render this market less peculiar, less impossible. New Labour’s emphasis on access, on bringing childcare to those families who did not have such options is laudable. However a focus on distributive justice, of access to a particular social good, is incomplete without an accompanying focus on content. Whilst those who work in early years may be able to substantiate the rhetorical assertion of the need for ‘quality care’, we suggest from the evidence in our research that parents find it harder to do so. Lacking meaningful information about daily life in care settings, they find themselves having to trust the provider. Parents’ voices have been muted in the expansion of childcare to date, and we were struck by the absences and silences characterising the relationships between parents and carers in our sample. We suggest elsewhere (work in progress) that there is a lack of appropriate vocabulary open to parents and carers in which to conduct full conversations around the children’s development and well-being or the tradition to support those conversations. This is also true, not just of relationships between individuals but at the level of public policy. Moss and Penn also suggest this as a reason for the sharp distinction between acute parental concern over their children’s well being and their lack of awareness around the nature of the care and education they receive with providers, when they note ‘the lack of vision at a public and political level and the consequent low level of public discussion. When it comes to early childhood services, Britain suffers a poverty of expectation and a low level of awareness of issues arising from years of [policy makers] neglect and indifference’ (Moss & Penn 2003 p24).

Alongside the welcome expansion of and public investment in childcare, we surely require a public debate round the care of our very young children, asking, at the very least, what types of care we wish as a society to see available, what are and what should be the goals of caring for young children in home and group settings and how that care is to be provided and maintained.

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Appendix

The Social Location of Respondent Parents

Table 1: Area x Financial sector jobs in City

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Battersea	5/28 (18%)	15/28 (54%)	20/56 (36%)
Stoke Newington	0/31 (0%)	1/30* (3%)	1/61 (1.6%)
Total	5/59 (8%)	17/58 (29%)	21/117 (18%)

* one respondent is a single mother and we do not have data on her child's father.

Table 2: Area x Welfare, voluntary and media jobs

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Battersea	10/28 (36%)	5/28 (18%)	15/56 (27%)
Stoke Newington	23/31 (74%)	13/30 (43%)	36/61 (59%)
Total	33/59 (56%)	18/58 (31%)	51/117 (44%)

Table 3: Area x Welfare and voluntary jobs only (no media)

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Battersea	8/28 (28%)	1/28 (4%)	9/56 (16%)
Stoke Newington	13/31 (42%)	5/30 (17%)	18/61 (30%)
Total	21/59 (36%)	6/58 (10%)	27/117 (23%)

Table 4: Sectors of current or last employment (mothers)

	Public	Private	Voluntary	Self-employed	Other	Total
Battersea	12	11	0	4	1	28
Stoke Newington	14	4	5	6	2	31
Total	26	15	5	10	3	59

Table 5: Sectors of current employment (fathers)

	Public	Private	Voluntary	Self-	Other	Total
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				employed		
Battersea	3	15	1	9	0	28
Stoke Newington	4	10	4	10	2	30*
Total	7	25	5	19	2	58*

* one respondent is a single mother and we do not have data on her child's father

Table 6: Area x mothers' further/higher education qualifications

		PhD (or several post grad qualifications)	Masters (or other post degree diploma)	first degree	no degree but diploma	other qualification	Total
area	Battersea	6	11	8	1	2	28
	Stoke Newington	5	5	17	2	2	31
Total		11	16	25	3	4	59

Table 7: Area x fathers' further/higher education qualifications

		PhD (or several post grad qualifications)	Masters (or other post degree diploma)	first degree	no degree but diploma	other	Total
area	Battersea	3	11	13		1	28
	Stoke Newington	2	6	17	2	3	30*
Total		5	17	30	2	4	59

* one respondent is a single mother and we do not have data on her child's father

