**Reflections on ‘Childcare: a Business’**

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**Introduction**
These reflections explore the juxtaposition of childcare and business in the context of policy, research and my own experience working s as a deputy manager for a private chain of day nurseries in an inner city area of disadvantage. I started in post in February 2014, but by January 2015, I had moved to work in the maintained sector. In the paper, I address two key issues that led to my move from the PVI sector: firstly conflicts I encountered between agenda of care and profit and, secondly, challenges to career progression and status in childcare. To locate the discussion in the field, I begin with a short overview of recent English childcare policy.

**The Policy**

Childcare policy has come to the very forefront of English politics in recent years. Until New Labour’s neo-liberalist approach focused on 'investment return', English childcare policy was characterised by inconsistency and incoherence, reflected in a plethora of childcare setting types and varied quality (ECEF, 1998). The 'Meeting Childcare Challenge' paper (DfEE, 1998) and the 10 Year Strategy (HM Treasury, 2004) highlighted two related government aims: to reduce child poverty and to increase child well-being. In regard to reducing child poverty, two routes were highlighted: reducing household poverty by encouraging parents into employment (Campbell-Barr, 2009) and investing in children in their earliest years to bring financial returns later (Heckman and Masterov, 2007). These ideas thrust to the forefront of government interest the demand for affordable, available childcarewhich has continued (DfE, 2013). Whilst both the maintained and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors came forward to offer childcare for families, the increased demand has paved the way for childcare to become big business; consequently, the private childcare sector has grown rapidly in England since the turn of the century (Penn and Lloyd, 2013).

**Conflicting Agenda?**

In the UK, England accounts for 84% of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2014) and the UK childcare business is booming: up 4.9% in the year 2013-14 to an income of £4.89bn, of which private sector nurseries’ income comprised £4.07bn (83%) (Blackburn, 2014). Equally, employment among mothers of young children in the UK rose from 25% to 65% between 1973 and 2013 (OECD, 2012 ; Office for National Statistics, 2013), potentially suggesting the need for increased childcare. Moreover, the introduction of Nursery Education Funding for all 3 and 4 year olds may also have increased demand for childcare; indeed, Blanden *et al*. (2013) suggest that free childcare funding is becoming significantly more ‘demand-led’ in the UK and this will only increase with the expansion of funded provision for two-year-olds. Yet few state funded places exist for children under three and state funded nursery schools are often term-time only, which can leave the PVI sector as the only viable option for many working parents (West *et al*., 2010). The increased demand for childcare has been reflected in a massive increase of private day nurseries, in particular the expansion of some chains (Gaunt 2012). Indeed, the nursery chain I worked for expanded from ten to fifty nurseries in the three years prior to me joining them. DfE (2013) has been intent on ‘making it easier for new providers to enter the (childcare) market and for existing providers to expand’ (p.13), indicating an assumption in current government policy that business is well suited to providing childcare. Yet this may not always be the case. Campbell-Barr (2009) observes that some practitioners see care and business as ‘incompatible and the adoption of one will be at the expense of another’ (p.79).

My own experience of working for a commercial chain resonates with Campbell-Barr’s findings (2009), particularly in regard to ‘difficulties faced in developing a relationship that dealt with financial operations and social relationships with the parents and children’ (p.83). My initial training and education in early childhood care and education taught me that developing sound relationships with children and families, equitable communication and building strong professional bonds are key factors that enable young children to flourish in early childhood education and care. However, whilst forming these trusting relationships as a deputy manager working with families every day, it was also part of my role to secure fee payments, often from parents who were experiencing financial hardship. There was difficulty in maintaining the required balance. One side of the scale reflected the value these children gained attending nursery: many were living in circumstances of socio-economic disadvantage and research continues to show the importance of good, quality childcare for children in such circumstances (Pascal and Bertram, 2013). However, the other side of the scale was the concern for profit: the company had to make money from fees to survive and indeed provide a service for families. When the profit imperative was not met due to lack of fee payment, coupled with continual pressure to run at capacity, I had to ask some families to leave the nursery. I was faced with a moral dilemma: the very children who most needed early childhood education and care were denied it because the nursery chain’s underpinning focus was profit. This caused me to question whether caring can be a commodity; indeed, as Osgood (2004) highlighted over a decade ago, the repurposing of the altruistic trait of caring to a business model can have negative implications for those in the caring roles.

Nevertheless, the company I worked for – and others like it – cannot be blamed for this situation: they are businesses which are required to show a profit. The issue lies at government policy level: in England, education from 5-18 years is viewed and fully funded by government as a common good and this should be extended to children aged 0-5 years if their parents wish it. A definitive shift to universally affordable, available, high quality early education and care is required.

**Career Progression and Status**

Despite childcare costs being a significant proportion of many families’ monthly income and the vast growth of childcare businesses, childcare remains an underpaid and low status sector (Himmelweit, Coote and Hough, 2014). Early childhood workers’ wages tend to be better in the state sector where a profit does not have to be secured. Yet unlike most areas of business, childcare is characterized by a distinct lack of career progression (Nutbrown, 2012). While high quality practice with the best outcomes for children is linked with highly qualified staff (Sylva et al. 2004) there is little financial or status-led incentive for early childhood workers to engage in higher level education to progress in leadership or a practitioner role. I experienced this lack of incentive at first hand: with a degree in psychology from a Russell Group university, a Master’s degree in Early Childhood Studies and Early Years Professional Status, I was a practitioner for a year before moving into deputy management. Yet despite my management role, which included significant responsibility for staffing, I was earning £10,000 less than my Qualified Teacher peers. It is no surprise to me, then, that Lumsden (2011) found that only 33% of those who undertook the Early Years Professional status thought they may be seen as equivalent to teachers with QTS.

Despite the rise of childcare businesses, a lack of clear career structure prevails and current practices are often wasteful of the capacity and capabilities of their workers. Career progression routes exist but the higher the position the more administrative the tasks tend to become so the less opportunity there is to lead and role model practice. Childcare businesses tend to adopt an ‘economic approach’, requiring graduate leaders to focus on financial and administration paperwork, delegating engagement with children to less qualified workers (Campbell-Barr, 2009). This was my experience of working for a chain: paperwork took me away from working with children alongside my less qualified colleagues. This requirement was due to the levels of quality control required by the chain and the importance placed on financial documentation. Although I gained useful office skills, this was an ineffective deployment of my skill set and qualifications as a graduate early years’ leader.

**In conclusion…**

Both maintained and private nurseries focus on providing for families’ needs. However, only private nurseries must also sustain profit. This leads to an inherent tension in the situation in which many private nursery leaders find themselves. They wear two ‘hats’: running a profitable business and ensuring the provision of nurturing, stimulating environments for young children. The same conflict is not experienced by leaders in maintained settings.

Across the early childhood sector, inroads have been made in recent years towards enhancing practitioner quality, for example by the introduction of early years’ foundation and top up degrees as well as specialist graduate leaders. This has provided opportunities to close quality gaps and begin a move towards a more cohesive early childhood community of practice. However, government funding for these opportunities has diminished despite the job not being finished. The lack of clear career pathways and incentives for early childhood workers to study to graduate level and beyond continues to affect quality and morale adversely. Consequently, many children’s earliest experiences are not as good as they could be. Nevertheless, families continue to struggle to access and afford childcare.

My experiences of working in both private and maintained settings in England have led me to believe that a deep shift at government policy level is required now to enact universally affordable, available, high quality childcare as a common good. Business may continue to be part of English childcare expansion going forward, but any benefits the childcare business brings to children, families and early childhood workers must outweigh any costs it may levy on them. It is imperative that government recognises its own duty to ensure this is the case.

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