

Recruitment and Retention of Early Years and Childcare Practitioners in Private Day Nurseries

(Conclusions drawn from findings of fieldwork carried out as part of a Ph.D. research)

Margaret Simms

Introduction

This research-in-progress questions what induces early years and childcare practitioners to remain in private day nurseries, when studies indicate a general undervaluing of practitioner needs resulting in constant migration of the workforce, as individuals seek better pay and prospects (Cameron *et al.* 2001). The investigation focuses on experiences of early years and childcare practitioners in private day nurseries, exploring their attitudes, values and perceptions with various aspects of work with children, including job satisfaction and approach to the workplace.

The importance of this research lies in investigating the central, most fundamental issue of whether practitioners feel sufficiently valued to remain in private day nurseries, as the absence of this professional well-being negates any attempt to recruit, retain or raise the status of early years and childcare workers. The extent to which the vocational passion of early years and childcare practitioners is being exploited is under investigation in an attempt to clarify the rationale for remaining in private day nurseries.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was taken to the research in order to ascertain attitudes, values and perceptions of practitioners working in private day nurseries. Qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques were employed. Data was analysed at each stage to inform the following stage of inquiry. There were 84 participants involved in various stages of the study:

- Survey of 19 settings. 13/19 settings (68%). 37 practitioner respondents.
- E-forum observation and participation with 18 practitioners.
- Follow-up interviews with 9 survey respondents
- Group interview with 29 student practitioners.

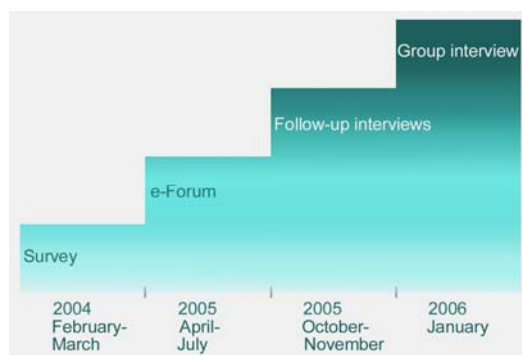


Figure 1: Fieldwork Activity Strata

Findings

The survey showed practitioners to be satisfied with most aspects of their job and settled in their current workplace; they could not imagine being able to find another job as good. All practitioners found satisfaction in working with children and the amount of effort they put in to their work, fellow workers, immediate supervisors and relations between management and staff. Dissatisfaction appeared to creep in with lack of variety in the work and job security. A small number of practitioners expressed dissatisfaction with relationships and aspects relating to career progression. Areas of greatest concern were regarding feeling trapped in their current job, 13 practitioners (35%) unhappy about their rate of pay, 16 (43%) and increase in pay, 18 (48%), 16 practitioners (43%) were overly stressed because of their work.

The majority of practitioners were satisfied working with children even though they experienced dissatisfaction with some aspects of the job and current workplace. Given the high level of satisfaction, it is then surprising that the majority of practitioners were dissatisfied with the amount of stress arising from their work, resulting in almost half of the sample as a whole (43%) being dissatisfied with this aspect of their work in private day nurseries.

Discussions involving 18 practitioners on early years' internet forums affirmed the existence of a great deal of dissatisfaction within private day nurseries. Successive postings reflected experiences and perceptions of the survey respondents, in that practitioners cherished their work with children, but were dissatisfied with the amount of stress arising from their work. Practitioners were frustrated about a range of issues. but constant threads running through the postings were those of feeling overloaded with work and responsibility. Practitioners were working extremely hard to rectify difficulties they

were experiencing, but were exhausted and drained by their labour which seemed to be in vain.

I turn up for work every day as chirpy as anything and feel drained at the end of it...

Practitioner, Nursery World September 2005

Practitioners' perceived that they were not being paid according to their worth. A recently qualified practitioner on low pay sought e-counsel on whether to remain in her current job, she was advised by an experienced practitioner to 'stick with it for a 60p increase over 5 years.' Low rates of pay and non entitlement to sick pay created difficulties for practitioners needing to support themselves whilst nursery owners were perceived to be making huge profits from taking in fees and paying low wages.

Regardless of low pay, work overload and exhaustion, the majority of practitioners remained in private day nurseries because of the children in their care. The satisfaction of working with the children seemed to far outweigh all other problems and keep practitioners rooted to their vocation. Only when frustration and exhaustion took over did they appear to move on.

... childcare is a labour of love not money.

Practitioner, Nursery World 07 June 2005

Findings from the follow-up interviews showed that training opportunities varied from nursery to nursery, some practitioners had all the training they needed, others had difficulty accessing training due to staffing shortage. Anecdotal evidence suggested that, in some cases practitioners have been expected to enter into contractual agreements to remain with the nursery for two years after having qualified. Young girls without prior experience of caring for children found it more difficult than those with experience, to gain the underpinning knowledge required to support their practice in the nursery. A common view was that maturity and experience is a prerequisite for early years and childcare practitioners as it enabled practitioners to support their peers in training.

When you qualify they make it difficult for you and they get rid of you, some incentive! They have a massive turnover of staff. Senior Practitioner Level 3

The appeal for more time to play with the children eclipsed the dissatisfaction with poor pay but practitioners did not want outsiders to think that they 'just sit and play with the children all day.' Follow-up interviews showed that practitioners accepted 'paperwork' as an integral part of their job but felt that it detracted from their main purpose of working with the children. When asked whether they would recommend work in private day nurseries to early years and childcare practitioners just setting out on their career, attitudes were on a continuum from 'probably' to 'not at all.'

Blame for most dissatisfaction was placed firmly at the door of managers and others with supervisory responsibility. Interviewees held clearly defined views on good management. One pictured good management as 'a line of respect from both ends.' Good managers:

- are efficient
- get the balance right
- make time for the children
- are prepared to get their hands dirty
- have got plenty of experience
- are a bit older and know what they are doing
- are approachable and really listen to their staff
- make sure that the team is able to work well together.

Too often it was thought practitioners evolved into management and did not always 'have the maturing for the role' or appropriate training. This kind of scenario was said to cause 'negative management.'

Main issues arising from the survey, e-postings and interviews were debated in the group interview where student practitioners were asked to note down their first thoughts on a series of words associated with work in private day nurseries; these were then discussed along with their opinions on comments taken from the early years' e-forums.

Some members of the group recalled positive experiences of private day nurseries, but explained 'It depends where you go.' Several students agreed that private day nurseries were 'boring.' One thought that they were 'quite laid back but not very good pay.' Group consensus was that the hours were long and pay poor in relation to the hard work and commitment provided by practitioners, no-one worked on Saturdays and no-one received

sick pay. Students perceived managers to be 'in the office all day doing paperwork' rarely seeing the children.

Students expected maturity and professionalism of their peers and thought that staff should not 'bicker and fight like school girls as the children pick up on it.' The group agreed that all nurseries are different and experiences were by no means all negative.

The only two day nurseries I have been at were absolutely brilliant...

The group were unanimous in their decision of what was the best thing about being an early years and childcare practitioner:

Just think you see that child take his first steps with you, you know, with your help, look how rewarding that is.

Although all students in the group intended to work with children in some capacity after they qualified most did not intend to work in private day nurseries.

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from these findings are that work in private day nurseries can be physically and emotionally exhausting – yet at the same time participant practitioners have shown that they are fully compensated for the long hours and even the low pay, by the rewards of helping children in their care to develop and take their first steps into life. Those who can afford to live on low wages do so, because for them job satisfaction comes from working with the children. Those who can not manage on the poor wages tend either to migrate to settings that pay more money, or leave the sector.

The fact that even the most satisfied practitioners were dissatisfied about the amount of stress arising from their work was cause for concern. What practitioners found more difficult to cope with even than being left alone in a room full of crying babies, was immaturity of staff which manifested itself, for example, as 'bickering and fighting like school girls.' Any aspects of the job that prevent them from giving the children their full attention, such as 'paperwork overload' also caused anxiety. Regardless of the dissatisfaction being expressed in the anecdotes of these practitioners they usually

included such phrases as “I love my job so much.” “I love the children.” “It will break my heart to leave them.” “It is so rewarding.”

What appeared to push practitioners over the edge was frustration and exhaustion exacerbated by a feeling of being undervalued. The vocational passion of early years and childcare practitioners was clearly being exploited and blame was placed firmly at the door of managers and others with supervisory responsibility. However, professional immaturity existed at all levels and caused dissatisfaction at all levels. Even though practitioners did not feel sufficiently valued to remain in private day nurseries they had stayed because of their mutual attachment with the children.

Eighty-four early years and childcare practitioners were involved in this research; most of them had experienced phenomenon that left them feeling undervalued over time, but the e-forum posting of one practitioner throws the light on the way forward:

... we realised that good nursery nurses don't necessarily make good supervisors ... all the supervisors do a training session with the manager and also have supervisors meetings, so then everyone knows what is expected of them. Nursery World 30 July 2005

This kind of reflective practice is the beginning of professionalism; the difference between doing the job every day and doing a better job every day; a step in the direction of reaching a position of mutual respect and understanding required to meet one another's professional needs, thereby offering early years and childcare practitioners more grounds for remaining in private day nurseries.

References

- Barber, J. (2000) The Future Of NNEBs is in Our Hands. *Early Years Educators*, 2(4), 18.
- Callender, C. (2000) *The Barriers To Childcare Provision. 2000*. London: South Bank University For Department For Education And Employment.
- Cameron, C., Candappa, M., Mcqual, S., Mooney, A., Moss, P. and Petrie, P. (2003) *Early Years And Childcare International Evidence Project: The Workforce 2003*. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit Institute of Education: University of London.

Forth, J. And Millward, N. (2001) *The Low-Paid Worker and the Low-Paying Employer: Characteristics Using WERS98*. London: National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

Munton, T. (2001) *National Day Nurseries Conference NDNA Conference, Leicester [Online]*. Available At: <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/Tcru/Staff-Munton.Htm> [Accessed 3rd. February 2003]

Nursery World (2005) *Have Your Say [Online]*. Available At: http://www.nursery-world.com/Have_Your_Say/Thread.aspx?Story_Id=2036289&Path= [Accessed 2nd August 2005].