

## **Day Care or Early Education? Perspectives on the institutional provision for the construction of a “good” childhood for young children in the UK?**

### **Introduction.**

In 2003 the Government in the UK announced plans for the establishment of a series of Children’s Centres across the UK. These are designed to be a ‘one-stop shop’ or in current political phrasing, to offer the provision of ‘joined up’ children’s services that will integrate care, education, family support and health services. Commenting on this announcement, the then secretary of state for education and skills Charles Clarke said, “ the attainment gap between poor and better-off children must be closed if we are to develop the potential of all young people. We need to ensure children and parents get the support they need right from the start” (*Nursery World*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2003). The Government has, as it does with all its policies, set itself some targets - the setting up of 2500 children’s centres by 2008 and 3500 by 2010. As of July 2005 288 Centres have been set up.

So far, so visionary. What this paper explores is the nature of that vision and the implications this has for children. It does this by asking some fundamental questions about in whose interests such Centres are envisioned, coming hard on the heels, as they do, of the new millennium vision of Centres of (educational) Excellence. Now rebranded and re-envisioned as Children’s Centres by the inclusion of Sure Start services, in this paper I ask whether this policy is in the interests of children, of parents and/or of the state?

Posing these questions about the UK’s provision of services for children is not, however, simply a parochial concern. Indeed, it is far from it. The new Children’s Centres will no doubt be subject to further political rebranding in the future, if targets fail to be met or a new government is elected and so, in some ways, they are of passing interest! Thus, my focus on the UK is expedient, a way of exploring further the socially constructed character of childhood (James and Prout 1997) through the theoretical arguments about the cultural politics of childhood, developed in our recent book (James and James 2004). Through examining the details of child-care provision in the UK, therefore, I want to provoke a broader theoretical discussion about the ways in which ideas about what constitutes child-care are linked to ideas about: (i) the social status of children in any society (ii) the ways in which that status is expressed in the social order of that society and (iii) children’s experiences of these processes and of the regulatory framework through which their status of ‘child’ is established. In short, what this paper argues, is that when we confront the question of childcare in any society we have first to confront the question of what kind of ‘ child’ and

what kind of 'childhood' is being constructed through the kinds of child-care services that are provided.

Thus, what we (James and James 2004) have termed the cultural politics of childhood lies at the heart of this paper. This involves looking at the ways in which ideas about children and childhood are embedded within the laws and social policies that come to shape the experiences of children; and, importantly, the ways in which children – through their actions – may also contribute to the shape those laws and policies take on.

In exploring these issues, however, the paper addresses a more fundamental question – that of the kind of childhood that is being promoted by this politics. The state's interests in children is, everywhere, to some extent about the nation's future – that is what children represent. But how that future is thought to be best accomplished can differ markedly. Here, then, I focus on the production of what in Norway is termed a "good" childhood and ask – in the case of the UK – whether the childhood currently being constructed is "good" for children and their everyday experiences of childhood and/or "good" for children's future in terms of the adults they will become. Drawing some contrasts with the child-care system in the Nordic countries, the paper therefore unpacks the concepts of 'care', 'education' and 'schooling' as they relate to the provision of services for children aged 0 – 5. It suggests that these form a continuum of ideas through which the concept of a "good" childhood for British children is socially constructed. It shows that the status of 'child' is realized as either an object of familial socialization, social control or educative training and that while all of these social practices can be seen as different forms of social ordering, they lead to rather different kinds of experiences for children themselves. If, as Kjørholt suggests, 'different discourses constitute a social and symbolic space for children as participants in that they make available certain social practices and subject positions for participation while eliminating others' then, as I shall show, a "good" childhood, as envisioned by the state, may only be experienced by some children in the UK as good (2004:227).

### **Problems of definition**

It has been suggested that while ' in many countries the distinction between care and education is blurred ... in the UK, where schooling starts early, there is a sharp dichotomy between care and education, and nursery education, as a matter of policy, excludes care ' (Moss and Penn 1996, cited in Penn 1997:8) This has been an enduring characteristic of the pattern of the provision made for young children in the UK since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a model that, despite recent government initiatives which ostensibly offer a more unified approach, looks set

to continue. However, as I shall explore below, this dichotomous thinking is not between care and education *per se*, but rather between the different institutionalized forms that these ideas take in the services provided for 0- 5 year old children in the UK. As I shall show, the conceptual framing of these institutions have rather different models of 'the child' at their centre and are premised on different ideologies of what constitutes a " good childhood" and "children's needs".

The issues which this slippage between concepts of care, education and schooling raises, which I detail below, can be understood theoretically, therefore, in relation to the social construction of childhood (James and Prout 1997). Practices of "care", practices of "education" and practices of "schooling", historically and contemporarily, can be said to be all in the business of controlling children under the guise of socialisation. That is to say, they aim to control what children will become through constructing "childhood" in particular kinds of ways. And, in any society, this is ultimately about producing a " good" childhood, not just for children, but for the adults that children will become and the adult society they will constitute. This is the futurity of childhood that Jenks (1996) has noted.

However, what is thought "good" for children will vary across cultures. Thus, for example, in contemporary Norwegian society the recent introduction of outdoor forest kindergartens, where children under school age spend most of the day outside, even in very cold and snowy weather, reflects important Norwegian ideas about the self, personhood and nationhood. Contact with Nature and the freedom for experimentation and for self directed learning through experience that this brings - building huts and collecting firewood to get shelter and warmth for example - is thought to be good for children and, indeed, as essential to the Norwegian way of life (Farstad 2005). If such practices were adopted in Britain, however, there would be a national outcry about child neglect. In British nurseries and schools, at the mere hint of rain, children are ushered inside. Wet playtimes spent reading comics and doing colouring seated at desks in a classroom are therefore, it would seem, a fundamental part of a good British childhood!

However, the social construction of childhoods may also vary *within* cultures so that, as I explore below, the recent initiatives and interventions in the field of UK early childhood care, education and schooling have to be understood within wider discourses about social class and current ideas of risk and protection that have rather different models of 'the child' at their core (see James and James forthcoming), discourses that problematise some kinds of (working class? ethnic minority?) children as being at risk and in need of intervention by the state. These new policy initiatives represent, then, the purposeful and intensive pursuit

of a long-standing construction of childhood in the UK that identifies some children as being in need of particular kinds of control to ensure their futures as responsible adult citizens. As Hendrick says, such policies are ultimately built upon 'the value of children as investments in future parenthood, economic competitiveness and a stable democratic order' (1997:46). What is perhaps new, however, is the extension and intensification of this strategic construction of children's becoming into the early childhood field. As citizens of the future, 3 year old children in the UK now carry with them a lot of conceptual baggage, which, as the paper suggests, may represent rather a heavy burden!

### **Care, education and schooling - the UK context in a nutshell.**

As suggested above, careful distinctions have to be made between concepts of care, education and schooling since they form a continuum of rather different ordering practices that, conceptually, range from positive forms of socialization through to more potentially coercive forms of social control in the construction of a "good" UK childhood. It is therefore necessary, before exploring this continuum in more depth, to sketch in some background details about the institutional provision made for day-care/nursery education for children under 5 in the UK.

In the UK compulsory full-time schooling begins for children at age 5. For those under 5 there is a highly diverse set of institutional arrangements for care, education and schooling summarized in the boxes below:

#### **State provision**

nursery school (state-funded school for 3s and 4s during regular school hours)  
nursery class (class for 3-4 year olds in state schools)  
early years unit (3-5 , part -time. Fulltime)  
reception class ( 4+, 9-3.30 school term only)  
LA day nurseries ( 0-5 " at risk" groups)  
Before/after school clubs  
Holiday clubs  
Special schools  
Opportunity units

**Private Provision**

Play groups/ preschools (2-5)  
Private nurseries/ prep schools (3-5+)  
Independent schools (3+)  
Private day nurseries (0-5)  
Child minder  
Nanny/au pair

For the purposes of this paper I shall focus, however, on just two types of provision - day nurseries and nursery schools in both the public and private sectors - for it is this split which is integral to the ways in which care, education and schooling are conceptualized.

Day nurseries are institutions that care for children from birth to 5 years and are present in both the public and private sectors. However the cost of provision at a day nursery has to be met by parents, via the private sector, unless children have special needs or are deemed at risk. When this is the case, provision is free or given at a reduced cost. State day nurseries are therefore primarily seen as providers of care.

Nursery schools are, by contrast, seen as providers of early education and cater for children aged between 3 and 5 years old. Since 1998, all 3-5 year old children have been given access to free part-time early education in state nursery schools. This provision is however rather limited - 2.5 hour session per day, five times a week, and only during the school term. If parents want - or need - their child to have extra time at a nursery school then this has to be paid for by them and has to be found within the private sector.

Interestingly, this split reflects the varied connotations of the idea of nursing as a care-giving activity. On the one hand, nursing involves tending the sick and dependent, looking after and managing people (or plants!) who are immature and need close watch kept over them. On the other hand, nursing can also refer to the fostering of an idea, to the act of training via nurturing and to the encouragement of development.

A number of other significant points can be noted about this provision. In relation to the state sector, the services provided by Local Education Authority are concerned primarily with "education"; they are centred on the school system and are for children from 3 years upwards. By contrast, those provided by the local authority *social* services, are focused primarily on "care" and are available for children from birth to 5. This means that, from the perspective of the state, most children under 3, unless deemed to be in need of special care - children at

risk, children in need of protection or children with special needs - have no services provided for them by the state. If both parents work, child care has to be found within the private sector – in a private day nursery, using a child-minder or employing a nanny or au pair. It should also be noted that within the state sector there are many different educationally based services, but few care based ones. This reinforces the idea that nursing/nurturing should ideally be carried out in the private sphere of the family, with formal education being left to the state.<sup>1</sup> As I shall argue below this relative lack of state provision for the under 3s, speaks to the ways in which ideas of ‘the child’ and children’s need for either socialization, education or control are constructed.

Reflecting on government policies towards early years provision in the UK the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report sums it up as follows: ‘ a system characterized by diversity and lack of co-ordination... with a strong tradition of voluntary and home-based care for children from birth to age three [which] seems to inhibit consideration of other forms of provision and funding mechanisms for this age group’ (2001:10). Although since 1997 the government has put in place what the OECD describes as ‘ unprecedented effort to increase investment in families and young children and to develop a wide-ranging plan of action that will expand and reform the early years system’ it notes that ‘ compared to most other European countries, ECEC provision in the UK is starting from a low base’ (2001:179-180).

### **Conceptualising care**

Given the somewhat confusing context of early years provision in the UK, briefly sketched in above, it is important to ask what this represents in terms of the cultural politics of childhood: with regard to the concept of child-care, as it is practiced through this variety of institutional arrangements, what visions of “the child” and a “ good childhood” are at its core and what are the implications of these for children themselves?

A first point to note is that, as Penn argues, until very recently it has been government policy that ‘ the care of children is the responsibility of their parents, and by implication, no one else should be expected to carry the financial cost of that care’ (1997:8). According to the OECD (2001:9) the Government maintains that parents are ‘ primarily responsible for the care of young children ‘, a view

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<sup>1</sup> This division has been reinforced by the recent transfer of responsibility for children’s services from the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Skills and making the inspectorate OFSTED responsible for the inspection of all children’s services including those involving care.

reinforced in an array of recent policy initiatives such as the provision of parenting classes in school (to instruct young people about child-care before they have children) and the introduction of parenting orders (given to those parents who fail to care for their children properly once they have had them). And if care is considered to be best carried out by parents within the family then, unsurprisingly, as we have seen, there is little emphasis placed on state provision for day-care. This means, in effect, that a “good” childhood is one in which ‘care’ takes place as a natural part of familial socialization. It is, therefore, those children who are perceived to be located in ‘uncaring’ families who become problematised and are deemed to be “at risk”. They are in need of the kind of ‘care’ to be found in the institutional setting of the day-nursery, a substitute, in effect, for familial socialization.

Meanwhile, those families with children under 3, but who are not deemed to be at risk and therefore not to be in need of this kind of state controlled childhood, have to cover the costs of day care themselves. It is not surprising therefore that only 40% of lone mothers in the UK work, that 49% of women with children under 5 do not have a full time job and that the 51% of mothers that do work, usually only work part-time.

The identification of risk works, therefore, as an indicator of the difference between good and bad childhoods, albeit under the guise of welfare and protection (James and James forthcoming). And in these different conceptualizations of childhood, given practical realization in the distinction between “day nurseries” and “nursery schools”, the care provided by the state is revealed to be as much about control as it is about protection. Placing children in day nurseries is in this sense a process of re-socialisation for a better, if not, a “good” childhood. As Penn describes the situation, the only ‘publicly funded care services which do exist are welfare based, and cater for children in need, usually defined as children from highly distressed and vulnerable families’ (1997:8). ‘Care’ in this context is thus delivered within a service which offers ‘regular surveillance and protection’ for children and it is precisely this vision of “the child” and of “risky childhoods” that lies at the core of the proposals for the new Children’s Centres (Penn 1997:8)

### **Care as education?**

This location of ‘care’ as ideally taking place within the family has a long history in the UK and, in part, accounts for the distinctive pattern of provision for the under-5s that continues to separate out institutions for care from institutions for education noted above. When in 1870 compulsory schooling was introduced from the age of 5, siblings and other children as young as 2 were often also taken into school. This enabled mothers to go out to work. There were at that time few examples of any separate educational provision for the under 5s. Thus by 1901

nearly half of 3 year olds were enrolled in primary schools. However, by 1905 it was thought inappropriate for young children to be involved in the didactic teaching that characterised primary schools, and, as no other provision was forthcoming as a substitute, younger children were returned to the care of their families. Care was to take place in the home; schools were reserved for older children's formal education (OECD 2001).

Indeed, it was only because of the labour shortage incurred by two world wars, when women were needed to swell the ranks of the workforce, that the expansion of nursery places took place at all and this was quickly followed by a post-war retreat. Post 1945, local authorities were not obliged to provide nursery places. However, if they did offer places they could choose whether to provide "education" or "care" services for children. And, in the context of the emerging welfare state, for the most part, local authorities chose to provide places for 'care' for children from 0-5 years old, rather than nursery schools as places for education (OECD 2001). As Hendrick argues, during the inter-war period childhood had been reconstructed and the child was conceived of

'as an individual citizen in a welfare democracy and as a member of a family.... [and] insofar as the child in care was a 'public child' it was viewed from the perspective of a kind of 'domestic ideal' ...whose late 18<sup>th</sup> early 19<sup>th</sup> century paternity was now emblazoned with psychoanalytic understanding' (1997:56).

Thus 'day-care nurseries' became focused on children in need, that is, children in need of a "proper" caring family environment. These nurseries of "care" became the province of the social services and offered state-funded nursery places for poor families. Thus, for example, although the 1967 Plowden report argued strongly for the state provision of child-centred nursery places, it was to provide for children's care rather than their education. It was intended to help "children in need", and was not for children whose mothers simply wanted to work during the day. In the UK, therefore, the social construction of what a good childhood is is a traditional one, where the 'care' of young children takes place within the family. Day nurseries are only freely available to those families whose 'caring' is in doubt.

By contrast, in the Nordic countries, the construction of a "good childhood" sees care and education as going more hand in hand in the ways in which kindergartens or day-care institutions are organized as a key part of all children's everyday lives. As Kjørholt (2004) observes, most children aged 1 - 6 year olds in Denmark and Norway are in institutional care during the day. However, these are institutions that offer both care and education but not a school curriculum:

the 'curriculum... emphasizes 'free play' to a large extent underlining the fact that the pedagogy is more child-centred than in primary schools' (2004:189)

But this contrast simply begs the question, then, as to how 'care' is conceived in the UK context and why there has traditionally been such a sharp separation, in terms of institutional provision, between 'care' and 'education', given concrete form as described above in the distinction between day nurseries and nursery schools.

To answer this question for the UK returns us, therefore, to an exploration of the social practices at work within the cultural politics of childhood, which, as noted above, reveal the ongoing social construction of childhood. And by looking back historically once more -to the work of Margaret McMillan, an early pioneer in early childhood education in England - we can find clues as to the importance for UK childhood of the distinctions to be drawn not only between care and education but also between education and schooling.

A labor party activist McMillan established an open-air school in Deptford, London in 1913, but it was a school with a very particular mission and intention. Following Montessori's views about the importance of sensory education, she was opposed to formal learning and she encouraged the working-class children she had rescued from poverty to learn from an engagement with nature. Children, she believed, should develop naturally and spontaneously. As Steedman, notes, ideas about child physiology were developing rapidly during this period and being

'structured around the idea of growth and development... allowed for comparisons to be made between children, and, most important of all as a basis for a social policy on childhood, it rooted mental life in the material body and the material conditions of life. In this way, working-class children could be seen as having been robbed of natural development, their potential for health and growth lying dormant in their half-starved bodies' (1992:25)

And, McMillan believed, through a purposive and healthy educational environment - open-air schools offered fresh air and exercise - the children of the poor could be rescued from deprivation and restored 'to become agents of a new social future' (Steedman 1992:35). In this she reflected the views of another pioneer of nursery schools, the Scotsman Robert Owens, who, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was also strongly opposed to the formal education of young children:

He wanted infant schools where children could be protected from their untaught parents and brought up in favourable surroundings as soon as they could talk. Teachers must never beat or threaten children, should always display a pleasant countenance and kind manner, and should teach the laws of nature through things rather than books' (OECD 2001:8)

In these two examples an important distinction is made - between a caring education on the one hand and formal schooling on the other. Although both pioneers were concerned to provide children with an education - and indeed both established schools - these institutions were first and foremost designed to care and protect those children who otherwise would be at risk. Thus the "education" that McMillan was offering was not schooling as such, but instead the kind of caring socialisation that would provide young working-class children with opportunities to learn. In effect, they would learn through growing up in a caring, domestic, familial type of environment, comparable to that of their more middle class counterparts. And Owens' schools were similarly familial environments of care for those children who did not have them.

Here then can be seen the roots of the conceptual framework around which ideas of the "good childhood" are strung in the context of the UK: young children should be cared for by their families and it is these caring relations that will provide for them the early foundations for their later education. Thus, it is only those children who lack a caring family who need state institutions - day nurseries - to perform the function of care on their behalf. Rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century this conception persists, as can be seen in recent discussions around one of the Labour government's new initiatives - the Sure Start scheme. This was described by Toynbee (2003) as follows:

Those at risk of failing would be helped before they were born, their parents helped to cope after birth with home support, followed later by childcare to help every mother to go out to work. The child would get not just quality care at all hours, but nursery education of the best (*The Guardian*, June 3rd)

And, with Sure Start now to be part of the proposed Children Centres, what that 'quality care' and 'nursery education' consists of is the kind of caring and educational environment characterized by the ideologies of middle class family life. This was made explicit in Carvel's (1999) report of the discussions held with ministers over the implementation of 'early learning goals' for young children:

Children should start learning to read, write and count as young as three and should have mastered the rudiments before the end of their first year

in primary school, the government said yesterday as ministers set out to bury the idea that early childhood is a time for carefree play. Margaret Hodge, the education minister, said children from disadvantaged backgrounds *deserved the well-structured nursery education that was seen as a matter of course in middle class homes* (The Guardian, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, my emphasis).

And there we have it. The sharp division which has shaped the pattern of the UK early years provision between day-nurseries and nursery schools is not based on much disagreement about what children “need”. On that there is clear agreement: young children need a caring environment but one that is also educative. The distinctions that characterise the supposed differences between ‘day-care’ and ‘education’ are – in effect – ones of social class. Day nurseries for the working class child offer a form of state provision that mimics the ideological caring role of the middle-class family. Thus, it should come as no surprise that day-care institutions in the UK are staffed by ‘nursery nurses’, who have relatively few qualifications and no teacher training and who subsist on poor salaries – they, after all, simply substituting for mother love and parental care for which there are few training grounds! (Rolfe 2005). Nursery schools, by contrast, are staffed by pre-school teachers, on better pay scales for, as we shall see, it is their job to “school” rather than educate or socialise the child.

### **Education versus schooling?**

In the UK context, therefore, it is not the concept of education that stands in opposition to care, but that of schooling. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that it is the middle classes – those paragons of care – who, on the whole, bemoan the lack of nursery school places for their children. But their complaint is not about the lack of day-care – this can be provided by mothers staying at home or can be bought in the form of nannies, child-minders and au pairs. Rather, it is the lack of places where children can, at an early age, receive a formal kind of education through schooling.

As noted, all children aged 3-5 in the UK now do have free part-time places at nurseries, and it is schooling, rather than day-care, that is on offer. First and foremost, nursery places are tied to the school year; they are only available on a part-time basis – 2.5 hours per day – and are not available in the school holidays. Parents who work therefore have to make additional private arrangements to fill in the ‘care’ gap between the end of ‘nursery school’ and the end of the adult working day, as well as finding day-care cover during school holidays. Nursery schools are most definitely for schooling; they are not a form of day-care.

Second, what children do, while at nursery school, is increasingly being prescribed as a form of “schooling” and not as, formerly, pre-school or play school. It is now considered to be the foundation level of the National Curriculum and has its own ‘early learning goals’ set out.<sup>2</sup> Compared to many other countries, therefore, children in UK begin formal education at a very early age – indeed, at an age where many children elsewhere are not enrolled in school at all but are in day-care and kindergartens receiving socialization rather than formal education. Those UK children who take up the free nursery place at 3 will effectively have embarked on their schooling career.

The ‘foundation stage’ of the National Curriculum involves, as indicated above, a set of early learning goals in six areas as set out in the framework, *Birth to Three Matters* (2003):

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication, language and literacy
- mathematical development
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development

Although denied by the Government to constitute a formal curriculum, the guidance notes that accompany the framework state explicitly that children ‘need a well-planned and resourced curriculum to take their learning forward and to provide opportunities for all children to succeed in an atmosphere of care and feeling valued’ (p.8). The monitoring of children is also mandatory and indeed any child who has attended a nursery school will enter primary school, at the age of 5, with an assessment profile, compiled through such monitoring processes. Thus, set out in the Education Act 2002, alongside the early learning goals, is

‘ a single national assessment system for the foundation stage, replacing baseline assessment schemes. The Foundation Stage profile was introduced into schools and settings in 2002-3. The Profile has 13 summary scales, covering the six areas of learning, which need to be completed for each child receiving government-funded education by the end of his or her time in the foundation stage.’ (DfES 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> In UK compulsory schooling starts at 5 years old in primary schools – for some children it can even start at 4 + with the “: year in which they are 5” signalling the start of primary school education. From 5 – 7 is, therefore, the first period of education for children known, since the formulation of the national curriculum in 1980s, as Key Stage 1. This is the first of 4 stages leading right through to school leaving at 16.

Each child then receives a summary score, which accompanies it to primary school.

The kinds of skills a 5-year-old child in the UK should now come to school with are as follows. In relation to reading all children should have, at the very least:

- developed an interest in books
- know that print conveys meaning
- recognises a few familiar words

Additionally they should have taken some of the next series of steps towards the early learning goal:

- know that in English print is read from left to right and top to bottom
- show an understanding of elements of stories
- read a range of familiar words and simple sentences independently
- retell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories
- show an understanding of how information can be found in non-fiction texts to answer questions about where, who, why and how.

The more advanced 5 year old will, however, have reached point 9 on the scale and will arrive at primary school, being able to read books of their own choice with some fluency and accuracy. And, in relation to writing, point 9 on the scale is depicted in the following manner: the child ' communicates meaning through phrases and simple sentences with some consistency in punctuating sentences'. At the very least, the 5 year old should be able to write his / her own name and other words from memory.

As Carvel (1999) notes:

When first introduced in 1999 these goals were met with ' a hail of criticism from the heads of 16 of the 18 nursery schools that [were] identified as centres of excellence. They said children under six should not be forced into formal learning of literacy and numeracy, but be allowed to develop social skills and learn through play. Otherwise too many youngsters - particularly boys - would "learn to fail" at an early age. ' (*The Guardian*, October 4th)

The Government responded to such criticisms roundly and refused to change the goals. Margaret Hodge (now Minister for Children) was quoted as saying:

"I am fed up of hearing how unstructured play and free activity are all that a young child needs ... Many children start nursery at the age of three unable to speak properly or communicate. They can't concentrate; they lack confidence and show no enthusiasm for learning; they don't know their colours, they are unfamiliar with numbers and they have rarely seen a book. Of course we don't want three-year-olds to sit in rows learning Latin. But equally if we do not structure the activities, the play and the learning they enjoy in their nursery setting, children will not develop the skills they need to succeed in life and at school." (*The Guardian*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999)

And she continued:

Play in playgroups and nurseries should be "purposeful". The days of toddlers "colouring, cutting and pasting" are over. Before the age of six, all children should be able to recognise numbers, count to 10, understand adding and taking away, know the alphabet and read a range of common words. "I don't accept, as some from advantaged backgrounds seem to be arguing, that we are being over-formal. If the well-to-do expected these standards of attainment by their children, how could the government deny them to poorer children for whom education is the best hope for a better life?" (*The Guardian*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999)

This was, as Hendrick describes precisely the impetus that lay behind the introduction of compulsory schooling for all 5 year old children in 1870 that, as I have shown, is fundamental to the cultural politics of UK childhood. For Hendricks compulsory schooling

' did more than merely declare a particular definition of childhood. By virtue of its legal authority, and on a daily basis through teachers and school attendance officers, it was able to impose its vision upon pupils... and upon their parents' (1997:46).

Just as in 1870, so in 1999, ' the classroom and the ideological apparatus of education ... demanded.. a truly national childhood, one that ignore[s] (at least theoretically) rural/urban divisions, as well as those of social class' ( Hendrick 1997:46).

## Care, education and schooling.

Nowhere is this vision of a good childhood for all more apparent than in the most recent UK initiatives – Sure Start Schemes and Early Excellence Centres, now to be called Children’s Centres – which have been heralded as finally overcoming the care/ education/ schooling divide. As Carvel (1999) comments:

Details of what ministers think children should learn between three and completion of the reception year in primary school may sound unambitious to middle-class parents who have been fostering such skills without any help from the state. They include knowing the alphabet, reading a range of common words, holding a pencil correctly, writing their own names and counting reliably to 10. But, if children from less privileged backgrounds could achieve a similar standard by the age of five or six, they would have a better chance of gaining more equal benefit from the remaining years of compulsory education. (*The Guardian*, June 23<sup>rd</sup>)

The aim is to close the gap between rich and poor by intervening with a combined package of care, education and schooling in the early years, together with the provision of parenting classes, family support services and employment opportunities for parents in a “one-stop shop”. As Toynbee (2003) observes:

Take babies tested for attainment at the age of 22 months: at one end of the scale is a very bright child from a poor home and at the other end is a dim but rich baby. At just under two years old, the bright child scores 85 points on the scale while the dim one scores only 10. But the two children are already on a steep trajectory in opposite directions: the poor/bright one travelling fast downwards; the rich/dim one moving up, as their social backgrounds counteract their inborn abilities. By the time they hit nursery school aged three, they have nearly converged - poor/bright scores only 55 now, while dim/rich has risen to 45. At the age of six the children's lines cross, and then diverge for ever more as they head off into opposite futures. (*The Guardian*, June 3)

Sure Start aims to ensure at least a level playing field for all when children enter primary school. The aim is laudable given that 1 in 3 children in Britain still live

in poverty. The question is, will it work? And, more importantly, will it endure? These questions are pertinent both in terms of the capacity building of children, and in terms of the sustainability of Government funding commitments. As the OECD review team writes:

‘people expressed to us their concern that educational and health solutions were being advanced to address problems that were largely economic, that a few hours of pre-school each day were expected to cure all social ills, with educators poised to be blamed if or when initiatives fail to achieve desired results’ (2001:40)

## **Conclusions.**

The cultural politics of early childhood education in the UK, set out in this paper, has raised a range of issues about the role that concepts of care, education and schooling have in relation to ideas about socialization, risk and social control in the construction of “good” childhood(s) for children. One of the key ironies, however, of the Government’s most recent determination to iron out differences through the establishment of Children’s Centres has been a back-lash against the “nanny state” and against state interference in the ‘black box’ of the family as the care/ education/ schooling divisions appear to be about to be relaxed. There is also a growing disquiet over the levels of surveillance and monitoring that such interventionist and apparently liberal strategies can facilitate – as for example, when the Home Secretary envisaged ‘nurseries’ as places where ‘care’ might take place, through the announcement,

that measures must be taken to spot problem children as young as three who could eventually join gangs and cause misery in their neighbourhoods. Speaking ... at the Parent Child 2002 conference in Islington, north London, he told delegates that the earlier unruly youngsters were spotted, the earlier support services could intervene to prevent offending behaviour. "We have got to be able to pick up on the behavioural reactions of children very quickly, from the moment the child enters nursery education," he said. "Instead of trying to pick up the pieces when things go wrong it makes a lot more sense to invest resources in prevention."... "We have got to provide support at the point where it can be most effective. Universal nursery provision makes that possible more quickly.' (*The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2002).

There is also the question, yet to be resolved in my mind, as to whether it is education rather than schooling that young children need. In terms of the UK, the current emphasis on schooling investment in the 3-5 year age, and care provision for those under 3, serves simply to continue the division between care and education, and to stigmatise one kind of parenting as dysfunctional and one

kind of childhood as potentially risky. As the OECD (2001) argues, in relation to the care and education of 0-5 year olds in the UK, there is a downward pressure from the school system, rather than an upwards movement - the expansion of a more embracing concept of 'education' that is - or can be - wrapped up within patterns of care as happens, for example, in the Nordic countries. And, what children themselves might think about these issues has not even begun to be explored!

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