

Pre-school childcare in England, 1939–2010

Theory, practice and experience

ANGELA DAVIS



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Manchester University Press

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Published by Manchester University Press
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 9065 3 hardback

First published 2015

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Typeset
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited
Printed in Great Britain
by TJ International Ltd, Padstow

Pre-school childcare in England,
1939–2010

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

Acknowledgements

My first and greatest thanks are to the women and men who shared their experiences of pre-school childcare with me. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Archive of Teacher Memory, University of Cambridge; the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, Holborn Library; the History Centre, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry; the London School of Economics Library; the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick; the National Archives, Kew; the Trades Union Congress Library Collections, London Metropolitan University; and Warwick Record Office. The book is based on research I undertook as a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Warwick and I am indebted to the British Academy for their generous support. My colleagues at the University of Warwick and elsewhere have offered invaluable criticism and advice, as did the anonymous readers and staff at MUP. Love and profound thanks go to my friends and family, and especially to Talia.

A note on oral history interviews

In addition to written sources, this book is based on oral history. It makes use of existing collections,¹ as well as a new body of fifty-three oral history interviews conducted by the author in order to ascertain the experiences of those involved in pre-school childcare, including practitioners, mothers who sent their children to childcare and people who had attended forms of care as children.² Interviewees were recruited from three locations: Coventry and its surroundings; Oxfordshire and neighbouring parts of Berkshire; and the London Borough of Camden.

The interviews were semi-structured and were typically between one and two hours long. To enable informed consent the aims of the research were explained to potential respondents in advance of the interview and interviewees were also given the chance to specify any restrictions they wished to make on their contributions. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees pseudonyms have been used. Interviewees are referenced and indexed by identifying codes. The codes are formed of the first two letters of the locality from which the interviewee came and an identifying number: CW = Coventry and Warwickshire; LC = The London Borough of Camden and OB = Oxfordshire and Berkshire.

The oral history interviews reveal how those involved in childcare think it affected them, how their attitudes have changed over time and in the light of later developments, and will offer a way of viewing the effects of childcare in their entirety. Existing accounts have often detailed what services the state has or has not provided for parents, and particularly mothers, from the point of view of the supply rather than the demand. This book aims to rectify this bias and uncover the experiences of care.

Interviewing people today about their past is not unproblematic. This is particularly true when interviewing adults about their experiences as young children; while people's memories of childhood are often more vivid than later events, they can also misremember. However, the work of oral historians and my own previous research on motherhood has demonstrated that oral history is a particularly suitable methodology for the study of subjective experience.³ The oral history is used here to consider how adults think their childhood experiences affected them throughout their lives; how changing attitudes towards and representations of the care of pre-school children have influenced their memories; and the differences between the accounts of children, parents and other carers. The book seeks to investigate how all those involved in childcare think their experiences have influenced both themselves and others.

Notes

- 1 These include interviews with mothers conducted by the author for a project on motherhood in England between 1945 and 2000 (see A. Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England c. 1945–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 12, note 18) and other oral history collections, such as the Archive of Teacher Memory, University of Cambridge.
- 2 Recordings and transcripts are held by the author.
- 3 See for example, G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); L. Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Davis, *Modern Motherhood*.

Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
LCC	London County Council
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
NCA	National Childminding Association
NEC	National Executive Committee of the Pre-school Playgroups Association
NHS	National Health Service
NNEB	National Nurseries Examination Board
NSA	Nursery School Association
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PLA	Pre-school Learning Alliance
PPA	Pre-school Playgroups Association
RSI	Royal Sanitary Institute
SPPA	Scottish Pre-school Playgroups Association
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WHO	World Health Organization

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Introduction

In the middle of the twentieth century, the question of how to care for the under-fives was a seemingly uncontroversial subject in England; it was assumed that they would be better off at home with mother. Yet, probing beneath this assumption, it becomes clear that the issue was in fact one of intense debate. Arguments against childcare outside the home centred on the fear that separating infants from their mothers caused emotional harm, while its proponents believed it provided children with opportunities for physical, cognitive and social development. Moreover, even if most people agreed that very young children should be at home with mother, until what age this should be was not as clear; was it two, three or five? And then when they reached this age where and by whom should they be looked after – in a day nursery, nursery school or class, by a childminder or in a playgroup? Should care or education be the main goal of such services? What about children who could not be looked after by their mothers; or those children whose home conditions meant that their health would benefit from time spent outside it; or indeed the only child who lacked the company of other children? And of course casting a shadow over all of these debates was the rising rate of female employment. What should be done about the children of working mothers? There were no simple answers to any of these questions. Issues of resources combined with ideological concerns about the respective roles of the state and the family and competing theories of child development to determine the provision of care for the under-fives. A lack of funding for many child welfare schemes meant they could not always meet the aspirations society held. While the second half of the twentieth century saw changing attitudes towards pre-school childcare, these same questions still dominate debates about childcare at the start

of the twenty-first century. Care of the under-fives is, therefore, a valuable area for study because it reveals attitudes towards children, gender relations and the relationship between the family and the state. It lies on the borders between government, charitable and private provision and straddles discourses of health, education and social care.

Childcare in the second half of the twentieth century has been highly politically charged and debated at length among and between the major political parties, the trade union movement, other professional associations and the voluntary sector. It has been the source of competing national and local agendas. It was taken up by the feminist movement as a major campaigning issue. And, of course, it has been picked up by the media – often surrounding moments of moral panic in relation to perceived scandals – and has entered popular debate. However, despite the often fevered debates on the subject and the social and political dynamism of these decades, there was little change in the level of state-provided pre-school childcare. The similarities of governmental attitudes throughout the second half of the twentieth century, despite the different colour of the party in power, are noteworthy. Indeed, writing in the 1970s the psychologist Jack Tizard (who founded the Thomas Coram Research Unit in 1974 and was President of the British Psychological Society during 1975 and 1976) and his colleagues Peter Moss and Jane Perry noted that, ‘The attitudes of governments, irrespective of party, to employed mothers has been in general to discourage them, not through any explicit and elaborated policy, but through failing to provide services geared to the needs of these mothers and neglecting even to discuss these needs.’¹ Hence, the question of childcare reveals larger political aims and agendas at both the local and national governmental level. It also sheds light on inter- and intra-professional debates between and among teachers, nursery nurses, social workers and others. And it says something about attitudes towards the respective roles of men and women, the status of children in society and the borderline between the family and the state.

England in the post-war decades

The decades after the Second World War were a period of significant social change and this resulted in many tensions within and

competing demands upon English families. There were dramatic alterations in women's working lives. While real wage increases and low unemployment rates meant that women's wages were no longer essential to the family economy for some families, women's rates of participation in the labour force were increasing and women were returning to work when their children were at younger ages. The number of women in work in the United Kingdom as a whole rose from 7 million in 1951, to 9 million in 1971, to just over 13 million in 2000, an average growth rate of 1.3 per cent per year.² From 1971 to 2011 the female employment rate rose from 56 to 69 per cent.³ Whereas in 1951 less than a quarter of married women were in the workforce, by 1991 this had increased to half.⁴ At the 1951 census, about one in six of all mothers of dependent children was employed. This rose to 26 per cent, 39 per cent and 47 per cent in the 1961, 1971 and 1981 censuses respectively.⁵ The numbers of mothers with very young children were also rising. The 1951 census 1 per cent sample tables showed that 4.5 per cent of the women with children under one year of age were working.⁶ At the end of the 1970s one in six women returned to employment within six months of having their first baby, rising to one in four at twelve months.⁷ Between 1990 and 2000 the number of mothers with pre-school children in employment increased further, from 41 to 54.4 per cent.⁸

However, at the same time as increasing numbers of mothers were working outside the home, there was also a focus on promoting the family as part of the programme of post-war reconstruction. Both men and women were encouraged to engage with their homes and families in new ways and domesticity was extolled and celebrated.⁹ In other ways, though, the welfare state was transformative. The legislation introduced by the post-war Labour government brought a previously unknown level of health and welfare provision in the form of the Family Allowance Act (1945), the National Insurance Act (1946) and the National Health Service Act which was passed in 1946 (for England and Wales; Scotland and Northern Ireland had separate legislation). The 1944 Education Act had already seen the expansion of secondary education. Coupled with the growing affluence seen in the 1950s as real incomes rose and unemployment remained low, the security brought by the welfare state meant that many families were living lives without precedent. The extensive house-building that took place after the war – both

private and council-built – meant that more families were realising their ambitions to live in a home of their own, often on new estates on the outskirts of both old urban areas and villages.¹⁰ Improved availability, knowledge of and scientific developments in contraceptives meant that couples were better able to control their family size and decide when in their married lives children were born.¹¹ However, these demographic changes had consequences for traditional patterns of childcare. Social and geographical mobility meant that families lived further from the relatives who had traditionally been the principal providers of care when mothers could not.¹²

The lives of young children were changing in other ways, too. In their book about day nurseries, published in 1980, Caroline Garland and Stephanie White noted:

The period since the war has seen dramatic changes in our attitudes towards childhood, and in particular to very young children. On one hand there has been an increase in our knowledge about the relationship between upbringing and emotional well-being of young children, brought about by such people as John Bowlby, Michael Rutter and the Robertsons in the professional field, and reflected more widely by Spock and Hugh Jolly. On the other hand there has also been an increased recognition of the important part that early childhood plays in determining the life-chances of the adult: children entering school at five vary enormously in their general grasp of language, their social and emotional maturity and their capacity to profit from the kind of education our schools have to offer.¹³

The war itself, and evacuation in particular, was crucial in instigating this change, with the wellbeing of children within the family becoming an area of concern. Harry Hendrick argues that the general significance of evacuation was threefold. Firstly, it revealed the destitute circumstances of a substantial minority of children, the continued problem of slum housing and overcrowding, and ‘the attendant problems of verminous conditions, and the lack of toilet and washing facilities’. Secondly, it showed the variability of local authority provision in facilities, such as infant welfare clinics and nursery schools. And thirdly, it stimulated the expansion of statutory provision of health and welfare services.¹⁴

The disruption of war also changed understandings about the impact of family breakdown upon children and the effects of their being brought up away from home. Following the death of Dennis O'Neill at the hands of his foster parents in 1945 two committees

of enquiry were set up: the Clyde Committee for Scotland and the Curtis Committee for England and Wales, under the chairmanship of Dame Myra Curtis. The Curtis Report on children 'deprived of a normal home life' was published the following year and prompted a reappraisal of the care of vulnerable children.¹⁵ Children were now acknowledged as the nation's responsibility. Contemporaries linked emotional and psychological security in children with social stability, and rebuilding the family was seen as part of the reconstruction programme at the end of the war. The findings of the Curtis Report led directly to the 1948 Children Act, whose main principles included a new emphasis on boarding out in preference to residential homes, restoration of children to their natural parents and greater emphasis on adoption.¹⁶ In short, it marked a move in favour of the family environment as the best place to raise children.¹⁷ The act also led to the establishment of local authority children's departments. Consequently, local authorities were given an increased role in a professionalised service for an extended group of children. While previously the churches and voluntary organisations had provided most services, with the establishment of the post-war welfare state, services for children were set up to explicitly meet their needs.¹⁸ Hence, Hendrick has called the act 'a significant piece of child welfare legislation'.¹⁹ The concern with the need to prevent family breakdown was translated into provision of services for the under-fives, with day nursery care being seen as a way to both prevent family breakdown and deal with its consequences.

The 1960s marked a period of further social, cultural and demographic change, encouraged by new legislation, which influenced patterns of family life. After the baby boom of the 1950s and early 1960s, the birth rate began to fall. More couples were offered the opportunity to limit their families with the introduction of the contraceptive pill to Britain in 1961 and the National Health Service (NHS) Family Planning Act of 1967, which allowed doctors to give family planning advice and to prescribe free contraceptives, though initially only to married women. The Abortion Act of the same year allowed the termination of pregnancy if two independent medical practitioners agreed that continuance would cause physical or mental risk to the health of the woman or her existing children. And the 1969 Divorce Reform Act made the 'irretrievable breakdown' of the marriage the sole grounds for divorce, replacing the previous basis of matrimonial offences and the need for a guilty

partner. It allowed couples to divorce if they had been separated for two years if both consented or five years if only one party was in favour. The consequences of these legislative changes, with rising rates of cohabitation, divorce and never-married motherhood, were seen in the years that followed. While marriage remained popular at the end of the twentieth century, non-marriage and singleness were becoming increasingly common, and those marriages that took place often ended in divorce. Reviewing the twentieth century, Jane Lewis has concluded: 'At the beginning of the century the vast majority of people married before they had sex, had their children inside marriage and stayed married. At the end of the century people's family arrangements looked increasingly messy.'²⁰

The history of pre-school childcare services

The piecemeal nature of the services available for the under-fives in England, which was characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century, had been formed over many decades. There had been private nurseries in England since the nineteenth century, often provided by the owners of the factories in which women worked. The Fox Brothers opened a nursery in their cloth mill in Somerset as early as 1835, with a purpose-built building following thirty years later.²¹ There was then a flurry of activity in the middle years of the nineteenth century with middle-class women opening charitable institutions for the children of the respectable working class, inspired by developments in other European countries.²² However, Peter Baldock notes that many of these nurseries, which were not linked to specific workplaces, ran into financial difficulties because they failed to attract sufficient custom. Parents were discouraged by the fees charged and preferred to make use of childminders in their own neighbourhoods.²³ By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, there were increasing efforts to promote both the health and education of young children which consequently affected the attention paid to services for the under-fives.

The 1870 Education Act was an important development. While the decision was made that compulsory education should begin at the age of five (hence, children under five were not covered by the act), many children below the age of five were admitted to schools, with the number of three- and four-year-olds being as high as 43 per cent in 1900.²⁴ However, the role of the elementary school in

providing education for children under five declined during the twentieth century. From 1907, it became the policy of the Board of Education to encourage the exclusion from school of children under five, unless special arrangements could be made for them. Subsequently, the proportion of three- and four-year-olds in school quickly fell to 23 per cent by 1910.²⁵ One effect of this change in policy was to stimulate the foundation of private nursery schools. Rachel and Margaret McMillan were among the pioneers in this field, starting an Open-Air Nursery School and Training Centre in Deptford in 1914. Their efforts were motivated as much by concerns about the physical welfare of the children as their intellectual welfare, and the nursery formed part of a larger project to promote the health of children in the area.²⁶ Other day care projects had similar origins, with the City of Westminster Health Society starting a day nursery in 1927 as part of its programme of health promotion.²⁷ From 1918, it was the Ministry of Health that was responsible, through local authority health departments, for state-provided child day care.²⁸ However, there were also local authority initiatives which were initiated through local education authorities. Manchester City Council opened two nursery schools in Ardwick and Collyhurst in 1915 and in 1920. This was followed by a further 'demonstration' nursery school under the aegis of Mather Training College, which was itself under the city's education committee.²⁹ Such efforts were restricted in the later 1920s and 1930s, though, due to the economic crisis of these years. Consequently, by 1 April 1938 there were just 104 day nurseries in the country providing 4,291 places for children under five; 118 nursery schools providing places for 9,504 children aged two to five; and 159,000 places in public elementary schools for children aged three to five.³⁰

Provision dramatically expanded during the Second World War, however, and by 31 December 1944 there were 789 new nursery classes for children aged two to five with 29,122 places; 1,449 full-time war nurseries with 68,574 places and 106 part-time nurseries providing 3,546 places for children aged two to five.³¹ At the start of the war, many existing nurseries closed as they were in areas at risk of bombing and their charges were evacuated. The wartime expansion initially began in the context of evacuation; a scheme of providing nursery centres in reception areas for evacuated children was championed by Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood and the Nursery School Association (NSA).³² However, it was labour supply

considerations that really drove the dramatic growth in the supply of nurseries, from only 14 in October 1940 to 165 a year later and 1,345 in the summer of 1943.³³ Even so, Vicky Randall argues that the Ministry of Health, still responsible for day nurseries, would have been prepared to rely on widespread informal childminding arrangements to deal with the needs of married women workers. She argues it was the demand from the women themselves, relayed via employers, together with pressure from organised labour that persuaded the government, in the form of the Ministry of Labour, of the need for expanded nursery provision.³⁴ As well as this conflict between the Ministries of Health and Labour, personnel within the Ministry of Labour were also divided on the subject, as Penny Summerfield has shown, demonstrating the controversial nature of state-provided nursery care for women workers.³⁵ The debate also indicates why the wartime expansion was not followed up and consolidated after the war. Instead, central government halved its grant for day nurseries to local authorities, responsibility for the nurseries was handed over to these local authorities and buildings that had been requisitioned for nursery use were returned to their previous uses. Summarising the government's position, Denise Riley concludes that the nurseries were viewed as 'aids to war production and not social services in themselves' and they were also keen that the public should share this view.³⁶

After the war, responsibility for childcare at the level of the national government remained divided between the Ministries of Education and Health. The Ministry of Education was concerned to the extent that the 1944 Education Act required local education authorities to provide nursery schools or classes for children under five, although no guidance was given on how universal this provision should be.³⁷ Consequently the provision of nursery education remained very limited due to other demands on local education budgets. From the late 1950s, most local education authorities introduced part-time provision. Part-time places (in the form of morning or afternoon sessions) were seen as a solution to the restraints on nursery schools and classes in light of the shortage of resources. In 1960, a Ministry of Education Circular³⁸ told local authorities that for reasons of economy the number of under-fives in school should be kept to the 1957 level.³⁹ By the end of the 1970s, some counties, including Oxfordshire, decided to close all their nursery schools and classes.⁴⁰