Time to Get Down to Business? : The Responses of Early Years Practitioners to Entrepreneurial Approaches to Professionalism
Jayne Osgood

Journal of Early Childhood Research 2004 2: 5
DOI: 10.1177/1476718X0421001

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ecr.sagepub.com/content/2/1/5

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Journal of Early Childhood Research can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ecr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://ecr.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://ecr.sagepub.com/content/2/1/5.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Feb 1, 2004
What is This?
time to get down to business?
the responses of early years practitioners to entrepreneurial approaches to professionalism

Jayne Osgood
London Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT
In this article theories of the gendered nature of new managerialism are drawn upon to examine the economic rationale behind educational reform (Trow, 1994) and the marketization and economization (Ozga, 2000) of early years education and childcare services. The author concentrates on the policy attention that the early years and childcare sector has attracted from the New Labour Government since 1998, and the implications of this attention. Through an analysis of the views and experiences of practitioners at the grassroots of early education and childcare it is argued that the application of business approaches is unhelpful and inappropriate. The evidence suggests that the top-down application of a specific policy designed to emphasize and promote new managerialist entrepreneurialism was unwelcome to an overwhelmingly resistant, almost exclusively female, group of practitioners. In conclusion, it is argued that whilst practitioners are committed to heightening their professionalism, the most appropriate means of realizing this is not through a business approach, but rather one which develops and nurtures practitioners' preferred feminized ways of operating, along collaborative lines with an appreciation of the emotional investment and personal sacrifices they make.

KEYWORDS early years practitioners, gender, New Managerialism, policy

early years education policy in England
Under the Conservative Government (1979–97) early years education and childcare provision in the UK received limited budgetary and policy attention
and as a result was largely self-regulated with the notable exception of considerations for the health, safety and wellbeing of children encompassed in the Children Act (Department of Health, 1989). Under the Act, local authorities were given the principal responsibility for co-ordinating and providing services for children in need. This typically fell to social services and teams of under-eights workers (McQuail and Pugh, 1995). Resources were limited and childcare services operated according to neo-liberal market forces (Hammersley, 2000). Annual reviews of education for under-fives found several fundamental problems with childcare provision in the UK in the 1990s: variable quality; high cost; insufficient places; and access to places hampered by poor information (Audit Commission, 1996, 1997).

After their election in 1997, the New Labour Government set out to address these problems by investing large sums of money and tightening the regulatory mechanisms for childcare services. In its National Childcare Strategy announced in 1998, the government outlined its plans for expansion and co-ordination of services. The strategy was central to the government's social inclusion agenda wherein increased childcare places would facilitate greater labour-market participation of parents, thereby reducing poverty and social exclusion. A second strand to the social inclusion agenda in childcare was the creation and expansion of Sure Start programmes across the country; it was envisaged that by providing childcare services and family support through Sure Start to the most needy families, long-term disaffection and educational failure could be prevented. As (Levitas, 1998) has argued, although New Labour Government policy is framed within social inclusion and equality rhetoric, the economic overtones inherent within the government's rationale for overhauling public services (including childcare) are pronounced.

Since the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy, research has shown that childcare services have become more prolific and better co-ordinated (Osgood and Sharp, 2000) with the introduction of local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) and integration of education and social services departments within local authorities. However, recently the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2002) raised concerns that early years and childcare practitioners were failing to meet the ‘childcare challenge’ as set out in their strategy. The DfES believed provision was in danger of becoming unsustainable in the long term, due to a lack of aptitude in financial management. In response to this concern the DfES allocated funding and issued guidance to all local authorities in England to appoint a (mandatory) business support officer to assist and guide Partnerships and providers to meet targets for expansion and sustainability through programmes of business support. This article considers practitioners' responses to the pressure to apply business-like approaches to their styles of
management. In the following section I focus on ways in which educational policy is transmitted to practitioners and argue that early education and childcare professionals are resistant to recent policies which emphasize entrepreneurialism because they consider such developments to be detrimental to the quality of provision.

transmitting policy to practice

Until recently the transmission of policy was widely conceptualized as a linear top-down model with distinct phases of policy-making (see McLaughlin, 1987 and Darling-Hammond, 1990, for further discussion). However, this view is criticized for failing to fully appreciate the contestation involved in policy implementation (Ozga, 2000); rather, it implies that the objectives, content and method of implementation of a policy is unproblematic – this is understood to be a technicist or managerialist view of policy (Blackmore, 1995; Ozga, 2000). There has been considerable criticism of this top-down view of educational policy (Ball, 1990; Bowe et al., 1992) which has arisen from the increasing power of policy to facilitate the ‘steering capacity of the state’ (Blackmore, 1995: 294). Debates about the nature and purpose of educational policy (Ball, 1990; Hammersley, 2000; Ozga, 2000), suggest that policy is a ‘process and not just a product’; that there should be recognition of the ‘action oriented bottom-up perspective’ which sees practitioners as informing and making policy; and that policy should be viewed as a ‘pattern of actions over a period of time’ rather than a specific document (Ham and Hill, 1993: 12–13). This debate indicates that the relationship between policy makers and those working with policies at the grass roots (and therefore how the policy process itself is perceived), has a significant impact upon how particular policies work (Blackmore, 1995). Commentators argue that practitioners’ resistance to accepting policy without questions should not be viewed as pathological or irrational but instead seen to be based upon their substantive knowledge of how the policy may detrimentally affect their professional practice (Blackmore, 1995; Ozga, 2000). I will propose that these arguments resonate with the reactions of early years practitioners (included in recent studies I have undertaken) to the application of interventionist and prescriptive policies requiring a definition of practitioner professionalism, which accepts centralized control and direction (for further discussion of this in relation to teachers see Ozga, 2000).

methodology

I am going to illustrate my arguments drawing on data from two studies, both of which were funded by the DFES to identify and assess factors impinging
upon the sustainability of childcare provision in England. The first of the two studies (Osgood and Stone, 2002) sought to identify the range and nature of business skills held by early years, childcare and playwork providers from different settings. The second study (Osgood, 2003) identified the nature and scope of business support available and assessed the impact business-support programmes had upon the (almost exclusively female) sample of practitioners in terms of attitudinal and behavioural changes towards applying business principles in early years settings.

The first study (Osgood and Stone, 2002) used qualitative methods of data collection including focus group discussions and interviews with 104 practitioners, which were undertaken in September 2001. The subsequent study (Osgood, 2003) also used a combination of qualitative methods including face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, and focus group discussions in five case study authorities. A small number of training events and meetings were observed and documentary analysis of Partnership Strategic and Implementation Plans (which were submitted to the DfES for approval) was undertaken. One hundred and six practitioners participated according to the type of setting they managed or provision they delivered. Twelve local authority officers participated in in-depth interviews in each of the five case study authorities. Fieldwork was conducted in the autumn of 2002. Tables 1 and 2 outline the sample structure for each study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>table 1 sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childminding network co-ordinators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Providers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day nurseries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-schools and playgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childminders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-school clubs and holiday playschemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*source: Osgood and Stone, 2002.*

The composition of the focus group discussions reflected the broader gendered profile of the profession. Each case study comprised between six and nine practitioners and there were only six male participants across the two studies. It is widely accepted that the childcare workforce is primarily female (Cameron et al., 1999 found that 99 percent of childcare workers are female). This was reflected in my research and it should be noted that the men who attended the focus group discussions were not active in delivering
childcare and education provision but were responsible for many of the financial aspects of the setting (treasurer, bookkeeper, etc.) and participated because the research focused on business-related matters.

The four main categories of provision varied slightly between the first and subsequent study. In the initial study, focus groups were conducted bringing together providers from both voluntary- and private-sector day nurseries. The distinction between private- and voluntary-sector providers proved to be an important factor in contrasting cultural and ethical dispositions towards the appropriateness of applying commercial principles to early education and childcare settings. Private-sector providers were more inclined to apply business principles to the management of their settings, while voluntary-sector managers and childminders were generally morally and culturally opposed to the entrepreneurial agenda. For this reason the more recent study separated out voluntary- and private-sector day nursery managers.

The degree of experience practitioners had in terms of managing the financial and administrative aspects of their provision was considered during the research design and providers were recruited with this variable in mind.

The impact of locality was also integrated into the recruitment process; providers from a cross-section of geographical regions (north, south, midlands) and socio-economic locations (inner city, suburban and rural) were included.

All discussions were aided by the use of semi-structured interview schedules and observation guides which were devised with the help and

### Table 2: Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business support officers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead officers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relevant officers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Providers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private day nurseries</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary day nurseries, pre-schools and playgroups</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childminders</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-school clubs and holiday playschemes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Network meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training events</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

guidance of an internal steering group at London Metropolitan University (which included the head of Early Childhood Studies and a Reader in Education). The protocols were then passed to the DfES for comment and appropriate revisions made. The schedules provided opportunities for practitioners to raise issues of importance to them whilst ensuring the interviews remained focused on the aims of the research.

Data from both studies were recorded and verbatim transcripts were systematically analysed using an approach designed to elicit deep insights, motives and opinions from the data. Ritchie and Spencer (1994) provide a useful explanation of this approach. Commentators acknowledge that data collected from qualitative studies are invariably unstructured and unwieldy (see Bassey, 1999; Bell, 1987; Bulmer, 1982). Navigating a way through text-based verbatim transcripts presents unique difficulties to the researcher when seeking to make sense of the data. As such, the ‘framework’ approach outlined by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) is particularly useful to ensure that: the analysis is grounded in the experiences and opinions of the sample; is dynamic and open to change; is systematic and comprehensive; enables easy retrieval; and allows comparative analysis between and within cases. This analytic process involves several distinct yet interrelated stages. It involves a process of sifting, charting and sorting material according to key themes. The distinct stages relate to what the authors refer to as familiarization: identification of a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and finally mapping and interpretation. By adopting this approach, the conclusions and research process are more transparent and accessible to scrutiny (see Bulmer, 1982 and Mortimore, 2000 for further discussion).

An analysis of the findings is fully reported in this article. I draw on the data from two studies to illustrate the tensions between recent education policy (which encourages individualistic and competitive entrepreneurialism) and the behaviour and attitudes of early education and childcare practitioners (which typically includes collaboration, community orientation, and personal commitment and sacrifice).

**analysis of the findings**

**the collaborative venture**

The New Labour Government and its new managerialist emphasis on competitive individualism as a means to ensure that early education and childcare services remained viable and sustainable ran counter to the views and experiences of participants in both studies. The overwhelming majority of practitioners felt business-like approaches to management were inappropriate in childcare and instead emphasized the importance of collaboration and mutual support as their preferred way of operating. Interview data from both
studies revealed that managers of voluntary sector provision proactively encouraged and instilled collaboration within and between settings. For example, over half the voluntary day nursery managers included in the studies demonstrated their commitment to supporting other providers in the voluntary sector and ensured providers were empowered by setting up local interest groups and by becoming actively involved in local decision-making mechanisms, including local EYDCPs. This commitment to collaboration was not just personal but also evident institutionally within many of the voluntary-sector settings. The sentiments in the following quote was shared by the majority of voluntary sector providers:

I’m sure the fact we’re all girls together makes the nursery a success, we naturally warm to working in close teams, we support and nurture each other and are able to face challenges together. They have opportunities to shape the direction of the nursery. One or two of the girls sit on the management committee and if a committee member makes a suggestion that is unworkable we encourage the girls to speak out, and they do. [Voluntary Day Nursery Manager]

Similar camaraderie was evident amongst childminders. Despite being well documented as a potentially isolating career (Mooney et al., 2001; Clyde and Rodd, 1994), the data reveal enthusiastic commitment to developing local support mechanisms. Like the voluntary-sector providers, childminders worked non-competitively, and despite lacking a shared institutional identity they developed ways to feel part of a collective, as this quote demonstrates:

We are quite close, we often meet and rely on each other really. We organize fortnightly coffee mornings when we all meet and talk over issues and difficulties. We phone each other all the time and see each other at the school gates everyday. We all know how important it is, especially where we live, you could so easily be left on your own to guess whether what you’re doing is right. [Childminder]

The majority of the older, more experienced childminders were committed to supporting new recruits and emphasizing the collaborative, localized nature of their practice:

Really they are our colleagues, they could well be about to make the same mistakes we have and we could advise them . . . it’s quite easy to seem invisible as a childminder because your work is home-based. [Childminder]

When considering the most appropriate approaches to safeguarding sustainability of provision the majority of childminders emphasized the importance of localized and collective decision making, as this childminder explained when discussing setting fees:

If you work very cheaply then the other girls won’t be very impressed if you devalue the service, and if you’re very expensive then you’ll be lucky to work at all – it’s a fine balance and it has to be sorted out locally with the other girls. [Childminder]
All childminders described the value of mutual support and as such most were part of local networks and support groups. This is not to suggest that all childminders have the same opportunities to work collaboratively, the isolating and therefore potentially exploitative dangers of being outside such collaborative mechanisms (Mooney et al., 2001) were experienced by a small minority of the participants. The pitfalls of exclusion from collective arrangements are described here:

Childminding is not a competitive business but too often childminders lack the confidence to raise their fees, they need to do it together, but the very nature of childminding means some are isolated and therefore exploited. [Childminding Development Worker]

A social justice analysis of the data suggests that such commitments to collaboration and collective behaviour can be considered one of the major strengths associated with practitioners in the early years. By extending mutual support practitioners operated in socially responsible ways and demonstrated an ethic of care to fellow practitioners to protect them from the potential dangers of the market – isolation and exploitation stemming from competitive practices.

**personal commitments to professionalism**

The studies revealed evidence of the enormous commitment practitioners make to the profession and the personal sacrifices they are willing to make. Despite employment patterns characterized by low pay, long hours, and an absence of benefits such as paid leave, practitioners remained enthusiastically committed to early education and childcare. Research suggests that in caring occupations and professions acceptance of low pay is taken as a sign of genuine commitment to caring for others (Frykholm and Cartmel, 1993). Practitioners included in my research concurred with this view.

Approximately a third of the managers from small independent nurseries described a range of personal financial sacrifices they made, such as not taking a salary and/or re-mortgaging their family homes to fund the upkeep or expansion of their nurseries. The heightened attention and direction that early education providers have received from politicians, the media and via policy has placed untold pressure upon practitioners, yet they continue to invest huge energy and commitment to the profession.

Of the 202 participants included in the studies the majority had entered the workforce when they become mothers because it fitted conveniently around their own domestic responsibilities. My studies reveal that the early education and childcare workforce increasingly includes middle-class women – approximately 8 percent of participants were drawn from occupations with a professional status and had taken a ‘career break.’ These middle-class women
were some of the most vocal about the unacceptable status that childcare has in the UK and the need to change the situation using a bottom-up approach:

It's wholly unacceptable that we should be viewed the way that we are . . . public perception of working with young children is dreadful, we have to educate parents and the general public to fully appreciate the enormity of the task we have taken on . . . the adverts on TV don't help matters . . . implying working in childcare is merely fun is undervaluing our work and legitimating the low pay . . . we have to change the world view of us. [Childminder]

Training and gaining qualifications were seen to be effective means of raising the status of the profession. Practitioners were committed to enhancing their professionalism, developing organizational skills and working more efficiently, but interest in and attendance at training designed to improve business skills was poor, particularly amongst childminders and voluntary-sector providers. Most practitioners expressed fears that applying business principles would erode the caring and personal nature of the provision they extended to parents. As Leathwood (2000) argues, the ethic of care and approaches to management that female managers tend to adopt can be regarded as oppositional discourses to the masculinist managerialism, which in the context of this discussion, is intrinsically embedded in government policy designed to promote entrepreneurialism. The following quote illustrates one respondent's resistance to masculinist managerialism:

We don't want some businessman from the commercial world coming in and telling us that we have to do things his way. We pride ourselves on providing a professional care service and that would be under threat. Seeing kids as commodities is just not a priority for us. [Voluntary Pre-School Supervisor]

Practitioners were heavily involved in a range of training, much of which they funded personally. They reported feeling overwhelmed by the wealth of top-down policies introduced in the past five years including: requirements to deliver the new foundation curriculum; Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections; and meeting a plethora of staff development requirements. This resulted in an increased administrative burden and consequently a seemingly never-ending intensified workload, which detracted from direct human contact with children and staff. The following quote was typical of the reactions to questions about the changing nature of childcare following policy reform:

I work until 9.30 every evening, I work all the hours God gives on admin, curriculum planning, returns for the NEG, researching other sources of funding, organizing training for me and the girls, it's relentless but the only way to get it all done is take it home with me . . . I reckon I must spend 50 hours on all that, but believe you me I'd rather be spending my time with the kids, hands-on you know, but with the rate of change that just ain't possible. [Voluntary Day Nursery and Out of School Club Manager]
This situation combined with the widespread moral objections to entre-
preneurialism rendered developing business skills a low priority. The vast
majority of practitioners were not convinced that developing business skills
would enhance their professionalism, but rather that status and prestige
would improve by developing greater self-confidence, a view widely
supported by commentators in this field (Rodd, 1997 and Pascal, 1992,
amongst others). Childminders believed they faced the biggest challenge
when seeking to change public perceptions:

We have always been the Cinderella of childcare but we have to believe in
ourselves and recognize that we are not only doing it because we like to be with
children. It's a career and there is a pathway to tread, levels of qualifications to
achieve and ways to conduct ourselves, in adopting a more professional approach
we can improve our sense of self worth. [Childminder]

The emphasis on caring was a prevalent theme to emerge from the data. As
discussed widely amongst feminist academics, an ethic of care and
commitment to emotional labour can all too readily be denigrated in an
instrumentalist masculinist culture as irrelevant and time-consuming when
new managerialism demands attention be paid to performativity and
prioritizing finance above education (Acker, 1998; Leathwood, 2000; Hughes,
2000). Across both of my studies practitioners from all sectors believed that
their views and commitment to caring for each other; the local community;
and parents and children were all 'steam rolled' by reforms that favoured
rationality, commercialism and measurable outcomes.

childcare in the community

Central to the government's commitment to tackle child poverty, disaffection
and neighbourhood degeneration, is the social inclusion agenda referred to
earlier in this article. The government has made public its commitment to
improve public services through joined-up service delivery and a focus on
localized, community-based ventures such as Education Action Zones, and
more specific to the early years – Sure Start Programmes and the
Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (Centre for Public Services, 2003). These
developments emphasize the importance of developing local communities yet
evidence from my studies show that practitioners consider the provision they
extend to their local communities fulfils the aims of the social inclusion
agenda and fosters community cohesion. All practitioners considered
themselves as actively contributing to the cohesion and strength of local
communities. Voluntary playgroups, pre-schools and nurseries often rely on
the voluntary contribution of mothers to help run the provision and commit-
tee members to offer managerial support. By instilling more entrepreneurial
approaches managers feared that the core function childcare centres play in
fostering community spirit would be compromised. Providers failed to see how business-like approaches could enhance their provision since voluntary-sector provision is in most cases full or oversubscribed; parents are keen to enrol children in voluntary-sector provision because the ethos and cultural values upon which the provision is founded is aligned with their own. Practitioners believed that approaches designed to promote competition and individualism would repel such parents as the service on offer would be qualitatively different and founded upon a counter ideological premise. The importance of community-orientated provision was a recurring theme in the data:

Our parents are as committed as we are to fostering community spirit. They want their children to go somewhere that promotes the same values they believe in. That is the key to our success, sharing the same beliefs as the parents and instilling community values into the children. [Voluntary Day Nursery Manager]

For me it was about putting something back into the community, the love of children, the love of the early years and the need to ensure families stay together. [Voluntary Playgroup Leader]

Committees are made up of parents, grandparents, and other older people in the community who give of their time and in return get satisfaction back I think . . . at the end of the day it's just as important to them as it is to us . . . you know it's at the heart of village life really. [Voluntary Day Nursery Manager]

It could be argued that the new managerialist emphasis on competitive entrepreneurialism represents an ideological threat to the collaborative, community-orientated practice that many of the women in my studies described.

**reactions to government policy on the ground**

Without exception, all practitioners included in the studies believed that the business approach the DfES sought to instil, through assessing their business skills and through introducing local programmes of business support, was based upon commercial and competitive principles. With the exception of managers of larger private-sector day nurseries, commercialism and competitiveness ran counter to the beliefs and practices most early education and childcare practitioners embraced.

Voluntary-sector providers and childminders were the primary target audience for business support as both the DfES and local authorities believed them to have the least developed commercial business skills and an unhealthy reliance upon grants and fundraising activities. However, the data show that these practitioners operate according to alternative approaches which maximize collaboration. The overriding emphasis on developing commercial aptitude inherent within new managerialist policies fail to take
into account, or value, alternative skills and creative practices. When asked about approaches to strategic business planning and methods used to acquire funds, this participant highlighted her ability to approach financial matters flexibly:

I've always had a clear picture in my mind of where I see things going, but a lot of the time you're reacting to a very quickly changing situation and you'll suddenly discover that a pot of money is no longer available, or an organization will change its funding criteria. So although you might have a vision, both short and long term, you have to work pragmatically. In terms of the broader vision you're always following funds and that is ever changing terrain. [Voluntary Day Nursery Manager]

The data show that private-sector nursery managers, whilst satisfying the government agenda for more commercial approaches, tended to take an insular and defensive view of their business interests and were sceptical about sharing practice for fear of losing a competitive edge over other providers. As a result of this fear most managers from the private sector actively excluded themselves from local networks and cluster groups:

It's difficult though because at the end of the day you're all in competition with each other, so sitting on these things would be like liaising with the competition, you wouldn't want to let slip or tell others about difficult times or they might capitalize on your problems. [Private Day Nursery Manager]

In addition to the dangers of competition, respondents universally alluded to other problems associated with working in entrepreneurial ways; the sense of isolation was considered a very real issue. Interestingly, the focus group discussions were the first time that many private-sector managers from small catchment areas had met and despite the concerns about competition many exchanged contact details and were making arrangements to meet in the future. Nevertheless managers in the private sector felt that a tension emerged regarding entrepreneurialism running counter to the generally collaborative and community-based culture of childcare. This was particularly the case for 13 managers (across the two studies) that independently-owned their day nurseries. The insular and competitive behaviour they felt compelled to adhere to sat uncomfortably with the commitment to nurturing children. They were resistant to viewing children as financial commodities but this became inevitable when seeking to make a profit.

Working competitively also created practical challenges for the private sector; the majority described their inability to pay staff more than the minimum wage, which lead to inevitable recruitment and retention problems. As other research has shown (Colley, 2003), private day nurseries tend to employ nursery nurses fresh from college. College leavers are particularly attractive to private nurseries because they have the requisite qualifications but are financially more viable because of their relative practical
inexperience. Despite combating recruitment difficulties by adopting this policy it was not without disadvantages, the following quote received nods of affirmation during a focus group with private-sector managers:

Some of these young girls fresh out of college are so green, our parents have made it plain they have confidence in older assistants, especially when they are mothers as well. [Private Day Nursery Manager]

Yet market forces and maintaining a competitive edge meant that private-sector nurseries struggled to attract more mature and practically experienced staff due to relatively inflexible working patterns, long hours, poor pay and fewer opportunities to exercise professional autonomy. Meanwhile, voluntary-sector providers, whilst similarly unable to provide ‘attractive career packages’ in financial and Human Resource (HR) terms, successfully recruited and retained staff by virtue of the generally collaborative and community-spirited cultures. The appropriateness of new managerialist approaches to managing childcare settings, which exaggerate rationality, measurability, and competition (Trow, 1994) is called into question when analysing the attitudes and preferences of childcare managers and the strength of counter cultures.

The impetus for the business skills agenda described in this article stemmed from a concern on the part of the DfES about the ability of providers to remain viable, however there was clear evidence of practitioners sustaining considerable careers (over 20 years in many cases) in the same setting. Despite the concerns raised by the DfES and some local authorities about grant reliance, the ability to creatively and successfully apply to a wide range of grant-awarding organizations was an important skill for many voluntary-sector providers:

I’ve been doing it for 22 years and I’m afraid it’s just the school of hard knocks. I’m completely self-taught. There are buttons you need to press, knowing what they are is very useful because we all believe our nurseries are the bees knees, we hype it up but we’re not necessarily pressing the right buttons with those funders, you become good at knowing where to put the right sentence and that will make all the difference. Is there training to teach you that? [Voluntary Day Nursery Manager]

Others echoed the question raised by the above respondent. The findings demonstrate that the vast majority of voluntary-sector providers were keen to attend training that might enhance their ability to secure grant funding, but this was often unavailable, instead providers were offered training and support that emphasized commercial approaches with a focus on profit-making. The new managerialist emphasis on business approaches demonstrates an apparent lack of appreciation for voluntary-sector providers’ preferred ways and past success in generating funds to remain sustainable; the entrepreneurial agenda overshadowed alternative approaches to the dismay and frustration of providers. Only 5 percent of respondents attended
business skills training where they had their worst suspicions realized and as a result were further opposed to the notion of commerce in childcare:

I got the impression she was trying to push business and profits and a hardnosed approach. I'm afraid business and childcare is a conflict of interest . . . business requires you to make money out of children. When a child becomes a commodity you're not meeting that child's needs and personally that's not a road I'm prepared to go down. [Voluntary Day Nursery Manager]

(passive) resistance to new managerialism

There was clear evidence of resistance to the government's perceived need to adopt more commercial approaches in early education and childcare. The underlying cultural resistance to adopting business-like approaches to managing provision was most forcefully voiced by voluntary-sector providers and childminders who felt commitment to enhancing child development and supporting local communities was more important and valuable than the need to make profits. The majority shared the view that if more commercial approaches were adopted the quality of provision would suffer as a consequence. Despite the resistance and protestations against the entrepreneurial agenda there was a sense of fatalistic resignation, providers felt that policy developments, however unwelcome and incompatible with their own motivations and commitments to childcare, were imposed and resistance was futile:

I'm bogged down in the office most of the day, it's almost impossible to balance everything. I resent not having enough time to spend with the girls and the kids. But I guess that it is bound to happen, although we are coming from a certain perspective: commitment to the local community and a voluntary effort; there does come a point when you are pushed in directions you don’t want to go but you have to if you’re going to survive. [Voluntary Playgroup Leader]

This sense of powerlessness against the imposition of top-down policy implementation was widespread. Despite frustration and disquiet about the inappropriateness of various policy developments in the early years, most notably the new entrepreneurial agenda, providers tended to feel unable to resist and therefore resignedly accepted that in the fullness of time, they would have to either adopt more business-like approaches or alternatively leave the profession altogether. As others have argued 'the ethic of care can serve to discursively disrupt masculinist new managerialism and constitute an oppositional discourse' (Acker, 1995: 22). Yet despite the widespread reference to an ethic of care, practitioners felt powerless in the wider policy context.
Based on an analysis of the findings from my two studies, I would argue that the new managerialist entrepreneurial agenda, which places the emphasis on profit-making and competition above an ethic of care is inappropriate to early education and childcare practitioners. The data show that the focus on developing individualistic and entrepreneurial skills akin to those found in corporate organizations, which as (Acker, 1992) highlights, have tended to be defined as lean, mean, aggressive and ‘rational’ (traditionally masculine traits), is misplaced in the female and feminized world of early education and childcare. The characteristics associated with early education and childcare include empathy, support, collaboration and care, all metaphors of femininity (Halford et al., 1997). Such characteristics are in polarity to the new managerialist masculinized demands for ‘rationality’ and performativity, which run counter to belief systems and values that practitioners hold. The personal and emotional investments that providers make to nurturing and safeguarding children and contributing to the health of local communities are made for altruistic reasons. The almost exclusively female sample of early education and childcare managers articulated an awareness and resistance to (masculinized, new managerialist) policies, which emphasized entrepreneurialism in favour of an ethic of care.

There are obvious parallels between early education and childcare professionals and primary school teachers, not just in the gendered composition of the workforces (Hutchings, 2002) but in the dispositions and commitments of practitioners. In both, the concept of caring is connected with discourses of nature, ethics and mothering (Vogt, 2002). When discussing primary school teachers (Nias, 1999) highlighted the importance of personal investment, commitment and motivation related to gender and a culture of care characterized by: affectivity; responsibility for others; self-sacrifice; and over-conscientiousness. Research in this area has shown that women teachers are more likely to engage and support reforms which emphasize the caring role in teaching (Hubbard and Datnow, 2000) which resonates with the findings presented here about early education practitioners. The emphasis on caring has been found to be associated with un/low-paid work performed by less academically successful working-class women (Skeggs, 1997). In this vein recent concerns have been raised about the changing composition of the childcare workforce:

The value attached to employment in the childcare sector needs to be radically improved . . . there are many reasons for questioning whether a workforce based on low levels of formal education, training and pay is sustainable or desirable. Recruitment and retention is at crisis point. The supply of potential workers is falling as levels of education amongst young women improve. With higher
qualifications as well as wider range of job opportunities, most offering better pay and conditions, young women who in the past may have worked in a nursery, now have more career paths open to them that are viewed as better paid and more desirable. Evidence is beginning to emerge that sustainability of services not only hangs on adequate funding, but also the ability to attract and retain appropriate staff. (Burke et al., 2002: 12)

Here, problems associated with early education and childcare services are squarely placed with the individuals that make up the workforce. Evidence from my research reveals that it is not exclusively ‘young women’ or those with ‘low levels of education’ that work in early years. Instead the workforce comprises a diverse range (in terms of age, experience, qualifications, professional background) of committed and enthusiastic women engaged in widespread training, endeavouring to enhance their professionalism whilst maintaining integrity and an ethic of care. I would further argue that the ‘recruitment and retention crisis’ might have more to do with the unwelcome demands of new managerialist policies, which seek to erode professional autonomy, than simply the attractiveness of alternative ‘career paths’. As others have argued (Leathwood, 2000; Ozga, 2000) in the new managerialist context both the discourses of professionalism and caring can be dismissed as outdated and irrelevant in favour of achieving individualistic self-sufficiency. An analysis of the data from my studies has demonstrated women are inclined to feel powerless to resist policies they consider inappropriate and damaging to the nature and purpose of the service they provide. The female and feminized arena of early education and childcare is particularly susceptible to dogmatic policy reform. Jill Blackmore usefully illustrates the compromised position of women in a policy context:

Women’s ‘propensity’ for more democratic modes of decision-making, their emotional management skills derived out of their familial and pedagogic experiences, and their emphasis on curriculum and student welfare is an exploitable resource for new styles of management. [Blackmore, 1995: 49]

There is a danger that in a time of rapid and distinctive policy reform early education and childcare services will (further) undergo a top-down transformation with an emphasis on efficiency, perfomativity and technicist practice (see Hammersley, 2000; Ozga, 2000) at the expense of community-focused, collaborative, and caring practice. Pascal stressed that the ability of educators to be influential is dependent upon self-perception and argues that too often they are ‘passive recipients of others’ actions’ (1992: 48). Rodd (1997) goes further to argue that by learning to become empowered, educators can develop into intrinsically motivated, responsible and independent professionals, confident to take risks, engage in collaborative ventures and undertake reflective self-evaluation. She argues that empowerment is possible through learning, and that from a new concept of professionalization
educarers can influence policies and create change rather than ignoring or abrogating responsibility to others to undertake on their behalf. These arguments resonate with the views and attitudes of respondents in my studies, especially voluntary-sector providers and childminders. Despite feeling powerless and therefore resignedly and resentfully accepting reforms to which they felt opposed, there was nevertheless strong evidence of a commitment to heighten professionalism and promote collaborative, socially responsible practice.

It is interesting to note that some of the most successful childcare provision in the country, heralded as ‘excellence centres’, began life as voluntary-sector provision (for example, Gamesley Pre-school Centre, in Derbyshire, and Sheffield Children's Centre). The centres have continued to maintain their ethos and commitment to collaborative and co-operative working practices but have caught the attention and financial backing of the government because they were seen to have the potential to successfully fulfil many facets of the social inclusion agenda and the National Childcare Strategy – namely that they foster greater neighbourhood cohesion, provide good quality, affordable childcare and additional support to parents, and are sustainable. Similarly, the government is extending its support to ‘new mutual models for childcare’, which build on the long histories of community-based childcare services and co-operatives in the UK, the USA and Europe and run alongside the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (Burke et al., 2002). However, the investment into these alternative and targeted developments are overshadowed both financially and ideologically by the new managerialist emphasis on entrepreneurialism. In 2002, the government announced that a national business support programme, with a budget of £6 million, was to be launched (Burke et al., 2002); clear evidence of the continued pursuance of the entrepreneurial agenda, despite research evidence (Osgood, 2003; Osgood and Stone, 2002) indicating entrepreneurial approaches were likely to be met with resistance and considered inappropriate. The government nevertheless regard this widespread application of entrepreneurial approaches to childcare settings as a means of improving sustainability.

**Conclusion**

It is more likely that the recruitment and retention crisis will worsen as practitioners resist the new managerialist agenda by ‘voting with their feet’. The findings presented here raise the question: shouldn't all providers have the freedom (and support) to operate according to the principles and morals that they value, rather than feel compelled to apply commercial business principles, develop competitive behaviour, and risk the danger of eroding the intrinsic qualities of early education and childcare providers in England? The
early education and childcare workforce, as this research has shown, is made up of women committed to and passionate about what they do and eager to heighten their professionalism and status, whilst maintaining that local communities and the well-being and development of children are of paramount importance. A tension emerges between the social inclusion agenda and the new managerialist agenda; whereby the former promotes a commitment to strengthening local communities and the latter encourages competitive individualism. It is clear that the New Labour Government sees an increased role for the private sector (and entrepreneurial approaches in the state and voluntary sectors) in the financing and delivery of education as a means of meeting its objectives. As the Centre for Public Services argues:

To the right-wing and to business, education serves the purpose of producing pliant workers and consumers. This is not a rejection or ignorance of the social role of education but a manifestation of their [the Government] conception of what society is: a collection of individuals following their own interests. (Centre for Public Services, 2003: 12)

Recent policy developments may serve to create a tiered system of provision, whereby early excellence centres and ‘new mutual models of childcare’ will be supported and encouraged to operate in collaborative, co-operative and community-orientated ways, whilst the remaining (majority) of provision operates according to commercial principles which by their very nature promote individualism. In conclusion, I would argue that the government might wish to support and encourage more widespread collaborative styles of management amongst childcare professionals. Such an approach would undoubtedly require higher state subsidies (most likely from taxation) but that this would be a worthwhile (and justifiable) investment and bring the status of early education and childcare provision in England to the same level as other EU countries.

acknowledgement

The author would like to extend her thanks to Louise Archer for her support and encouragement throughout the writing of this article.

notes

1. In April 2001 the DfES allocated funding and provided guidance to all local authorities to appoint a Business Support Officer (BSO). The post was mandatory and the job description issued by DfES indicated that BSOs would be expected to have multiple responsibilities including: hands-on support to providers; a strategic role within the Partnership; and core role in securing funds, accountability and monitoring. The case study authorities invested a considerable time in deciding how a BSO could be integrated into existing structures; as a consequence the business support programmes were in their infancy when the research was conducted (August and September 2002). Therefore providers were asked about the
notion of business support, rather than their experiences of it because only a very small proportion received business support/training.

references


23

correspondence

Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE), London Metropolitan University, 166–220 Holloway Road, London, N7 8DB.
[email: j.osgood@londonmet.ac.uk]