what are nurseries for? : the concept of primary task and its application in differentiating roles and tasks in nurseries
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What is This?
what are nurseries for?

the concept of primary task and its application in differentiating roles and tasks in nurseries

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ABSTRACT

Communities in the UK are seeing a sustained shift in the balance of care of babies and the youngest children from families to nurseries, with a particular emphasis being placed on early learning. Yet a basic question of whether nurseries should be modelled on the intimacy and spontaneity of family interactions or the more professional and planned interactions of school has remained largely unaddressed. The assumption has been that the multiple tasks now expected of nursery, including education, child care, health promotion, family support and child protection, can be integrated together, and much attention has been given to this. Much less attention has been given to the way different staff respond to these different conceptions of roles and tasks and how they interact with the personal and professional priorities and concerns of the staff themselves.

Using the conceptual framework of ‘primary task’ taken from the organization studies literature, the article explores the interplay of these different and competing tasks through an intensive nursery case study. The article concludes that recognition and understanding of both professional and personal tasks and how they align or conflict is important to our understanding of the behaviours and responses of children and adults in the nursery system.

ABSTRACT

nursery, organization, practitioner experience, primary task

introduction – what are nurseries for?

The role of nurseries within different national, international and cultural contexts has been fiercely debated by many writers (for example, Tobin et al., 1989; McGurk et al., 1993; Penn 1997; Rose, 1999; Moss 2001; Rayna, 2004). These
writers have investigated the way the roles of nurseries are shaped by the concerns and priorities of the societies and cultures within which they are located (for example, to keep children safe so that parents can work, to replicate the intimacy of family interactions, to reproduce cultural values, or to educate and socialize children to enhance development or counter inequality).

The question at the heart of this literature concerns how social environments for young children should be conceptually and relationally constructed. In relation to the daily roles and tasks of nursery, this is a question of professional practice, but it is embedded within wider questions of cultural imperative and social policy. Within the particular context of the UK, three aspects of the way in which social policy has evolved have been influential in the construction of roles and tasks. I briefly review these in order to illustrate the diversity and complexity of tasks nurseries have to undertake and reconcile, before turning to the concept of ‘primary task’.

First, historically, most nursery provision has evolved within three different administrative and legislative contexts, education, child protection and privately-funded child care for working parents.

Since the mid 1970s, UK governments have acted to bring together these three contexts and their associated tasks (education, family support and child care), and to promote a holistic approach to children and families (Pugh and McQuail, 1995). However, as Pugh and McQuail concluded, the resolution of tensions between different tasks and professional disciplines would always be dependent upon the quality of relationships that could be nurtured between them as well as on organizational structure (1995: 16).

Second, in the particular UK context, social policy debate about the role and tasks of nurseries has often been accompanied by public and professional anxiety about whether nursery may be harmful to young children (Leach, 1997; What About the Children?, 2006).

There is a broad research consensus that nursery experience is not automatically harmful for children, subject to close staff–child interactions (Mooney and Munton, 1997; Melhuish, 2004) but less agreement about the effects on children under the age of 18 months (Rutter, 1995; Stanley et al., 2006). This consensus has been supported by official endorsement of attachment relationships in nurseries, Department of Education and Skills (DfES, 2002; DfES/Department for Work and Pensions, 2006; DfES, 2006).

Dahlberg et al. (1999: 81–82) have argued that this emphasis on attachment relationships is a rationalization by society of a conflict rooted in the ideal of the nuclear family. For example, a core task that society requires of nurseries is to care for children so that both parents are free to participate in the labour market. This conflicts with society's anxiety about the impact on young children of non-familial care. Dahlberg et al. argue that society seeks to resolve this unnecessary
Elfer what are nurseries for?

perception of conflict, by making nursery like the family and modelling staff-child interactions on parent child interactions in families.

Third, the UK government has given political priority to education with the roles and tasks of nurseries directed at defined learning outcomes (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000). Anxiety about the over-formalization of early learning has been reinforced by the publication of the draft Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES, 2006) and described as part of the ‘schoolification of early childhood education’ (Bennett, 2006). There is a striking contrast between this conception of nursery (as a school) and the one discussed earlier (as a substitute home) and between the different tasks and roles arising from these different conceptions.

A different approach from the way in which the roles and tasks of nurseries might be constructed has been taken by writers focusing on the perspectives of individual practitioners. These writers have examined the way in which practitioners construct their roles based partly upon perceptions of professional identity and partly upon what is personally manageable for them.

For example, Hopkins (1988) has shown how staff may construct their daily tasks so as to avoid attachment. This study reported that practitioners did this for several reasons including fear of painful feelings for themselves and the children when attachments formed and separation inevitably followed. More recently, others have critically addressed the manner in which nursery practitioners personally construct nursery tasks, particularly emotional interactions with children, in a way that is influenced by human internal psychological structures of strength and vulnerability, as well as external social structures and inequalities (Colley, 2006; Manning-Morton, 2006). These writers have argued that much more respectful attention should be paid to what are often highly personalized perceptions of children and child-interaction tasks and this should be seen as a legitimate part of professional discussion and reflection.

It seems important that these social, professional and personal constructions of tasks and their interplay should be as clearly understood as possible. I therefore now turn to the organizational studies literature to introduce the concept of primary task and to consider how it may assist our understanding of the roles and tasks of nursery.

the concept of primary task

The concept of ‘primary task’ was introduced by Ken Rice (1958), one of a group of social scientists working at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations (TIHR). The TIHR was particularly concerned with the experiences of employees in industry and their psychological experience of, and behaviours within, any kind of work organization. They drew too on the concept of a ‘socio-technical system’,
significant because of its recognition that any productive system needed to attend to both a technical process of production and a human organization process that related the efforts and experiences of individual employees together and towards the production task.

Rice used the term ‘primary task’ to refer to the task that an organization must accomplish successfully, beyond all others, if it is to survive. For example, the primary task of any commercial organization is to make a profit whilst the primary task of a public organization is to provide a service. Rice (1963) was quick to acknowledge the limitations of the term given that all organizations have to combine multiple tasks. However, he retained the word ‘primary’ to emphasize the way in which, both overall and in the immediate moment, an organization must prioritize one task over another. The concept is then useful in showing how primary tasks may fundamentally conflict, for example those of a prison to be punitive, secure and rehabilitative. It is also useful in showing how primary tasks may need to change from moment to moment as well as over time, for example when theatre staff in a teaching hospital in one moment need to prioritize a procedure with the patient whilst in the next minutes, be able to move to prioritize a teaching or demonstration task. With both these overall and moment-to-moment perspectives in mind, it is easy to see the tensions arising that may be inherent in differing external expectations of a nursery, between practitioners generally and those with commercial or political responsibility for nursery provision and indeed between practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds.

The power of the combined concepts of ‘primary task’ and ‘socio technical system’ lies in the linking of the detailed tasks that an organization needs to undertake and with changing degrees of priority, with the subjective experience of the individual or group of staff members undertaking these tasks. Rice refers to this subjective experience as comprising the satisfactions and frustrations, joyfulness and painfulness of work experience. For each employee, these experiences will arise from:

- the direct tasks and activities she or he is asked to undertake;
- interactions with the group of immediate colleagues working on similar tasks; and
- interactions between this group and groups of colleagues in other parts of the organization.

For example, a worker engaged in routine ‘conveyor belt’ type tasks may have little direct work satisfaction and may seek this instead in social interaction with others working on the conveyor belt. In the context of nurseries, this focuses attention on the balance of work satisfaction between direct interactions with
children and interactions with other nursery staff. In a nursery where interactions with children are characterized as mainly routine physical care ‘conveyor belt' type tasks, the pressure on staff to seek social interactions instead with other staff members may be very high.

Building on the work of Rice and Miller, Lawrence has shown how the concept of ‘primary task’ can be conceptualized into three subtasks (Lawrence cited in Roberts, 1994: 30). Thus:

- **Normative** primary tasks are those official tasks declared by an organization in its mission and values statements and in policy and procedural documentation.
- **Existential** primary tasks are those which staff believe matter, which they value and have meaning for them.
- **Phenomenal** primary tasks are those that might be inferred from actual behaviours but of which staff may not be consciously aware.

Readers may be quick to recognize the distinction between the first two of these. The third may be less familiar but refers to activities which can be best understood as expressing an experience of task conflicts: for example, a practitioner who makes overly familiar relationships with children or parents (conflicting with the task of maintaining some professional distance) or the practitioner who avoids interactions with children, prioritizing instead hygiene, tidying or administrative tasks (conflicting with the task of emotional responsiveness).

How might the concept of primary task, with its three sub tasks, be applied to the nursery situation? I apply the concept to an intensive case study of a nursery addressing three research questions:

- What do nursery staff describe as their primary tasks?
- To what extent is there convergence between these descriptions of tasks and the tasks that are prioritized day to day?
- How do the systems and practices within the nursery organization assist staff reconcile differing tasks?

**methodology**

The data reported in this article focus on the young baby room (3 months to 12 months) of a private nursery. A case study design was chosen for two principle reasons:

(a) that case studies are best suited to gathering in-depth and holistic data about organizational goals and systems and their interaction with individuals and networks of people;
that case studies allow sufficient time to develop trust in the research relationship so that staff feel more confidence to talk about their personal reactions and responses to the work of the nursery.

In the qualitative methodology literature, there are frequent and common references to the strengths and limitations of case study design. For example, the case study is seen as having the capacity to ‘get below the surfaces offered by one method of data collection on one element of the field in order to achieve some purchase on the complexities of social worlds’ (Edwards, 2001: 126). Edwards however acknowledges that ‘most writers urge considerable caution about generalization...’. She also refers to the problem of boundaries in case study design.

This general view of the limitations of case studies has been strongly challenged by Flyvbjerg (2001: 66). He cites five criticisms of case studies:

- that general knowledge is more valuable than context dependent knowledge;
- that it is not possible to generalize from case studies;
- that they are limited to generating rather than testing hypotheses;
- that they build in a researcher bias towards verification of original beliefs;
- that they are difficult to use to generate theory.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on just two of the above points: boundary issues and verification bias.

Edwards describes the difficulty of drawing the boundaries of a case study when the case, as a social system itself, interacts with many other proximal systems. This is particularly true of a nursery which is embedded in community, professional and regulatory systems and where subsystems of the nursery such as staff and child groupings, are intimately part of family systems. For the nursery presented here, a decision was made to draw the boundary of the ‘case’ mainly excluding the collection of data from parents about family circumstances (although parents were asked, in seeking their permission for their child to be included in observations, to mention any major and current changes of family circumstance).

The chosen primary focus of study was the young baby room (YBR) as it was here that possible choices of task (for example, creating a home ethos or ‘school’ ethos) seemed likely to be most differentiated.

Flyvbjerg (2001: 82) discusses the criticism that single case studies carry a critical weakness in that they cannot accommodate the procedures of large sample research that control for researcher bias. He rejects this, arguing that procedures directed at rigour and objectivity may control for some sources of bias but that others arise from the much narrower and more restrictively defined sources of data of large-scale research.

The observation and interview data arising from this nursery case study conveys strength and depth of articulated view, body language and communicated
emotion from children and staff. In this respect, it is highly individual and contextualized which encourages confidence about its authenticity. Yet it must be acknowledged that in terms of gender, age and class, I occupied a very different position from that of most of the nursery staff. I do not think that this seriously compromised the data or introduced major distortions of interpretation, but this can only really be tested as the analysis is scrutinized by others and compared with further case studies.

**procedure**

The research in this nursery took place over six months. Five types of data were collected and these are summarized in Table 1 (p. 176).

**results**

In this section, I bring together the data that relates to questions of task, whether formally expressed in documentation, explicitly or implicitly expressed in the staff interviews and diary notes. I then report on the data from the observations in the young babies' room. The characteristics of the nursery are given in Table 2. Key documentation is identified in Table 3.

The nursery tasks that this documentation reveals are thus multiple and wide ranging. What kinds of tasks could be discerned in the staff interviews and room observations and how did these relate to those evident in documentation? Here the data are presented as five themes:

- tasks implicit in staff accounts of coming into nursery work;
- tasks explicit in staff views on the roles and purposes of nursery;
- tasks implicit in staff descriptions of applying personal experience, empathy and experiences of vulnerability and satisfaction;
- tasks implicit in staff accounts of their emotional interactions with children;
- phenomenological tasks evident in the YBR observations.

**tasks implicit in staff accounts of coming into nursery work**

For the managing director (MD), an initial task is a personal one of ensuring good enough child care to enable her to reconcile working and parenting in a way that was satisfactory to her:

I was a single parent...and had a look at day care and I thought I don’t want to leave my baby here...what happened was I set up a very small place on my own...it grew and evolved from there.
In the responses of the other staff, it was striking how they nearly all referred to long experience of being brought up in the company of other children (for example, being taken to work with their mother) or looking after other children:

### Table 1 Data Sources for Young Baby Room (YBR)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Document audit</td>
<td>Policies and procedures, young baby room records and individual child records.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Staff questionnaire (N = 17)</td>
<td>Self-complete, mainly multiple-choice questions for all staff who may be deployed in YBR, including views on role, tasks and sources of frustration and satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Young baby room observations (N = 2)</td>
<td>Alex (6 months) and Mia (8 months) selected randomly. Ten 60-minute observations plus three 60-minute whole room observations (see note 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Staff interviews (N = 8)</td>
<td>Cross-section of senior and YBR staff using a semi-structured schedule and audio-taped responses (see note 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Diary notes</td>
<td>A contemporaneous fieldwork diary was maintained.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1. Two types of target child observation were conducted, timed, holistic, narrative observations recorded using a notebook and untimed holistic observations developed at the Tavistock Centre (Rustin, 1989; Elfer, 2004). In this method of observation, the focus is neither the baby nor carer but the interaction between the two. The observation ‘tool’ is the personal interaction of observer with observed. No written record is kept during the observation so that the observer can be as receptive as possible to the emotional content of interactions as well as details of body language, sequence and timing without the distraction of having ‘instantaneously’ to turn the observations into a written record. The observer must develop the skills to absorb and to remember as much as possible of the events and feelings during the observation which is written up immediately afterwards in as free and unprocessed (edited) manner as possible, trying to avoid making premature judgements or interpretations.

Observation transcripts were analysed using modified grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and incorporating separate thematic and micro analysis which were used for triangulation.

Note 2. In the interviews, staff were invited to respond to four areas:

- the process of coming into nursery work;
- the role of nurseries;
- how they felt nurseries should be working with children;
- their experience of the work and its satisfactions and frustrations.

A similar analytic approach to that reported in Note 1 above was adopted and interview data triangulated with the questionnaire data.

In the responses of the other staff, it was striking how they nearly all referred to long experience of being brought up in the company of other children (for example, being taken to work with their mother) or looking after other children:
**Table 2** Nursery Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Hours of opening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Max numbers (full-time equivalents)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 6. | Age range and bands | Young babies’ room (9 babies aged 3 months to 12 months)  
Older babies’ room (12 babies aged 12 months to 24 months)  
Toddlers’ room (18 toddlers aged 24 months to 36 months)  
Preschool room (25 children aged 3+ years) |
| 7. | Fees/month | £950 for a full-time baby place; £650 for a full-time toddler place (2004 prices) |
| 8. | Management structure for company | MD; three Asst MDs devoted entirely to management and support for the five nurseries. |
| 9. | Management structure for nursery | Two ‘job share’ managers: deputy who is part-time manager, and part-time ‘floater’ to cover in rooms  
Room leader for each room |
| 10. | Average age of staff | 25.6 years |
| 11. | Qualifications | Fully qualified at National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2 or above (33% at NVQ Level 3 or previous course-based National Nursery Examination Board qualification) |
| 12. | Length of service at this nursery (time/staff %) | <6 months (29%)  
6 months but <12 months (12%)  
12 months to 5 years (47%)  
>5 years (12%) |

It's all I've ever really wanted to do. ...even when I was ten I used to always get up in the middle of the night and help her (sister) feed... it was something that came really naturally to me to look after other people’s children.

It's just something I've always seen myself being good at, being capable of doing... I always said I'd like to work with children... I thought this is me, this is quite me.

These responses suggested the significance of constructing nursery tasks that gave satisfaction because they drew on capacities built up in a long apprenticeship of caring for children. Such care involved family recognition, gave a sense of identity and allowed the avoidance of work being seen as unsuited or boring. I explore this further in the discussion section below.
tasks explicit in staff views of the roles and purposes of nursery

Staff who were parents themselves tended to emphasize the primary task of nursery as providing relationships with children modelled on those in a family:

...it's not an institution...we're providing a family care and that's how it needs to be...

I think babies need to have somebody in nursery like their mummy (laughs). I think they need the warmth and the comfort and somebody that they can cuddle up to...

It is like being at home because it's like a home from home environment... I don't feel like I'm in a classroom here....I'd like to hope they think they're at home...

Staff who were not parents made less reference to the nursery task as being like a family and more to providing social and learning opportunities for children beyond those available within a family.

When these particular data were triangulated with the questionnaire data on tasks, a different perspective emerged. Here staff referred more to outcomes for children than nursery ethos. Of these, taking ‘first priorities’ only, learning matters most (see Table 4). However, when the first three priorities were aggregated, there was a more even split between cognitive, separation and social outcomes.
The MD described her experience of five ways in which these ethos and outcome tasks interacted and conflicted with more personal goals:

- commercial growth versus staying small and retaining a ‘family’ ethos;
- constructing work with children as a professional role (to raise status) versus a maternal one (seen as lower status);
- moving job for career progression versus staying for continuity of care;
- maintaining professional detachment versus emotional closeness;
- reconciling family commitments with work responsibilities.

The conflicts between professional and personal tasks were evident too in the accounts of the staff. For example, three staff, in expressing their disapproval of long hours of nursery care, indicated that they felt hypocritical in doing so, because their own employment depended upon it. The nursery manager also spoke of wanting to be paid more but immediately countered this by saying that nursery work was not a career to enter for reasons of pay.

The room leader of YBR spoke of the tension between her desire to work and her role as a mother:

but then I’ve got my own sort of personal responsibility (care of her own son) that was really hard for me, it took me a long time to adapt... I found it really hard, I was quite depressed about all that and used to come into work often crying and stuff.

She spoke of feeling guilty about being away from work to look after her son who was not well and ‘neglecting’ the nursery children. This is the dilemma of many parents but is perhaps more acute when caring for other people’s children.

**Table 4** staff views about priority tasks in their work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which of the following is most important to me in my work with children</th>
<th>First priorities only (N = 17)</th>
<th>First, second and third priorities (N = 49)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Helping children learn</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Enabling parents to work/do a training course</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Helping children get used to separating from parents and being more confident</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Giving children chance to mix with other children/learn social skills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Helping parents under stress</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Other (specify – see note 1)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not ranked</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1. Caring for children in a safe and secure environment.
tasks implicit in staff descriptions of applying personal experience, empathy and experiences of vulnerability and satisfaction

The data showed vividly how deeply the demands of nursery work reached into and resonated with the personal resources and vulnerabilities of staff. Staff accounts here showed too how staff could conceptualize day-to-day tasks in a way that translated painful personal experience into an empathic response to parents. An example of this was described by the room leader of YBR drawing on her own experience of working and parenting:

...her mum was so upset at leaving her, she actually cried, she actually held on to me and cried. And I thought, God that's awful. Actually made me cry. And being a mum I can take that into account, I can sit on her side of the fence. I really felt for her- I thought you know what I will look after her for you...

All of the interviews contained examples like this, in different forms, but where staff showed how interactions with the babies gave personal comfort or satisfaction:

...it makes you feel good I think when you've got certain children, it makes you feel nice when you come in and they come over and give you a cuddle I think it's nice for you it makes you feel wanted and needed.

The question that then arises from a primary task perspective is to what extent the task of constructing interactions with infants is directed at eliciting these experiences of comfort and satisfaction and to what extent they arise naturally from interactions initiated by the babies themselves.

The importance of these sources of work satisfaction was corroborated within the questionnaire data where half of all responses on work satisfaction referred to feeling valued and acknowledged by the children. The other main grouping in these questionnaire responses concerned the working relationships of the nursery. Staff valued the nursery highly as a place in which they felt respected with comments like ‘individual ideas valued’; ‘prepared to change’; ‘listened to’ and ‘not talked down to’. This may be a particularly significant organization task given an early years' workforce that in general is under qualified, under recognized and with staff more at risk of feelings of low self-esteem.

tasks implicit in staff accounts of their emotional interactions in children

The documentation of the nursery reveals a clear commitment to attachment (see Table 3, Document 7). However, in their interviews, staff expressed mixed views about attachment:

...what happens when you're off sick if they're so attached to you, what happens if you do want to leave.
I don't think they can bond too much. Sometimes it can be a problem because it makes life harder for the member of staff and for that child because that child can't do anything without that member of staff being there.

These data were supported by the interview and questionnaire data where ‘children getting too attached to me’ was cited as a cause of anxiety ‘most’ or at least ‘some of the time’, by half the staff group (the second highest source of anxiety after the fear of children getting injured or hurt). However, it was ranked equally in the questionnaires with the anxiety of children not getting enough attention.

It is clear that staff see the formation of attachment relationships as a key task of their work. However, these data also imply that an equally important existential task for the staff is the avoidance of ‘too much’ attachment.

‘phenomenological’ tasks evident in the YBR observations

Here I refer to tasks that might be inferred as important from the observed behaviours and responses of staff. What is of interest here is the alignment or mismatch between tasks that are prioritized in documentation or interview and those that appear to be most important or are implied by institutional and individual behaviours.

Alignment of tasks was strongest between the physical safety and care ideals expressed in documentation and questionnaire data and the observed vigilant attention staff paid to safety in the room. Physical care of the children was scrupulous and sensitive.

The most striking mismatch between tasks was between the espoused commitment to offering experiences of attachment expressed in documentation and interviews and the clear restriction of consistent and sustained attention in observed practice. This showed itself in patterns of deployment of staff and in individual staff interactions.

For example, in the first child observation in YBR, all of the staff involved were temporary and the task of promoting attachment through consistency of staffing had had to give way to tasks of physical safety and commercial efficiency (the need to deploy YBR staff to another room).

Individual interactions also showed a pattern in which consistent or sustained attention was not prioritized:

Mirhban picks him up to change his nappy...The moving about seems to calm him and within about five minutes she gently places him down on the floor and turns her attention to other tasks...

...within a few minutes, Alex starts to cry again and this time, Nina picks him up...he stops crying and she lays him on his back on her legs as she reads him a book. He watches, more calm...within a few moments, she abandons the book and places Alex on the ground...
Subsequent observations showed the same patterns of team care turning to individual attention when babies became distressed, turning back to more distance when the distress was soothed. Individualized attention, when given, seemed managed to minimize intimacy:

Sue picks Alex up and holds him in a close embrace across her chest almost as if she were about to feed him herself... he seems secure against her body. But very quickly, Sue places him in the baby bouncer, as if the intimacy is too close for her rather than him.

These patterns of fluid staff deployment and systematic limiting of attention were found too in the observations of the other babies in YBR. In the second observation of Mia, the whole staff team of YBR has been replaced for the morning because the regular team has gone on a baby massage course. Staff interactions with Mia showed the same pattern of vigilant and sensitive physical care and soothing of distress but withdrawal of attention as soon as these were accomplished.

discussion

I will discuss these results under the headings of each of the three research questions.

what do nursery staff describe as their primary tasks?

Whilst the MD recognized that the primary task of the nursery must be commercial viability, her ‘existential’ primary task was to provide a homely ethos and a ‘family experience’ for the children. A powerful theme throughout her interview was her commitment to construct the task of nursery management around her ideal of the family business. By this she meant a commitment to run the nurseries in a way that emphasized the responsibility of managers for the growth and development of the staff, the fostering of mutual loyalty and a shared commitment to their ‘product’ and their commercial success. In this, the notion of the ‘family business’ refers both to the way the business was run (its organizational values and obligations) and to the product or service it offered (the family experience).

This twin conception of family tasks enabled the MD to reconcile her own need and desire to work with what she described as a cultural expectation that children should be brought up in families and not nurseries:

It's almost a bit of a cultural thing. I come from an Italian family and Anna (her deputy) comes from a Greek family... there's this whole thing of children staying in families... I almost set it up like a family affair really.

The merging of personal and professional tasks was evident in all the staff interviews although the patterns and subtleties in the way they aligned or
conflicted varied. For staff with young children, the conflicts often seemed painful. The family business culture of the company meant that it was flexible in arranging shifts for staff to suit home circumstances and indeed to providing subsidized places in the nursery for the children of staff. This was the case for the room leader of YBR who said that having her own child in the nursery had made it much easier for her to combine employment and child care. However, it was also painful for her to feel that she was caring for other people’s children whilst her own child was cared for by someone else.

Many of the staff described or implied that a significant task for them was constructing the work in a way that allowed them to deploy child care skills they felt they had accumulated and honed over many years of growing up. Equally important, this work allowed them to avoid the other forms of employment (tasks) they felt were available but that were seen as boring and not providing the emotional or personal validation rewards of nursery work.

Reay's description of Bordieu's concept of ‘habitus’ (1998:23) as used to relate personal agency and social structure in understanding individual’s behaviours, seems to exactly fit these nursery practitioners’ descriptions of the significance to them of nursery work. The concept of ‘cultural capital’ too, which might be contained in physical and mental forms, in institutionalized forms such as status and qualifications, and in objective forms such as books and other tangible recorded cultural artefacts, allows thinking about the forms of cultural capital that staff might possess. It also questions how the nursery, as the context in which that capital is held and deployed, limits or facilitates the conversion of cultural capital and the way tasks are constructed and differentially valued. These might include, for example, economic capital (through career progression and increasing salary prospects), ‘social capital’ (through the pleasures and social activities of the team interactions), and ‘symbolic capital’ (through the development of authority, status and recognized expertise).

This nursery paid considerable attention to curriculum planning based on the structural priority given by the UK Government's education agenda. However, the existential tasks directed at learning, those that seemed to carry real day-to-day meaning, were much more characteristic of the informal and spontaneous ones likely to be found in a family than in a more formally structured ‘school' environment.

to what extent is there convergence between these descriptions of primary task and the primary tasks that are prioritized in day-to-day practice?

There are two striking areas of convergence and conflict between the tasks that are described in documentation and interview and phenomenological tasks that is those that can be inferred from actual staff behaviour.
There is clear convergence between the priority tasks of ensuring the children's physical safety, care and well being as described in documentation and the day-to-day tasks observable in the YBR observations. It is interesting that there is not much reference in the interviews to the physical care tasks, probably because there is such a deeply engrained assumption about their priority.

Where there is a gap between articulated and actual tasks is in the priority accorded to attachment interactions in this nursery (see Table 3, Document 7). There is anxiety evident in the interviews of the staff concerning the practical and emotional consequences of children's attachments to particular members of staff but still clear assertions of its importance. Yet both patterns of management deployment of staff and staff-child interactions show either disregard or avoidance of the consistency of staffing necessary to systematically promote attachment.

One way of interpreting these data is to think of the babies and staff not in the common social frame of a 'family' but in two separate social frames. For the staff, the primary task of nursery is to be a source of employment, pay, recognition of their knowledge and skill, opportunities for peer interaction and avoidance of less desirable forms of work. For the babies, the primary task of nursery, determined by society and parents, is to provide a safe and secure environment until they can be restored to their families.

These primary tasks explain both patterns of staff deployment and interaction. The primary task of survival for the nursery as an organization means that it must prioritize maintaining statutory ratios rather than consistency of staffing first, because should an accident occur, even if were not the result of deficient ratios, the fact that ratios had not been maintained might lead to censure or closure.

For the staff, to facilitate the fostering of attachments with children, consistent with the family ethos task of the nursery as a whole, would be to risk disrupting the collective patterns of team care they so value. If babies are allowed to be selective about which member of staff cuddles, changes or feeds them, then the team patterns of equal turn-taking, equal sharing of 'difficult' children, shared responsibility for safety, would all be disrupted. Staff were also anxious that some parents might become jealous and resentful of staff member's attachment to their child (consistent with Hopkins' findings referred to above).

If there is serious management commitment to attachment as a core task of nursery, then the implication of this analysis of tasks is that attention must also be paid to the way staff social interactions can be maintained and nurtured and how the anxiety for staff of forming close emotional interactions with babies can be contained.
how do the systems and practices within the nursery organization assist staff reconcile differing task?

The support systems of this nursery are rooted in the desire of the MD for it to be a family business with a culture and ethos of mutual concern and support. This manifests in four ways:

- three supernumerary Assistant MDs available to give advice and support on all operational matters;
- a managers’ forum, with the avoidance of a set agenda;
- an open door policy of managers to be easily and quickly available;
- encouragement of an ethos of mutual support through whole staff group training and socializing events.

This strategy is premised on the ideal of the ‘family business’ that is to encourage an ethos of being like a family for the staff and children. The data strongly indicates that, despite the good intentions underpinning this approach, it is likely to fail for three reasons.

First, some staff found the long hours separation of children from their families painful but it is difficult to comprehend why it should be painful if the nature of the separation is obscured in the creation of an ‘alternative family’. Second, whilst there is this overall claim and aim to be like the children’s family, the attachment task for the staff remains unmanageable. They clearly cannot be ‘family’ and it is not necessary that they should try to be so. The task of defining and constructing a different social space from that of either ‘school’ or family remains obscured and it is impossible to engage with what the nursery’s tasks might entail. Third, if the nursery becomes an alternative family, what implications does this have for the task of working in partnership with parents? How is a partnership between the two ‘families’ to be understood?

The psychological pressure to construct the nursery task as a substitute family has its roots in both society’s expectations about the daily care of young children and in the particular personal histories of the senior staff of this nursery. In this respect, the call by Manning-Morton (2006: 49) for the development of a new professional identity, particularly for ‘under-threes’ practitioners, is profoundly important. The professional care of babies is a task that needs both intensely subjective as well as objective capacities. There is therefore a need for a model of training, professional development and support that allows staff to think about how professional and personal tasks are constructed without fear of the criticism that addressing the ‘personal’ will be seen as ‘unprofessional’ and without resort to a ‘family’ model of practice that is neither necessary nor achievable.
conclusion

The concept of primary task and the sub concepts of normative, existential and phenomenological tasks, developed in the organizational studies literature, have considerable potential in opening up for scrutiny and better understanding of the multiple social policy, professional and personal tasks that must be accomplished in nursery settings. Working professionally with young children is also an intensely personal undertaking involving the satisfaction of individual needs, expressed in the way tasks may be constructed and undertaken. Analysis of these tasks illustrated in the nursery case study of this article, begins to uncover the patterns in professional and personal tasks that will both align and conflict. This is to be seen not as exceptional but as a universal and inevitable feature of any practitioner's engagement with the work situation and the way it is socially constructed. Such an analysis presents the opportunity to think critically about this engagement, and the difficulties as well as synergies it gives rise to, as an essential part of professional practice rather than as evidence of human inadequacy.

references


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