
Childcare, Choice and Class Practices

Middle-class parents and their children

Carol Vincent and Stephen J. Ball

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Childcare, Choice and Class Practices

How do parents find and choose childcare for their young children?

The contentious issue of childcare has enjoyed a recent and meteoric rise up the social policy agenda. The topic is frequently in the media spotlight, and continues to spark heated debate in the UK and around the world. *Childcare, Choice and Class Practices* is based on the findings of a substantive study which investigated the childcare markets and the choices made by middle-class parents in two London localities. In this account of the research the authors explore the complexities of the relationship between locality, childcare choice and childrearing. They highlight processes of social reproduction, the continuation of gendered responsibilities and conceptions of 'good' parenting.

The book considers the development of the UK government's childcare strategy from 1998 to the present day, and highlights the critical debates surrounding middle-class families' choice of childcare. In doing so, a number of themes develop, including:

- how parents balance paid work with the responsibilities of childcare
- what role modern fathers play in caring for and organizing care for their children
- how the childcare market operates, and what kind of care is available
- whether it is possible for parents to find care that complements their own views on childrearing
- the similarities and differences between middle-class fractions in relation to the care and education of young children.

This important study will be of great interest to anyone concerned with understanding the development of the childcare market and the fears and aspirations of middle-class parents.

It offers invaluable insights into a complex subject, and will be essential reading for all those working in or studying early years provision and policy, and students of sociology, class, gender and work.

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To Madi and Daniel

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All material has been reworked for this book.

Abbreviations

ACORN	A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods
B	Battersea
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CACE	Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education
CPI	Consumer Price Index
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
HE	Higher Education
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury
IT	Information Technology
LEA	Local Education Authority
NCT	National Childbirth Trust
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NDNA	National Day Nurseries Association
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
SN	Stoke Newington
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Introduction

Childcare today

MPs want affordable care for all

(Nursery World, 16 September, 2004, p. 8)

Parents pay inflation-busting cost of childcare

(Press release dated 27 January 2005 from the Daycare Trust on their annual cost of childcare survey. Over the last year costs had risen three-and-a-quarter times the rate of inflation.)

Nurseries peg pay to NMW (National Minimum Wage)

(Nursery World, 5 August, 2004, p. 4)

Day Nursery market grows 20 per cent in one year

(Nursery World, 17 March, 2005, p. 4)

Private nurseries are valued at £2bn

(Nursery World, 12 August, 2004, p. 4)

This is a book about childcare, but it also a book about families, social class, gender, education markets and education and social policy. We explore these wider issues through a focus, through the lens, if you like, of the choice and management of childcare arrangements. Thus this book has three interrelated themes. One highlights substantive issues around childcare choice: how parents make a choice, their views on different forms of childcare, the relationships they develop with carers, how they ‘juggle’ the demands of their children with other domestic and workplace demands, and how mothers and fathers experience this ‘juggling’ to different degrees. In a second theme we analyse policy around childcare, and situate it within a wider policy context of markets and education. A third theme highlights a set of sociological concerns around social class, particularly the middle classes, and gender, particularly the gendered division of domestic labour and childrearing. These three themes may seem to

appeal to very different audiences, but we argue that they need to be thought about together, in order to gain analytical purchase on the role of the state, the market and the family in caring for young children, and the classed and gendered nature of 'family practices' (Morgan 1996).

We first discussed researching childcare in 1997. At the time it was possible to agree with Denise Riley (1983) when she noted that childcare was not seen to be a glamorous or exciting policy issue; indeed 'the very term "child care" has a dispiriting and dutiful heaviness hanging over it ... it is as short on colour and incisiveness as the business of negotiating the wet kerb with the pushchair' (cited in Brennan 1998, p. 3). However in the eight years that have passed between our preliminary discussions and the writing of this book, childcare has been transformed as a policy issue. It has shot up the government agenda, with the National Childcare Strategy appearing in 1998, and the first ever Ten Year Strategy for Childcare being published in December 2004. Childcare became a key issue in the 2005 general election, receiving the attention of the Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Chancellor Gordon Brown, both eager to draw the electorate's attention to the expansion in childcare places, the government's attempts to increase parents' access to 'affordable, good quality childcare' (Baroness Ashton, cited in Mooney 2003a, p. 112), the promises of moves towards a universal offering of childcare through Children's Centres, as well as a number of other changes (increased maternity leave, increased levels of child tax credit: see Chapter 3) which will result in what Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, called 'a welfare state that is truly family friendly for the first time' (Brown 2004). As we discuss in Chapter 3, childcare as a policy issue has been the subject of increased attention under New Labour because of its apparent ability to address a number of New Labour concerns: increasing social inclusion, and in particular combating child poverty, revitalizing the labour market, and raising standards in education. The provision of childcare is seen as having the potential to bring women (particularly those on benefits) back into the workforce, modelling childrearing skills to parents understood as being in need of such support, and giving children the skills and experience they need to succeed in compulsory education. It thus plays a key role in both New Labour's economic agenda (the maintenance and improvement of a skilled workforce) and its social agenda (especially its pledge to end child poverty).

As indicated earlier, a study of childcare also encompasses a number of other policy issues, in particular, the respective roles of the private and public sectors in providing social provision. Until the advent of Sure Start¹ and Children's Centres, public sector provision in childcare was under the auspices of the local authorities, aimed at three- and four-year-olds only, and was usually minimal (although with considerable variations between authorities). Thus the expansion in childcare places during the 1990s has been in the private and voluntary sectors, with particularly rapid expansion in the former, leaving the UK with a large private sector relative to other modes of provision (for more details, see

Chapter 3). The OECD has raised questions about the likelihood of achieving accessible and equitable care in a private market (OECD 2001). However, the current government shows no signs of departing from its commitment to a mixed economy of private, state and voluntary sector provision.

Whilst this blaze of policy activity and recognition is clearly welcome, the question of why childcare as an issue took so long to come to prominence also deserves attention. Jennifer Marchbank (2000) notes that feminists have been slow to organize around childcare issues, unlike the sustained attention given to equal pay, or abortion rights. She argues that there are a number of reasons for this: that in the late 1960s and early 1970s some feminist writing displayed an ambivalent attitude towards motherhood, seeing it as a source of women's oppression, that younger women activists may not have had children, and that motherhood itself leaves little time for campaigning. She further argues that women's views on 'appropriate' childcare are highly differentiated, and also that many women are ambivalent about seeming to relinquish family and domestic responsibilities which appear to be a source of female power.

Later chapters in this book show clearly the ways in which responsibility for children, and for organizing and managing childcare, continues to lie with the mother, illustrating the robustness and longevity of traditional gender roles. Indeed this became one of the key sociological concerns of the project. Initially focused more on the operation of the pre-school market and the ability of middle-class consumers to engage with that market, the experience of doing our first round of interviews led us to focus more attention on the gendered division of labour around domestic issues, the role of mothers and fathers in childcare and childrearing more generally, and the efforts made by parents to achieve a work/life balance with which they were more or less happy.

A convergence of theoretical interests led us to focus the research on middle-class families. We were interested specifically in ideas of class fractions within the middle class, 'in practices of distinction and closure' (Ball 2003, p. 175) *within* class groups, and the relationship between class and space. There was also a practical rationale for focusing on the middle classes, namely, that in order to access the private childcare market in inner London, families had to have the levels of income normally available through employment in middle-class professional/managerial occupations.

We turn now to consider the structure and content of the book.

The structure of the book

This introductory chapter explores why we see childcare as being a key issue in both contemporary policy making and sociological terms. **Chapter 2** describes the qualitative research on which this book is based. We consider the respondents in terms of their education, occupations and place of residence. The two London settings for the research – Battersea and Stoke Newington – are described and the reasons for choosing them explained. The literature on

the gentrification of urban areas, particularly work on the gentrification of London by Tim Butler and colleagues, is used to justify the importance placed on locality in the study. The final section of this chapter contains a reflexive account of the research process. **Chapter 3** focuses on policy. It draws on theoretical frameworks offered by Esping Anderson which seek to analyse and compare post-industrial welfare regimes. Such analyses emphasize the extent to which childcare in English-speaking countries, particularly the USA and the UK, has been regarded as a private, not a public issue, one to be resolved by individual households (except for those in extreme situations of need). In the second part of the chapter, we ask what effect the vigorous policy focus on childcare, maintained by the UK government, is having. Thus we consider the development of New Labour's National Childcare Strategy, from its birth in 1998 to the time of writing (summer 2005), noting that the major role played by private sector 'for-profit' providers is unlikely to change. We link national developments with the provision in our research localities. We identify the characteristics of the two local childcare markets in Battersea and Stoke Newington, and consider how the development of provision on the ground relates to the aspirations of national policy makers. In **Chapter 4** we turn to consider class theory and analysis, focusing on the middle classes. The key debates here turn on the extent to which there is a unitary middle class or a set of distinct fractions marked off from one another by values, lifestyle and political preferences and social relations; whether, if these differences are significant, they relate back to occupational divisions – professionals and managers, state- and private-sector employees and so on. In this chapter we briefly review the literature in this field, and argue that a focus on individuals' occupations alone is too blunt an instrument to provide a correlation with values, attitudes and lifestyles. Drawing on our earlier focus on locality (see Chapter 2), we consider how this can be productive in mapping nuances of difference and similarity between middle-class fractions.

The following chapters (5–7) go on to consider the differences and similarities between the middle-class respondents of Battersea and Stoke Newington, focusing in particular on their choice of childcare and education, but also considering the gendered divisions of care responsibilities within households. In **Chapter 5** we demonstrate the key roles of mothers in choosing childcare, and the sense of responsibility and anxiety that pervades the process. We also analyse the respondents' attempts to reconcile the demands of paid work and childcare, and consider the position of those within our sample who chose to stay at home full-time. Finally, we focus on the fathers, to try to understand their attempts at finding a balance between their work and family commitments. We conclude that despite the social and economic advantages of the respondents, despite the cultural power of the 'new man', that these mothers and fathers are not in the main presenting a serious challenge to a traditional understanding of family relationships. In **Chapter 6** we explore parents' experiences of childcare and their relationships with carers, using data from both

parents and carers. The relationship has a potential fault line, as carers are required by parents, and also by their own occupational and professional cultures to show affection for their young charges, a very intense form of emotional labour. However, the interaction is also a financial one, and love and money are at times in tension with each other. In this chapter we also consider the extent to which parents feel they can exercise their 'voice' and achieve a 'fit' of values between themselves and the carer concerning the care of the child. In **Chapter 7** we argue in accordance with Stephen Ball's (2003) earlier work that education is of prime importance to the middle classes. Educational success ensures social reproduction of the middle classes as a whole, and offers individuals access to the 'right' universities, and particular points of entry into the labour market. As such education is an investment against 'the fear of falling' (Ehrenreich 1989), a mechanism through which the middle classes can close themselves off from the working classes. In support of this argument we offer three types of settings with which middle-class families engage in search of social reproduction: nurseries, primary schools, and 'enrichment activities'. With regard to the first two we identify local differences between the middle classes of Stoke Newington and Battersea and the types of nursery and school with which they feel comfortable. Finally we draw attention to the role of the increasingly ubiquitous classes and drop-ins in music, sport, art, drama, and dance, and their role in 'making up the middle-class child'. In **Chapter 8** we review the issues arising from our study; in particular the role of childcare in attaining social advantage and in maintaining social divisions, the contribution of our work to the understanding of middle-class fractions, the effectiveness of a mixed-market system of childcare in satisfying families' needs, future developments in childcare policy and provision, and the view of contemporary gender relations which emerged from the research.

Chapter 2

Contextualizing the study

Making and maintaining arrangements for childcare is not a simple process; indeed it is more like a volatile chemical reaction that may or may not settle down into a stable state of equilibrium

(Uttal 2002, p. 5)

Introduction

This chapter describes two aspects of the context to the research. In the first section therefore we give the reader some factual information about the respondents in the research, where they lived, their occupations and their education. We also briefly describe our research method: how we identified the respondents, conducted the interviews and analysed the data. The second section has a more experimental tone; in it we try to place ourselves within the research and reflect on how different aspects of our own personal and professional identities affected how we understood the data.

The study, the respondents, the localities

We are interested in the developing and dynamic pre-school education and care market, and the interactions of parents with that market. We are focusing on professional and managerial middle-class users, sometimes referred to as members of the 'service class', a sizeable group of users in the formal childcare market place where the costs involved in accessing care are high, especially in London, the setting for our research. (The Daycare Trust's 2005 Childcare Costs Survey reports *average* London costs of £197 per week for a full-time place for a child under two. That is nearly £10,000 per annum.) The research involves interviews with a respondent group of 57 mothers and 14 fathers (from 59 families); 20 of the mothers were re-interviewed to track changes in their care arrangements. In addition 21 providers were interviewed including nursery staff, childminders and nannies. They were selected for interview from amongst those used by respondent families. Five relevant 'others' including LEA personnel and representatives of provider organizations were also interviewed. In total we conducted 109 interviews, involving 101 individuals.

Table 2.1 The respondents

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>Providers</i>	<i>'Others'</i>
Stoke Newington	30	8	6 group settings 5 home-based carers (3 nannies and 2 childminders)	2 LEA personnel 2 from provider organizations 1 nanny agency
Battersea	27	6	7 group settings 3 home-based carers (2 nannies and 1 au pair)	
Total	57	14	21	5

We located the research within two inner London areas: Stoke Newington in North London, and Battersea in South London (of which more below). The respondents were recruited in a number of ways: we placed adverts in child-friendly shops and cafés in the areas and in local area parenting newsletters and those of the National Childbirth Trust. We attended music groups and library story-time in order to make contact with parents. We also 'snowballed' from our original respondents to others. Our original contact was in all cases but one with the mother, but in the later stages of the project we sought to include fathers' views, by interviewing them alone or as part of the re-interview with their partners (as they chose).

Only two families interviewed did not meet the criteria for Goldthorpe's (1995) 'service class' membership, and these were held as additional to the sample referred to here. The parents were a singular group, being largely white (except three) and in heterosexual relationships (except one), and all were highly educated. Amongst the mothers 42 per cent (25) had a first degree as their highest qualification and 46 per cent (27) had post-graduate qualifications. Amongst fathers 51 per cent (30) had a first degree as their highest qualification, and 37 per cent (22) had post-graduate qualifications; 20 per cent of the mothers (12) and 31 per cent (18) of the fathers had studied at Oxbridge (see Tables 2.2–2.5).

Table 2.2 Mothers' further/higher education qualifications

	<i>PhD (or several post-graduate qualifications)</i>	<i>Masters (or other post-degree diploma)</i>	<i>First degree</i>	<i>No degree but diploma</i>	<i>Other qualification</i>	<i>Total</i>
Battersea	6	11	8	1	2	28
Stoke Newington	5	5	17	2	2	31
Total	11	16	25	3	4	59

8 Contextualizing the study

Table 2.3 Fathers' further/higher education qualifications

	<i>PhD (or several post-graduate qualifications)</i>	<i>Masters (or other post-degree diploma)</i>	<i>First degree</i>	<i>No degree but diploma</i>	<i>Other qualification</i>	<i>Total</i>
Battersea	3	11	13	0	1	28
Stoke Newington	2	6	17	2	3	30*
Total	5	17	30	2	4	58

* One respondent is a single mother and we do not have data on her child's father

Table 2.4 Mothers' studies in Oxbridge universities

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Battersea	8	20	28
Stoke Newington	4	27	31
Total	12	47	59

In terms of their schooling, the parent sample was fairly evenly split between those who had received state schooling and those who had been to at least one private school (usually secondary). There were two marked examples of area-based differences: 61 per cent (17) of the men in Battersea were educated at private schools and 39 per cent (11) at state schools compared with the women in Stoke Newington of whom 68 per cent (21) were educated at state schools, compared with only 32 per cent (10) in private schools. The Stoke Newington women were also the group least likely to have been educated at Oxbridge, and most likely to have a first degree as their highest educational qualification. These differences are comparable with our later observations about the characteristics of the middle-class populations of both areas, and specifically about their occupational positions (see Tables 2.6 and 2.7).

All the families had at least one pre-school child at the time of the first interview. Family size varied between one and three children, with the majority in both areas having two (see Table 2.8).

Table 2.5 Fathers' studies in Oxbridge universities

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Battersea	8	20	28
Stoke Newington	10	20	30*
Total	18	40	58

* One respondent is a single mother and we do not have data on her child's father