Understandings of care work with young children: reflections on children's independence in a video observation study

Dr. Claire Cameron, Research Officer,
Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London
27/28 Woburn Square
London WC1H OAA
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7612 6957
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7612 6927
Email: **c.Cameron@ioe.ac.uk**

Abstract

This paper reviews some of the ways in which early childhood professionals in England discuss aspects of practice in nurseries for preschool age children. The ways in which professionals talk about and react to early childhood practice tells us much about contemporary understandings of such practice and how concepts and policies developed over time are being interpreted and translated on the ground. The data for the paper was obtained using a video observation method that asks small groups of selected and knowledgeable people to make spontaneous comments about elements of professional practice, both national and cross-national, they view on a video. One of the emergent themes from this 'talk' was a discourse around children's independence and choice in early childhood services such as childcare centres. This discourse is discussed with reference to the wider discourses on 'independence', contrasting current debate in England with that in other European countries.

Key words: nurseries, preschool services; choice; independence; video observation method

This paper explores some ways in which professionals in early childhood services in England discuss aspects of practice in nurseries for preschool aged children. In particular, it argues that notions of choice and independence in the context of discussions of practice are related to wider discourses on the societal place of independence, drawing on Rose's (1999) view that a shift from a social state to an advanced liberal state is taking place in which a regulatory regime is the prime means of governance. Based on a cross-national study using a video observation method, this paper argues that while notions of independence occupy a central place in the construction of English early childhood practice, variations in what is understood by independence exist, vividly illustrated by contrasting understandings from the study in England with those in other European countries. The paper concludes by arguing that in an advanced liberal state such as England there is a paradox between valorising independence as an expression of individual autonomy and the highly governed practice, through regulation, of early childhood services. The first section begins with a discussion of the wider discourse in which practice discussions of independence are located, before going on to discuss the method adopted in the study.

Independence and the advanced liberal society

Discourses of valuing independence in the UK have grown in importance during a period of intense governance of children's lives (Rose 1989; Prout and James 1997). While at a societal level, independence implies freedom from external constraint and freedom to act and think for oneself, Rose (1999) has argued that 'independence' to act and think only exists whilst simultaneously being governed by a web of socially sanctioned rules and norms. Rose claims that throughout

the development of 19th century, when many welfare services were inaugurated and modern ideals of liberty were being developed, ever more complex 'technologies of government' were introduced with explicit and implicit regulatory effects on individuals in families, schools and towns. Children attending school, for example, were considered social subjects whose 'inner life' was to be observed and 'known' by teachers, in order to judge them according to norms and inculcate moral lessons in them. According to Rose, this process of governing individuals through a society's institutions and codes of behaviour had profound consequences for understandings of freedom, and thus of independence (Rose 1999).

In the field of education, Fendler (2000:122) has argued that parallel shifts have occurred in the construction of the educated subject, which now targets the 'soul' of the individual. Now students have not only to master intellectual content and behavioural compliance, they have also to be 'motivated' and 'have a positive attitude'. English policy assertions about the value of independence draw on the role independence plays in being motivated and having a positive disposition towards learning in early education and care settings. Ideas about children's independence as expressed by early childhood practitioners and experts could be expected to be located within an overall framework of what Foucault and others have called 'governmentality' (Rose, 1989): normative ideas about the limits of individual conduct or independent action are related to moral codes, and potentially policy pronouncements, about acceptability and responsibility. Governmentality is concerned with the exercise of power, where power is conceptualised as working to shape norms and train individuals through 'technologies of government'. It refers to 'all endeavours to shape, guide, direct

3

the conduct of others' (Rose 1999:3), including subtle and effective practices that are 'steering us towards desired behaviour' (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 19). The most important effect of governmentality, however, 'is that we govern ourselves – conduct our own conduct – in ways that conform to the dominant regime' (ibid). In relation to early childhood institutions, regulatory frameworks are often externally provided by curricula and inspection processes, while early childhood professionals create their own internal norms that guide their conduct; they both reflect and promote normative understandings about practice.

The particular positioning of independence within early childhood services also depends on the kind of welfare regime in which it is examined. Rose (1999:166) has argued that western societies, including the UK, were and are shifting from a social state to an advanced liberal state, in which it is believed that individuals can best fulfil themselves as free individuals, not bound to the state as a provider of services or providing a cohesive identity, but 'linked into a society through acts of socially sanctioned consumption and responsible choice'. In advanced liberal societies, the idea and practice of independence is critical to making individual choices, and to this action as an expression of modern identity.

The video observation method

The data presented here derive from a methodological study undertaken as part of a large, six-nation project called *Care Work in Europe: Current Understandings and Future Directions*[1]*.* The approach adopted was a video observation method named Sophos, or Second Order Phenomenological

---

[1]Care Work in Europe (2001 – 2005) was funded by the European Commission's Fifth Framework Programme. Research took place in six countries: Denmark, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The overall objective was to contribute to the development of good quality employment in caring services that are responsive to the needs of rapidly changing societies and their citizens. Further information is available from the project website: http://www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru/carework

Observation Scheme (Hansen and Jensen 2004). To date, research purposes of video have included: providing a full record of the behaviour of 'subjects' such as infant behaviour (e.g., Draghi-Lorenz, 2000); presenting vignettes for 'informants' to evaluate (Berry and McKenna, 1995); developing the interactive and reflective skills of 'participants' through using video as a training tool (Moyles, 2001; Richardson and Potter, 1999); and providing data on daily life for later analysis by researchers (e.g., Erlandson and Eklund, 2001; Lomax and Casey, 1998). These examples use the visual image, the video, as the data source, or what might be termed 'first order' observation. In Sophos, by contrast, data is collected via the observations made by selected groups about the visual image, making it a 'second order' observation.

The reason for using Sophos was its suitability for gaining insight and understandings into how a particular practice is viewed by care work practitioners and other groups closely associated with that practice. It works within a qualitative, cross-cultural, phenomenological paradigm, and uses video to pose a very open question: what spontaneous discussion takes place when videoed practice is viewed? (Hansen and Jensen 2004).

Sophos was inspired by and developed from the work of Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989). Their study of *Preschool in Three Cultures* also used video, and asked 'stakeholder groups' to discuss typical practice from three early childhood centres in China, Japan and the USA. The aim was to obtain data that was very close to the meanings held by study participants, and not constrained by the structures of interviews. The cross-national element of the work enabled teachers, administrators, parents, children, teachers from other parts of the

country and in the two other countries to vocalise differences in ways of working with children and understanding childhood in early childhood settings. In all, 900 people were involved in the study (Tobin 1999).

Hansen (2003:1) developed the Sophos method as 'suitable for second-order phenomenological observation - i.e. the observation of professionals observing their own practice and the practice of others'. The main focus of enquiry was not on the cultural beliefs pervasive in, and about, a particular set of services or phase of life such as early childhood, but on the spontaneous observations, reflections and understandings made by those observing the video. These are what we termed the 'knowledgeable experts' whose utterances provide the data for analysis and convey both their personal understandings of how care work is and should be, and, since these understandings shape and are shaped by current practice and social conditions, about relevant discourses in contemporary care work (Hansen and Jensen 2004).

While Sophos and *Preschool in Three Cultures* have the second order dimension to the method in common, Sophos differs from the *Preschool in Three Cultures* method in two principal ways. First, there is a more limited claim for the generalisability of the data in the Sophos study: in Sophos there is no attempt at understanding the cultural beliefs and values expressed by observers as reflecting those of the country as a whole. Observers' comments are instead seen as reflecting their own 'culturally based understandings, attitudes and values' (Hansen and Jensen 2004: 22).

Second, as a phenomenological study, researchers have an interpretive role, not just to relay participants' 'meanings'. Such interpretation can also, deploying a critical hermeneutic perspective, give explanations. Researchers 'distance themselves in a critical way from the text material, going behind subjects' immediate understandings by applying critical perspectives to the social reality and dominant ideologies that determine those understandings' (Hansen and Jensen 2004). In brief, in Sophos there is a conscious effort to be analytically interpretive of observers' understandings of the social reality depicted on videos of care work practice in three countries, practice which is seen as not 'genuine truth or to be representative of all practice in a country or to show best practice' but to 'reflect ordinary or typical day-to-day practice' (Hansen and Jensen 2004:5). The critical perspective explicitly links the 'everyday' or ostensibly banal with the wider social and ideological context in which it is expressed.

Sophos for Care Work in Europe

The Care Work in Europe Sophos study involved two parts; the first of care work with older people, which will not be reported on here, and the second of care work with young children[2]. Each of these parallel enquiries took place in Denmark, England and Hungary (Jensen and Hansen 2004). Each of the six videos made as part of this work followed two workers for one day. Each was made by the same cameraman, and edited by him and each national researcher working together. The aim was to create a 'compelling narrative' (Tobin 1999), and, in the interests of cross-national comparability, the research team agreed to include in each video a number of features of everyday practice found in all three

---

[2] England's early childhood services are fragmented. This paper refers to one form of early childhood service, childcare services, primarily for preschool aged children of working parents. Nurseries or childcare centres are all–day, year round services for pre-school aged children.

7

countries such as one to one work, group times, personal care, greetings and departures and so on.

In each country, the observation scheme followed a similar pattern. In the English Sophos study of understandings of work with young children (Cameron and Clark 2004), the observer groups were: a) the two nursery practitioners who were the focus of the English video; b) the children attending the nursery; c) parents of children attending the nursery; d) nursery workers from another similar establishment; and e) a group of 'experts' drawn from research, teaching and practice. Each of these groups were shown a 30 minute edited video made in the English nursery. Videos of practice in an equivalent childcare centre in Hungary and Denmark were shown to groups a) and d) combined to form one 'care worker' observer group; and to group e). In all, there were nine video showings in England. Data in this paper will be drawn from the seven sessions with *care workers* and *experts*, while data from groups b) and c) are reported on elsewhere (Cameron and Clark 2004). Table 1 sets out some background characteristics of the care workers and experts.

Table 1. Characteristics of *care workers* and *experts* participating in observer groups

	Job titles	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Yrs exp in early childhood field	Level at which completed full–time education	Relevant qualifications attained or in progress
Care workers (n = 4)	Nursery assistant, Nursery nurse, Senior nursery nurse/SENCO Deputy manager	20 – 24*	White	3 F 1 M	1 – 10 years	GCSE	BTEC, NVQL3, SENCO, NVQ Assessor, Highscope**, 'various short courses'
Experts (n = 4)	University lecturer; university researcher; manager of early childhood service	45 - 55	White	3 F 1 M	20 – 30 yrs	Degree	Teaching Management studies Advanced diploma in early childhood studies NVQ Assessor Art Diploma

*one was older but did not specify an age. ** Highscope is a training programme with an 'active learning' curriculum focus

Observer groups were alerted in advance to the fact that the video was a case example and not a representation of all childcare. Observer groups were encouraged to make comments about anything that came to mind in response to the practice they saw. The groups were audio and video recorded; recordings were fully transcribed, and annotated with a record of group dynamics and body language. The transcriptions were summarised according to cross-nationally agreed headings. Each verbal comment or 'intervention' and any discussion that followed was listed so the researcher could identify what stimulated comments and how the discussion developed. These interventions and interpretations of the data formed the first stage of analysis, as the process enabled patterns and common themes to be discerned.

The data thus assembled, analysis proceeded informed by a long standing interest in directions in children's services policy and in Rose's theories about changing forms of governmentality. This led to an analysis of the relationship of practice understandings to policy rhetoric and to new ways of understanding the worker in their relation to the work. The process of analysis was one of working with a combination of transcript summaries to organise the data and identify recurring topics that provoked comment and the transcripts themselves to locate the details of discussion and its development.

To summarise the method: initial inspiration from the *Preschool in Three Cultures* method developed by Tobin and colleagues in their use of videos as a research stimulus and the development of multiple 'voices' concerning three cross-cultural examples of care practice was adapted for use across both elder care and childcare settings. Study participants or observers were conceptualised as knowledgeable experts whose spontaneous comments revealed much about their perspectives on and understandings of care work.

Emergent Themes

The most frequently recurring topics in the English study of childcare practice were the pace of the work, which was related to the ethos and atmosphere conveyed in the videos; the environment and the organisation of the daily work in childcare centres; and independence, choice and its place in work with young children (Cameron and Clark 2004). These themes were discussed in relation to cross nationally identified themes in Hansen and Jensen (2004).

For reasons of space this paper will focus on one theme - that of understandings of choice and independence as expressed by care worker and expert observer groups arising from their observation of case examples of practice in English, Danish and Hungarian childcare centres. Links between the comments made by observers and the main policy documents relevant to English early childhood curriculum, including *The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*[3] (QCA 2000), which sets out the principles for early years education, will be drawn on in the account that follows to show how the comments made by observers are embedded in the governing regulatory framework of the curriculum guidance.

Choice and independence: use of the term 'choice'

English observers largely expressed the idea of independence through the term 'choice' and by privileging the discourse of choice in children's daily experience of early years settings. Giving children choices during their time in childcare centres was frequently discussed as a valuable part of daily life. It was seen as an essential method of enabling children to practise decision-making and being 'independent'. This was demonstrated in the comment made by a worker, who referred to the approach in her nursery, where the aim was to ensure that when children go to school they have self-reliance skills:

> I think, when you start it, even like with the babies, don't you, start it from the very beginning, and you can see as they go through… And obviously they're a lot more developed as they get older, but things like going to the

---

[3]The Foundation Stage is a national curriculum for children aged 3 -5 in England. All settings that receive public funding should be using the Foundation Stage. It has six areas of learning, each of which has related early learning goals. These are: personal social and emotional development; communication language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development, and creative development. The Curriculum Guidance is intended to help practitioners plan to meet the diverse needs of children to achieve and go beyond the early learning goals by the age of five.

toilet, washing their hands afterwards, being allowed to reach the paper

towels, get their own paper towels and wipe their own hands… just sort of

little things like that throughout the day sort of improves their independency.

And the choice throughout the day as well. So sort of *choosing their own*

toys, and allowing them to move round to each area. (emphasis added)

For this observer, independence was interpreted as training for self-accomplishment, which should be built into everyday interaction and into the organisation or the environment. Being able to exercise choice was linked to the structure of the day. One of the expert observers argued that children should be able to freely choose from a wide range of options:

As far as I could see, what was going on was sponge painting, and if you

weren't sponge painting you were sitting on the carpet playing with

whatever you wanted to play with, but *there wasn't much choice* because it

was all the same sort of toys, wasn't it? (emphasis added)

Alongside having structures that facilitated making choices, observers thought children should have 'space' to make choices. One expert observer said 'And giving children, in a way, giving the children the space to make the choice and be in the home corner, for instance, when you want to have that quiet [time].' This reference to 'space' refers to 'time freedom' from (adult) interference, as much as to the need for physical space, and relates to the Foundation Stage principle of giving children 'time to become engrossed, work in depth and complete activities' (QCA 2000).

Possible tension between individuality, groups and structures in nurseries

Children's choice making can be facilitated (or not) by the organisation of the day, but what are the values held about choice as a goal? Exercising choice can prompt decisions about whether to value individuality or a group ethos or both. The values held and decisions made about individuality, groups and the structure of daily life in nurseries are a key issue in the expression of regulatory regimes.

For some English observers, choice was seen as something tied into an idea about individuality and the nursery as a place where individual needs are met. Discussing the English video, one expert thought 'There wasn't much choice in the whole day' and 'It was all, "We're going to do this, or that"'. Another observer thought this 'might be an ethos of the idea that we're in a group and we're doing … the dough is out and that's what we're doing'. Both of these observers here highlight a possible tension between the ethos of individuality or children exercising choice and that of collectivity or providing group activities that require participation, something that implies conformity to a routine. Observers juxtaposed 'choice' and 'group ethos' and in so doing implicitly favoured an individual approach.

Watching Hungarian childcare practice prompted another English expert observer to comment on the issue of working simultaneously with individuals and groups; she said:

> There isn't a lot of children playing on their own, completely on their own, in this film, I don't think. I haven't seen many examples of that. And that's not in any way a criticism, because obviously the individual is very important

and respected, but there is quite a focus on the group as well, and the wholeness of the group.

This comment highlighted the experts' view that an important element of early childhood practice was to retain a focus on individuality and the 'wholeness of the group'. Maintaining children's expression of their individuality through choices in the context of group routines was discussed as a nursery management issue by experts. It had repercussions for the organisation and structure of the day, for it led to questioning of the primacy of the adult-created timetable. Individual choices to do something different were seen as important yet difficult to protect by this expert observer:

Whatever you do it will be adult-managed because they are in an adult-created environment. But I think within that, if you give children the opportunities to make their choices and to persist with something, and put it to one side and say, 'I'm coming back to that.' Yes, perhaps there is going to be snack time, and it's going to be that everybody gets together and has snacks. Or everybody gets together and has a story and song, or… But if my play dough, or my building can be over there then I can come back to it.

Overall, observers' comments revealed a tension between two goals of early childhood practice: first, enabling children to exercise choice and so develop their individuality and second, that of providing a structured day which accords with the demands of the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000).

Expert observers comments also suggested that this tension should be resolved by privileging the individual's time and opportunities to make choices over the timetable of the day, an approach supported by the Foundation Stage principles: '[children] need time to explore if they are to be satisfied with a piece of learning. Sometimes this may mean that the practitioner needs to be flexible in what they had planned for the session. Sometimes it may mean finding ways for children to return to activities at a later time' (QCA 2000: 20). Study participants were drawing attention to a key area of tension, that between the group, the individual and the structure of the day. Foregrounding individuality is a key tenet of valuing the modern ideal of freedom, a concept which can be double edged (Rose, 1999: 67). On the other hand, giving primacy to the group as an entity may be to promote a social ideal around reciprocity and solidarity and be organizationally convenient. Rinaldi (2005) argued that the group and the individual do not have to be positioned as in opposition, but can be interdependent. Through techniques of 'multiple listening' Rinaldi argued that practitioners can make individuality become visible within groups: her maxim is: I can discover this individuality because you exist'. By changing the everyday structures and the methods of communication between adults and children, tensions between pursuing individuality and the group can be addressed.

Choice and creativity

Lack of choice was also seen as inhibiting creativity. Childcare workers viewing the Hungarian film were critical of what they saw as a lack of choice during a play dough activity. Children were asked which one colour they would like to play with and were given a small ball of play dough. Such a restriction on colours and

quantities was thought to be detrimental to 'creativity' as the following care worker explained:

> I mean, she gives him the choice of colour, but they can only have one colour and a little bit, as well. Rather than, like, 'Here's the play dough, off you go.' *Gestures outwards*. So they can't…I don't think they could be very creative with it.

Asked what the possible rationale might be for this approach, the workers thought it might be to do with not having mixed colours of play dough to deal with or to do with 'tidiness'. One said she could not understand why they did it: she said, 'It threw me'.

The implication of this observer's linking of choice and creativity derived from her belief that unrestricted access to resources is an important determinant of self-expression. In explaining such a view, she has the support of the principles outlined in the curriculum guidance to the Foundation Stage, which state that learning is a rewarding and enjoyable experience in which young children 'explore, investigate, discover, *create*, practice, rehearse, repeat, revise and consolidate their developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes' (QCA, 2000: 20, emphasis added). According to these principles, creativity is planned for and enabled through rich and stimulating resources and experiences provided by workers, rather than something that happens spontaneously – although spontaneous play should be supported and extended when it occurs (QCA 2000: 25).

Experts raised the issue of the worker exercising control in relation to the play dough scene in a slightly different way. One expert referred to there being a 'strange mixture' of a directive approach where the worker was handing out portions of play dough, and at the same time giving the children an instruction to 'do what you like with it'. This was perceived as inconsistent. However, experts also commented on how elements of choice were actively promoted in the Hungarian video. They said there were 'lots of examples of giving children choices', using phrasing to emphasise choice such as 'what colour would you like?' rather than 'what colour is this?' They noted that the former phrasing accorded with the principles of 'free flow conversation' rather than the latter, which implied testing knowledge. Experts praised the way a child was given two choices during rest time (to read or to sleep) while interestingly the same group were more critical of a parallel scene in the English video where children being read a story were given two choices (to lie down or sit down). In response to this scene, an expert observer said, 'And then a story, but you can't stand up, you can only sit down or lie down, you can't actually interact'.

Independence or freedom?

It was striking that the word 'choice' did not come up at all in care workers' and experts' discussions of the Danish video. One expert observer thought that workers were more inclined to give instructions to the children than choices: 'There are quite a lot of instructions as well, to do this and tie this'. Referring to a scene in which a child asks if she may sit down, the same observer reacted that rather than viewing this as 'polite and nice', it seemed 'quite regimented, isn't it? If they have to ask if they can sit down.'

17

Notwithstanding this perception of 'instructions', many comments about the Danish video referred to children having freedom of movement and of expression. Observer groups were divided in their reactions to this apparent freedom among children, which appeared to obviate the need to discuss more limited 'choice making'. Expert observers were more critical of the Danish practice while care workers largely approved. Taking the expert observers' views first, at one point in the video a little boy challengingly put his foot on his lunchbox on the meal table, and no worker intervened to say anything. One expert talked about this scene as 'disappointing' for the boy, who appeared to be seeking some response and did not get any. The observer interpreted this 'freedom' as the boy feeling that 'nobody cares' while another remarked that a member of staff would be likely to respond to the boy putting his second foot up in a 'matter of fact' way as: 'how true. So you have.'

Expert observers understood the Danish practice as encouraging children's independence but viewed this quite critically, as an apparently 'matter of fact' approach to work with young children. It bordered on lack of care. One expert explained her view:

> But, it still…it still feels very…it's sort of matter of fact, you know. They're in nappies, they're two, they're two and a half, it's not a problem. You know, when you're two and a half you take your own nappy off, so that's alright. It's kind of those sort of feelings, I think, that are coming across, you know. And eating your lunch, and taking your lunchbox back. You know, 'See if you can try again to put the lid on'.

The point at which independence slides into perceived lack of care was also referred to in comments made about the structure and organisation of the Danish setting. The child can show his self-mastery or independent abilities because the environment was organised to expect it of him. For example, an expert observer described a scene where a small boy took off his own nappy, disposed of it and got a new one out as 'extraordinary … the chap who put his own nappy up, that was quite outrageous' and viewed this as a cultural contrast from practice in England: 'You realise how completely culturally set you are in nappy tables, and having nappies all up on the shelf round them'.

The 'independence' that expert observers were seeking and praising in the English and Hungarian practice was, in their interpretation of Danish practice, taken to an extreme that provoked discomfort. Study observers were committed to an approach to independence that favoured structured opportunities for children to express themselves creatively and to show their competence in self-management. The expert observer groups' reaction to the Danish video makes visible the strength of this commitment and this group of observers' departure from what was described as a 'live and let live' approach to young children's daily life as seen in this Danish early childhood setting.

Study childcare workers, on the other hand, admired the level of freedom and independence that children appeared to have in the Danish video, and how this appeared to be helped by having little of a sense of routine, compared to their workplaces. One care worker explained that the balance of routine and spontaneity seemed different. The Danish workers appeared to expect children

to be independent rather than their having to consciously promote children's opportunities for independence. An observer explained:

Just the whole thing of knowing the routine of what they're doing all the time. I mean, our children, they know the routine, and we do try to give them a certain amount of independence, but it just seems to come out from there that, you know, taking his lunch box back to the lockers, and taking the nappies and putting it in the bin, and going to get the cloth, as well, to wipe the mess, and stuff like that. I think that's quite popular, I mean, in every practice, I think they quite encourage it, but … it just seemed to come out on the video a lot.

Another care work practitioner admired the expectation of independence, saying that:

It's really nice because the [children] seem to almost be trained to do everything by themselves. Because I think they've had, like, that independence right from when they're really young. Like, they're all putting coats on. So, like, when it comes to things like that … They just do it, don't they?

One of the observers attributed this self-management to giving children time and space to do things for themselves, especially in the 'in-between moments'. She called it 'leisurely time' or 'leaving enough time so they can do stuff'. This practitioner said:

I think it's giving children the time, isn't it? Like you said, the in between things. Putting coats on, changing nappies, washing hands, whatever, the

tidying up, it was all given time enough. It's all giving children time and
space to be able to do that, really. So it's not…well, nothing was rushed,
was it?

Care worker observers agreed that the pace of the day was important to
enabling children to show their independence. They identified the Danish
workers as being calm, and not rushing in response to events. One said that
workers were 'not freaking out over, like, spilled milk or anything', and in
response to a scene where a young child toddled in a corridor, apparently alone
with a group of older children, there 'wasn't any sort of rushing over and … the
baby who was walking along the corridor, [with those] big children, and there
didn't seem to be any adults'.

However, English care workers' praise of the Danish children's freedom was
tempered by some reservations about the methods of organising the freedom the
children appeared to have. In response to a scene where a baby was left to
sleep in a pram outside, apparently unsupervised, concerns were raised about
the child's safety. One observer said:

you can't see whether there's, like, a fence around, or whatever. I know
that sounds a bit dramatic, but just leaving the baby outside in the
pushchair… I mean, I was left outside in a pushchair as a child and my
mum was fine about that, but… *She pulls a face as if unimpressed*.

In another scene, a small group of children went out with bikes with one worker.
Care workers contrasted this with their own preparations for going out, which
involved going in pairs, taking mobile phones, and counting children in and out

and talking to the other staff. One said: 'You don't seem to see them counting out the children, and letting others know where they're going' and another agreed it was risky going alone in case a child was hurt or changed their minds:

Because one of them fell off and hurt himself, and she obviously had to comfort that child… *pointing at TV* …and, like, if he hurt his leg and couldn't walk, how far away is she? … But I still think I'd feel safer if someone else was there, just in case one of them wants to go back. Or doesn't want to ride it any more or gets stubborn. She's got to carry that, and the little one.

This observer groups' understanding of outdoor practice was rooted in concerns for children's and staff safety, but they also understood the value of freedom of movement for young children. Despite their reservations, care workers agreed that 'It's lovely for the children, though, to have that freedom and that park next door'. This juxtaposition of comments draws attention to how these observers are working the tension between risk and freedom inherent in a shift towards an advanced liberal society. One member of the expert group pointed out that the level of children's freedom outdoors was helped by the built environment: the Danish video showed an underpass taking the children from the early childhood setting to the nearby park without going onto the road. She attributed this to a strong societal valuing of children:

One of the things about how society feels about their children was … there was an underpass under the road, by the looks of things … you're thinking about those things as you're planning your buildings, so that you're not worrying about … constantly worrying about safety on the roads.

In summary, comments from expert and care worker observer groups showed that notions of choice and independence were linked to understandings of the importance of practising decision making, expressing individuality, exercising creativity and experiencing freedom.

Interpretations of independence

English observers' interpretation of children's choices and independence appeared to relate closely to the policy goals of the curriculum document in place, namely the Foundation Stage. This foregrounds children's learning on the basis of what they already know; on a structured and relevant curriculum; on self-initiated activities as well as planned activities: 'Well-planned, purposeful activity and appropriate intervention by practitioners will engage children in the learning process and help them make progress in their learning' (QCA 2000: 11).

Alongside this evidence of policy goals as expressed in curriculum document being embedded in the discourse of knowledgeable experts, there was also evidence that that the latter viewed children as not only learners, but also as competent, independent and becoming self-reliant. The childcare workers' role was frequently discussed in terms of promoting this agenda, so her or his job was to encourage children to display their competence and be independent. For example, it was said that the childcare worker should 'maximise learning opportunities' for children, by doing things alongside them and not for them. The converse of this approach was 'learned helplessness', or children who believe they lack ability and feel frustrated (Dweck 1978), that in the words of one expert observer, arises when 'people leap in too quickly … often the adults who are

23

working with children quite like doing things, like creative things … [and] you do end up sort of thinking, 'I'll just get this done quickly'.'

Equally, comments from both care worker and expert groups about independence showed that they adhered to a particular version of independence which was not unfettered 'freedom' for children to do what they want, but took the form instead of carefully structured multiple choice making. Independence was seen as something to train children in, to introduce into nurseries by way of presenting choices and varying the structures. This appeared to be motivated by the idea of an outcome, that of being ready for school, where children would have to be much more self-managing. This has roots in a broader debate within education, and, in particular, the idea of self-reliance as a necessary ingredient for a disposition to learn (QCA/DfEE 1999).

A second interpretation of independence, also favoured by both care workers and experts, was the opportunity for self-expression, particularly evident in the art activity sessions, where having a wide choice of materials and resources was seen as important in allowing children free rein over their imagination. This view has clear roots in the liberal tradition of 'learning through play' (c.f. Darling 1994).

A third way of interpreting independence was as a 'way of life'. Here the child was conceptualised as making their own decisions from the moment they entered the centre, and where independence seemed much more like freedom to do what you like. Overall, the observers in this study were divided in their views about this kind of independence, with the care worker group much more enthusiastic about this approach to early childhood practice than the expert

group, but they also expressed some reservations, particularly, as noted above, about the implications for children's safety.

Across both English observer groups 'choice' was therefore seen as a child's means of expressing independence in a group setting. It was a mediating device between structure and freedom, and between group life and enabling individual expression. Choice was also seen as a training method for decision-making and self-reliance, skills that would shortly be needed in harsher or busier environments such as school. But choice was not discussed, so perhaps not seen as so relevant, in discussing Danish practice, where the whole environment was designed around freedom. Arguably, making individual choices has a central place in the political agenda of advanced liberal societies and it may be that nurseries, and the children who inhabit them, are situated as a site for the expression of that agenda.

The place of independence in the English national agenda
If the image of an 'independent' child is predominant in contemporary early childhood practice, as these observers suggest it is, where does the valuing of independence originate from? It may be that the theories and terminology of emergent debates in childhood studies have combined with a policy agenda of individual educational achievement curricula and targets in early years services aimed at achieving 'learning goals' to create a consensus in the policy and practice mainstream that values individuality and independence. This is a complex area: further contributions to the discourse are ideas of individualism and autonomy currently dominant in liberal political and economic agendas (Rose 1999), and ideas about children's rights and autonomy reflected at least in

25

part by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child. Not all observers concurred with a perspective that promoted competent young children practicing independence, but a discourse of children's competence did seem to be percolating through the care workers comments as well as those of some experts.

The principles of the Foundation Stage provided in national curriculum guidance do not refer directly to 'independence' as such but imply it through references to children planning and making 'decisions for themselves, thus enabling them to learn, develop and make good progress' (QCA 2000: 11). Hendy and Whitebread (2000) have, however, pointed to earlier policy references to independence in early years (for example in the Early Learning Goals (QCA/DfEE, 1999) and in Ball's (1994) report for the Royal College of Arts), which express similar ideas about independence assisting learning and self-expression.

Ideas about independence in education have deep seated roots in the liberal movement of the early twentieth century. In England, Montessori (c.f. Bruce 1997) and the MacMillan sisters (Tizard et al. 1976) developed these ideas in day nurseries, and similar ideas were promoted by John Dewey who believed that 'education could best contribute to society by producing self-governing individuals capable of independent thought and able to question the social world of which they are a part' (MacNaughton, 2003: 158). In considering how this might be achieved, Dewey coined the phrase 'children learn by doing'; a sentiment often regarded as central to contemporary 'learning through play' philosophies. This is the liberal, reforming approach to early education, where

the core aim is the growth and development of each individual child. In practice, this means 'maximising a child's personal growth and development and drawing out the child's inner capacities' (MacNaughton 2003:160). In the 1960s, this philosophy won the support of a national report into primary education in England, which said: 'play in the sense of "messing about"… is vital to children's learning and therefore vital in school' (DES 1967:193).

The English national curriculum framework for those working with very young children, *Birth to Three Matters* (SureStart 2003), also mentions independence, but this time in the context of very young children being vulnerable and the role of significant adults in separation and developing autonomy: 'young children are vulnerable. They learn to be independent by having someone they can depend upon'. With this age group, interdependent relationships are seen as key: 'to appreciate what they can do independently, children need supportive relationships through which they can develop self confidence, a belief in themselves and healthy self-esteem' (Sure Start 2003: 62). High quality interaction is also seen as important for learning independence: 'Warm attachments and positive responses leads to children becoming socially adept, self-assured, independent and interdependent, higher achievers in their later early childhood and school settings' (ibid.).

These policy and framework documents interpret independence as assisting children's development as learning and socially competent beings. This is supported by the findings of Sylva et al. (2003): preschool attendance of any kind improved all aspects of children's cognitive development and social behaviour including their independence. Sylva et al. (2003) concluded that 'effective'

settings for learning and development had freely chosen play activities and an equal balance of child initiated and adult initiated activities. Effective practice required intellectual challenge and open-ended questions during child-initiated activities to extend the shared thinking, and the best opportunities for these exchanges appeared to come from freely chosen activities. One conclusion from Sylva's study is that children require independence to function in the social or educational setting and to develop their cognitive abilities.

An alternative interpretation of independence can be found in debates on children's rights in early years settings. Rather than seeing young children as becoming or developing, children are here seen as competent individuals whose ideas, approaches to life, choices and relationships are of interest in their own right (Clark et al. 2003), and adults have a responsibility to both discover and respect children's 'being' (Nutbrown 1996; James and Prout 1997). This understanding of children is common in the four Scandinavian countries included in a recent OECD report on early years care and education: 'the early childhood institution should contribute, alongside the parents, to the individual child's development and well-being, which is generally interpreted as learning to live in society and sharing a society's fundamental values, including respect for autonomy and independence' (OECD 2002: 64).

Essential or diverse understandings of 'independence' in early childhood?
Understandings of independence among the English observers in this study varied but were firmly located within the advanced liberal discourse: both groups viewed choice making as an expression of independence, and independence

was much valued as a prerequisite for 'learning', itself positioned as something that takes place within highly governed educational institutions.

But while the term 'independence' has resonance in other cultures, understandings of it and its place in early childhood settings vary, and this may relate to variations in the ways in which the advanced liberal discourse is played out. Findings from the parallel studies in Hungary and Denmark suggest that different interpretations of the place of independence in early childhood practice were operating.

For example, in the study of Hungarian observers (Korintus et al. 2004), a country in a state of economic and social transition but informed by the 'social state' (Rose 1999), the idea of independence was also present, but in this case independence meant training for self-reliance in relation to body care such as toileting and dressing. Observers commented that, '[English] children may be more independent in terms of their personality and their expression of opinion, yet they do not, for example, put on their shoes on their own. While care work … includes training for independence, not much importance is attributed to self-reliance' (Korintus et al. 2004: 15).

Findings from the Danish study supported the idea that English practice was embedded in a learning discourse (Hansen and Jensen 2004) and that this was quite different from the Danish solidaristic discourse, which in turn was located in the 'social state'. These authors drew attention to what appeared to the Danish observers as practice in England that was externally governed by an institutional or school rationale. Day-to-day life as it was portrayed in the English video

appeared to be highly controlled by adults, and practice was oriented towards the 'learning' child. By contrast, their observations of the Danish video were that it represented a childhood rationale, where 'children's acquisition of experiences and making discoveries on their own terms' held centre stage (Hansen and Jensen 2004:53). Rather than discuss 'independence', Danish observers foregrounded 'interdependence': they understood children as 'co-actors of practice', where friendships and play and children taking initiatives were important. Individual self expression and community life were not seen as in opposition, but both were a precondition for becoming a 'free human being' (Jensen 2004: 6). While similar ideas about the 'wholeness of the group' were made by some English observers, the purpose of this discourse appeared quite different: no mention of the pursuit of freedom, or the idea of children's actions and initiatives taking precedence was made by the English observers who had watched the same case examples. However, just as English observers may be governed by predominant discourses of the importance of choice and structure in daily life, the Danish observers' understandings of early childhood practice may be governed by prevailing ideas about the importance of children's pursuit of individual expression (Kjørholt 2005).

Conclusions

Notions of children's choice and independence had a central place in the concerns of English practitioners and experts in this study, revealed through their spontaneous observations about the 'everyday' in early childhood practice. The value of independence was linked in their observations to children's decision-making, to children's creativity, to their individuality and freedom of movement. Such values ascribed to independence in turn reflect a particular cultural and

30

ideological moment in the English discourse about early childhood. Study participants' interpretations of independence were clearly embedded in the curriculum guidance in place in England at the time of the research. Independence was valued where it was located within a recognisable structure for daily life: too much independence or freedom could become matter of fact care, or even the unsupervised neglect of children. Looked at cross-nationally, however, English observers comments appeared culturally specific rather than universal in their significance: Hungarian observers paid more attention to independence through self-mastery of body care, while Danish observers thought the English practice was overly concerned with opportunities for controlled learning.

The close alignment between policy rhetoric and observers' spontaneous comments illustrates the power of governmentality: internal regulation was evident alongside external frameworks. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005:22-3) comment, we cannot escape from dominant discourses that shape how we think about early childhood practice but we can privilege curiosity about practice and make ethical and political choices. Through governmentality we can see a paradox at work in the advanced liberal state. One the one hand, the autonomous individual is valorised as engaging in individual relationships and self-expression. On the other, beliefs and ideas about early childhood practice are highly regulated through social governance. Perceptions of 'independence' are in fact always constrained: 'free individuals' are acting out socially approved choices. It as if the advanced liberal state cannot, in the end, trust individuals to act independently and needs a regulatory regime to ensure the continuance of its discourse under the guise of 'free will'. By relating observers' comments on early

childhood practice to wider discourses of governmentality, we are returned to the argument posed originally by Tobin, that cultural beliefs can be obtained through stakeholders' meanings, but with a new twist. The study of observers of early childhood provides a site for the revealing of their values and beliefs which may be culturally determined: it also provides an example of how wider theories about social relations and the state relate to observers of early childhood.

7, 890 words 5 January 2006

References

Ball, C. (1994) *Start Right – the importance of early learning.* London: Royal College of Arts

Berry, P and G. McKenna (1995) Adolescents with Attitudes: Using Video and the National Curriculum to broaden drugs education in schools, *Drugs;Education, Prevention and Policy* 2 (1) 59 – 64

Bruce, T. (1997) *Early Childhood Education* (2nd edition). London: Hodder and Stoughton

Cameron, C. and A. Clark (2004) *Video Observation Study of Childcare Work:UK National Report*, unpublished report. Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

Dahlberg, G. and P. Moss (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early ChildhoodEducation*. London: Routledge Falmer

Darling, J. (1994) *Child-Centred Education and its Critics*. London: PaulChapman

Publishing Department of Education and Science (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools: A report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) Volume 1: The Report*. London: HMSO (The Plowden Report)

Draghi-Lorenz, R. (2000) Five-Month old Infants can be jealous, Symposium' Jealousy in Young Infants: A new area of research'. Available at:http://www.isisweb.org/icis2000program/web_pages/group32.html

Dweck, C.S. (1978) Achievement, in M.E. Lamb (ed) *Personality Development.* New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston

Erlandsson, L-K. and M. Eklund (2001) Describing Patterns of Daily Occupations a methodological study comparing data from four different methods *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 8 (1) 31-39

Fendler, L. (2001) Educating Flexible Souls: the construction of

subjectivity through developmentality and interaction, in K. Hultqvist and G.

Dalhberg (eds),*Governing the Child in the New Millennium.* New York: Routledge

Falmer

Hansen, H.K. (2003) *Sophos: a model for second-order phenomenological*

observation, unpublished paper. Jydsk Pedagogic Seminarium, Aarhus,Denmark

Hansen, H.K (2004) *Anxiety Ambivalence and Learning in Care Work with*

Elderly People, Paper presented at the seminar 'women's work'. Inter University

centre, Dubrovnik, 28 June – 2 July 2004

Hansen, H.K and J. J. Jensen (2004) *A Study of Understandings in Care*

and Pedagogical Practice: Experiences using the Sophos Model in cross

national studies Consolidated report. available at

http://www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru/carework

Hendy, L. and D. Whitebread (2000) Interpretations of Independent Learning in

the Early Years. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 8 (3) 243 –252

James, A. and A. Prout (1997) (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing*

Childhood: Contemporary issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood.

London:Falmer Press

Jensen, J. (2004) *A Study of Understandings of Pedagogical Practice in Centre*

based Services for Young Children: experiences using the Sophos

method. paper presented at European Early Childhood Education

Research Association conference, Malta, 1 – 4 September

Kjørholt, A. (2005) The competent child and the right to be oneself: Reflection on

children as fellow citizens in a day-care centre, in A. Clark, A. Kjørholt and

P.Moss (eds), *Beyond Listening :Children's perspectives on early*

childhood services. Bristol: Policy Press

Korintus, M., G. Vagda and Z. Török (2004) *Video Observation Study of Childcare Work, Hungarian National Report.* unpublished report. National
      Institute for Family and Social Policy, Budapest

Lomax, H. and N. Casey (1998) Recording Social Life: Reflexivity and Video Methodology. *Sociological Research Online* 3 (2) available at http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/3/2/1.html

MacNaughton, G. (2003) *Shaping early childhood: learners, curriculum and contexts.* Open University Press: Maidenhead

Moyles, J. (2001) *The Development of Primary Teacher's Understanding and use of interactive teaching.* conference paper available at http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001010.htm

Nutbrown, C. (1996) *Respectful Educators – Capable Learners: Children's Rights and Early Education.* London: Sage

Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (2002) *Starting Strong:Early Childhood Education and Care.* Paris: OECD

Prout, A. and A. James (1997) A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood Provenance, Promise and Problems, in A. James and A. Prout (eds)*Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood.* London: Falmer Press

QCA/DfEE (1999) *Early Learning Goals.* London: DfEE

QCA/DfEE (2000) *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage.* London: QCA available at http://www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/foundation/223.html#Download%20curriculum%20guidance

Richardson, H. and C. Potter (1999) Facilitating Classroom Assistant's Professional Reflections through video workshops. *British Journal of Special Education* 26 (1) 34-36

Rinaldi, C., G. Dahlberg and P. Moss (2005) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia.* London: Routledge

Rose, N. (1989) *Governing the Soul: the shaping of the private self.* London:Routledge

Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of Freedom: reframing political thought.* Cambridge:Cambridge University Press

SureStart (2003) *Birth to Three Matters,* available at

http://www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/birthtothreematters/

Sylva, K., E. Melhuish, P. Sammons, I. Siraj-Blatchford, B. Taggart and K. Elliot(2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project: Findings from the Pre-school Period, Summary of findings.* Institute of Education,University of London, available

at http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/ecpe/eppe/eppe/eppepdfs/eppe_brief2503.pdf

Tizard, J., P. Moss and J. Perry (1976*) All Our Children: Preschool services in a changing society*. London: Maurice Temple Smith

Tobin, J., D. Wu and D. Davidson (1989) *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States.* New Haven: Yale University Press

Tobin, J. (1999) Method and Meaning in Comparative Classroom Ethnography,in R. Alexander, P. Broadfoot and D. Phillips (eds) *Learning from Comparing:new directions in comparative educational research, Volume one,Contexts, Classrooms and Outcomes.* Oxford: Symposium Books