WHAT MAKES ALL-DAY PROVISION SATISFACTORY FOR 3- AND 4-YEAR OLDS?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of an investigation of the experiences of 3- and 4-year olds who had all-day provision, either in one pre-school education and care setting or from a combination of providers. Here the data gathered about the children's experience and perspectives is reported. The evidence from the children suggests that if all-day provision is to give them satisfaction then activities that match their individual preferences are essential. The tension between allowing children to make their own choices and pressures to ensure a 'balanced curriculum' is identified. Behavioural indicators and the children's responses suggested that all-day provision was a predominantly positive experience in all settings. Adults were important to children but their need for adult attention fluctuated during the day. The social context and peer culture that children could create among themselves made a significant contribution to satisfaction with all-day provision but this required a supportive environment to flourish.

INTRODUCTION
This paper reports on an investigation of the experiences of 3- and 4-year olds who had all-day provision in pre-school education and care settings. The study was commissioned by the then Scottish Office Education Department (now the Scottish Executive Education Department) and was a departure in two ways from the research that they had previously commissioned. Firstly, this commission was concerned with all-day provision (moving away from the previous concern only with sessional 'educational' provision) and secondly, there was explicit interest in the child's experience and perspective (in contrast to the focus on the views of practitioners, parents and providers that had characterised earlier studies). In this paper the data gathered about the children's experience and perspectives is reported and implications for practice and policy considered. The expectations and judgements of parents, practitioners and providers are examined elsewhere (Stephen et al, 2001a, 2001b).

Our remit was carefully specified and we were asked to examine exclusively what constituted *good* all-day provision. At that time (1999-2000), as now, all-day pre-school provision in Scotland was characterised as a 'mixed economy' of education and care services for young children and their parents. Each 3- and 4-year old was offered weekly 12½ hours per week of government-funded pre-school provision in registered private, local authority or voluntary settings. Some of these settings offered an all-day service, available to families on a welfare basis or through the purchase of time beyond the government funded session. Alternatively parents were able to 'build' all-day provision from a combination of providers, perhaps a nursery class during the morning followed by an afternoon spent with a childminder or at a private nursery. The *Curriculum Framework for Children 3-5* (SCCC, 1999) set out the areas of experience and learning to which the pre-school child should have access. This *Framework* did not make any specific recommendations for all-day provision as such but was a statement of good practice and of the expectations of provision in receipt of government funding.

A search of the literature revealed a dearth of studies that focused explicitly on all-day provision in one centre or from a mix of providers or reported explicitly the perspectives of children. Nevertheless, it is clear that definitions of quality depend on the perspective of the stakeholder and the cultural environment (e.g. Woodhead, 1998; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, Tietze et al, 1996). However there is much less emphasis in the literature on one set of stakeholders, that is, the children. This study begins from the premise that children are actors in the pre-school experience and not passive recipients (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, Pollard and Filer, 1996). Earlier studies suggested that children did indeed hold particular perspectives on their experience, having defined likes and dislikes (Evans and Fuller, 1998) and that their emotional state at nursery can be influenced by their experience (Hestenes, Kontos and Bryan, 1993).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Research Design
A nested design (43 cases of children within 8 case studies of providers) was adopted for this project. Eight case study settings (each categorised as the main providers for one or more sample children) were selected to include a variety of care and education settings across the local authority (LA), private and voluntary sectors. These settings

were located in two local authority areas with different geographic and socio-economic profiles: one an urban city environment, the other an authority encompassing one large and several smaller towns with significant rural areas. However, both authorities had areas of socio-economic disadvantage and in each the LA all-day provision was located in an urban area of disadvantage. Both advocated child-centred playroom practice (maximising opportunities for uninterrupted free play) in their direct provision and for partnership providers in the private and voluntary sectors. Figure 1 describes the main providers in each LA area.

Figure 1 about here

At each setting selected as a main provider children who had all-day provision were identified. Some of these children had all-day provision with that main provider while others received all-day provision by a combination of sessions with that main provider and further time with one or more additional providers (other private all-day nursery settings, a childminder or nanny or a LA nursery class). Nested within each case study of a main provider were between one and 9 cases of individual children, and associated with these were cases of 13 additional providers contributing to all-day provision for young children. In reporting our findings here we will focus on evidence pooled across the settings.

Research Methods

Data from children
Two approaches were used to explore the children's experience of all-day provision, that is, talking to children about their experience and observing children to record both what they were doing and indicators of their affective states. The interview technique adopted with adults was clearly inappropriate for gathering the perspectives of children. Nevertheless, talking to children about their experience of all-day provision was an important part of this project and alternative means were sought so that their perspectives could be included. During a pilot stage we explored and abandoned a number of different ways of structuring and supporting conversations with children, including a felt board and pictures and toy furniture, play figures and equipment with which to 'build' a nursery. We also experimented with an adaptation of the innovative telephone technique, developed by Evans and Fuller (1996). The telephones were attractive to the children but their desire to use them as play objects made the technique difficult to manage for data collection.

One further technique was piloted and became the main resource for this study (supplemented by the use of a book of pictures of a nursery day). This technique (building on work initiated in Stirling Council) used line drawings depicting four facial expressions (happy, sad, sleepy and cross/angry) to facilitate children's discussion of their experiences. Children in the sample were invited to talk to the researcher in their playroom as opportunities presented themselves. Most of the children were enthusiastic about taking part, although a few declined the invitation or agreed to participate only at another time. The children switched the tape recorder on and off for the audio recording of the conversations and listened to parts of the recording if they wished.

A schedule for recording observations of children in the playroom (during play indoors and outside, group times and meal times) was designed and piloted. The first section recorded narrative accounts of the child's behaviour during arrivals and departures and during particular incidents (for example, if a child was unusually distressed, excited or content). The second part of the schedule was used to record the child's behaviour over timed periods throughout the day. The record included the time of day, the nature of the activity the child was engaged in (e.g. adult-led whole group story time or role play in the house with one other child), a record of the child's actions during the observation period and a description of behavioural indicators of affective state (using a list compiled during a pilot phase and added to as the study progressed). As there are no general, tested and accepted behavioural indicators of children's satisfaction and dissatisfaction our analysis adopted a pragmatic approach, of relatively high inference. The behavioural indicators recorded were categorised as indicating satisfaction when children displayed commonly accepted signs of pleasure (e.g. smiling, laughing, talking with animation) or were engaged in some activity or interacting with another with no signs of displeasure. On the other hand, behaviour displaying commonly accepted signs of displeasure or of tiredness (e.g. crying, resisting), behaving in a disruptive manner and wandering between activities was categorised as indicating dissatisfaction.

Data from adults
The perspectives of the adults were gathered by semi-structured interviews. The providers (that is the managers or owners of the main and additional provision settings) were interviewed in person. For each child in the study sample a playroom practitioner who knew him/her well (usually a key worker) was interviewed at their setting. Because they had children to care for throughout the day and no other assistance, some childminders were interviewed by telephone. Parents were interviewed by telephone.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE PLAYROOM: HOW DID THEY SPEND THEIR TIME?
Children at all the case study settings spent most of their time involved in activities which they had chosen from those set out and planned for them by practitioners. They may have been able to change the puzzles put out or request a change in the small world toys but on the whole they chose from among the equipment, resources (structured and unstructured) and learning opportunities already in the room when they arrived. Each of the case study settings offered government-funded places and, consequently, activities in each playroom were arranged in accordance with the practitioners' understanding of the recommendations of the *Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5*. Furthermore, the pattern of the children's day was shaped by a consensus across settings and sectors the there should be a mix of certain 'ingredients' (free play, time outside, small and large group activities, snacks, meals and time for toileting, washing and playroom tidying).

The evidence (across settings) did not suggest any clear difference between 3- and 4-year olds in the activities they were engaged in nor was there any evidence of clear gender difference in their activities. The curriculum experienced by any child on any one day reflected, to a large extent, the choices s/he made during free play. Provision was typically arranged to offer some activity from each curriculum area but children could and did choose to avoid one or more areas or to focus on a particular interest.

Practitioners however, were concerned with 'balance' in children's curricular experience and used the brief, daily small or whole group activities common across settings to ensure that each child was, to some extent, involved in each of the curriculum areas. However the degree to which children participate in and learn from adult imposed activities of this kind is open to question, as is the length of the period over which balance is necessary (a week was the typical planning period observed).

In addition to looking at curriculum areas the learning activities in which children spent their time were analysed in terms of the kinds of skills or areas of development that they were designed to promote. Again children's choices varied and influenced their learning experiences. Some children focused on learning opportunities designed to develop particular skills (e.g. one boy was engaged in manipulative and creative activities during half of the observations recorded) while others chose a broader range of activities, perhaps learning by listening or watching, followed by imaginative play, interacting with adults and physical activities. Despite this individuality, across all the sample children were more likely to be involved in developing manipulative and creative skills, learning by listening, watching and looking and developing life skills. Learning by sorting, categorising or matching, involvement in group games, musical activities, physical or imaginative play seldom dominated children's experience.

For nine of the 43 children in the sample involvement in activities designed to develop life skills and independence (e.g. eating, washing, tidying) was a dominant feature of their time in nursery. The degree to which children spent time on life skills was inevitably influenced by the way in which the daily programme was arranged. For instance, in settings where snacks were taken only as and when children wished to do so and tidying was only necessary at the end of the morning and afternoon much less time was spent on life skills than in settings where all meals and snacks (including hand-washing) were arranged as whole group activities and rooms were rearranged or tidied for shifts in the programme several times a day.

At three very different settings the observations of children in the playroom recorded all or most of the sample children there as 'not engaged' at least once. They were observed wandering around the room, flitting from activity to activity, picking up toys then rapidly putting them down again, passively waiting or gazing across the room. Elsewhere only about half of the sample children were recorded as 'not engaged' during any observations of their playroom activities. There is no clear difference between the settings that can account for this variation in engagement. The size of the setting may be influential but the degree of structure in the daily programme and playroom practice (whether passivity was permitted or children were actively directed) may contribute to this difference too. Factors particular to the child also influenced the likelihood that they would have periods when they were not engaged (e.g. being unsettled for a period or being reluctant to play with other children or adults).

Sand, water, dough, painting, small world toys, puzzles and small construction are staples of the pre-school playroom yet they were all among the activities less frequently engaged with by all-day children. Some of the activities 'infrequently' or 'occasionally' engaged with by our sample appealed only to relatively few children (e.g. water play or easel painting) or for brief periods (e.g. dough or looking at a book,

a computer game). There were no discernable differences between settings in the nature of the activities less frequently engaged in.

Group games, story time and singing all featured among the activities that children were observed taking part in more frequently (though often for brief periods). Group activities were planned and led by practitioners who used them as an opportunity to ensure that all children experienced particular aspects of the curriculum (e.g. music or listening to stories) or to facilitate the supervision of the children by a limited number of adults while others arranged equipment, set out meals or had breaks. To this extent the frequency of imposed group activities depended on the schedule and circumstances of the setting. Some child-initiated activities were more popular in some locations than others e.g. drawing and writing activities were more frequently chosen activities in two private settings and one local authority all-day provision. Only at one main provider (a nursery class) was looking at books and listening to stories read on request frequently chosen by children in the study. In contrast wherever physical play outside was available as a free-choice activity it was frequently chosen by all-day children.

Those children who stayed for extended hours (typically from 3.30 pm or 4 pm until about 5. 30 pm) in group settings (private or LA) experienced a change in the nature of provision at that time when a smaller number of children remained after the sessional children left. Typically they were gathered together in a restricted part of the playroom towards the end of the day and adults led selected activities (often described as a 'quieter activities'). Only at the wraparound setting did children experience a different environment at the end of the day when they moved from nursery school to the 'wraparound room' in a school nearby. Here the focus was not on adult direction but on giving choice at the end of the day, albeit from a different range of resources.

Children's experience with an additional provider was influence by whether this was group or home-based care. In group settings the focus in both main and additional settings was on provision in line with the *'Curriculum Framework'* areas, although there were some differences in opportunities e.g. whether large block play was available every day or free play outside was possible. On the other hand childminders or nannies emphasised letting children decide what to do (or to do nothing) and letting them feel at home rather than 'doing things with them' or offering planned activities. Play resources were more limited in home-based care but children had more opportunities to negotiate play possibilities there and they were involved in some of the same types of activities and play (e.g. role play, physical play, baking) as they experienced in group settings.

CHILDREN'S RESPONSE TO ALL-DAY PROVISION: SATISFACTIONS AND DISSATISFACTIONS

Behaviour During Arrivals And Departures
As well as the time sampled observations of behaviour, records were kept of incidents of particular note when children arrived at nursery, were collected or asked to change to a different period of activity. There were only occasional protests when children were asked to change to another activity, decided upon by staff. Indeed, children were observed (and overheard) anticipating change points in the well-known routines.

There were few observations of dissatisfaction when children were collected from nursery and none when they arrived. Most children came into and left the playroom quietly with greetings and farewells from parents and staff. They usually went to an activity quickly, sometimes after a brief walk around the room or waving to parents. Some were greeted by friends already in the playroom and invited to join in a game or activity. Occasionally children were cross because someone came to collect them when they were very involved in a game or were anticipating participation in something they enjoyed or felt they would miss out on. For instance, a boy who had just started to look at a book asked his father to go away again as he was not ready to leave.

The observations of children's behaviour were made after they had been with the main provider for at least 6 months and it is possible that observations earlier in the school year would have noted more evidence of dissatisfaction at arrival time and when children were departing. However, pilot observations were made (in different settings) during the autumn term and the two incidents of dissatisfaction on arrival identified then were notable because they were so unusual. There were no examples of children protesting or appearing dissatisfied when collected by a nanny or childminder or arriving at an additional provider.

Behaviour Observed In The Playroom
The observations of 3- and 4-year olds in the playroom suggested that children's experiences were predominantly positive in all settings, with typically 75-90 percent of observations indicating positive behaviour, indeed the behaviour of some children was positive on each observation recorded for them. There was no evidence that children were more dissatisfied, tired or unwilling to participate at particular times of day. This finding contrasts with the expectations of policy makers and the perception of some practitioners that children were at their best in the morning. Specific sources of satisfaction included pleasure in a newly acquired skill (e.g. pedalling a bike) or in a model completed. Children often showed rapt attention to a story or video and evident signs of pleasure when allowed to play outside and when participating in boisterous play inside or in verbal games such as rhyming or 'silly word' conversations with other children. A small number of children were observed interacting positively with other children much more frequently than were their peers. More generally, the sample children were observed positively engaged with activities, joining in, attending or listening to an adult, interacting with an adult or responding to adult requests and instructions.

A very few children were judged to be feeling rather less positive about their time in the nursery than the typical 75–90 percent observed. For each of these individuals there were particular circumstances influencing their behaviour on the day of observation. For instance, practitioners were already concerned about the behaviour of a child who showed signs of satisfaction on only 50 percent of the observations. When observations of children were categorised as indicating dissatisfaction with their experience in the playroom, they were most likely to be recorded as wandering or behaving aimlessly. Other evidence of dissatisfaction or of a negative experience observed included children breaking the rules, having their behaviour corrected or being sad or sleepy. Children were seldom seen being reluctant to join in with a game or activity and were never recorded as being clingy or crying for their mother or father. Of course children were momentarily upset by falls, bumps, something being

lost or 'broken' or if denied something by another child. These specific instances were brief and children were comforted or helped to resolve the problem by an adult.

The observations of the 3-year olds in the sample were examined for any evidence of distinctive features in the behaviour of this younger group who might have been expected to be more vulnerable and more likely to exhibit signs of negative affect or dissatisfaction. However, the evidence suggested that their experience of all-day provision was predominantly positive, with nothing to suggest that they were a more vulnerable group. They did however spend much of their time engaged in activities and interacting with adults, rather than other children. This finding is not unexpected; at their stage of development interactions with adults would be expected to be 'easier' than with other children. Where their behaviour suggested a more negative experience, it was largely one of disengagement: wandering apparently aimlessly or in passive detachment. Behaviour considered to be breaking the nursery rules was rare. There were examples of children being tearful or sleepy, but the 3-year olds did not appear to be more fractious, unhappy or 'difficult' than the older children.

THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR PLAYROOM EXPERIENCE
It was not possible to record conversations with every child and, as the coverage was 'patchy' across children (constrained for example by the topics they were willing to talk about), the data gathered were not amenable to systematic analysis. Children were free to choose to speak to the researcher or to end the conversation, to talk about the faces (happy, sad, sleepy, cross) or pictures of nursery used as prompts, or to recall their experiences of all-day provision in other ways they chose. The children were happy to talk about their routine or to identify with an emotional state portrayed in one of the four 'faces' shown, but some were unable to recall an incident to illustrate when they felt like that at nursery. Others could identify the affective state portrayed in another child, if not in themselves. For instance, looking at the sleepy face, one boy laughed and said 'Jack gets like that'. Some children were able to express a concern for the emotions of others as well as comment on their own. A girl talked about feeling 'fine' at home time, but was also able to point out that.

> When Mummy comes you don't make a fuss, if you make fuss your
> Mum'll be angry … and they get sad. (*Girl, LA all-day nursery*)

In all settings where children were recorded in conversation (only at the voluntary sector playgroup where the child in the sample was too shy to speak to the researcher was there no recorded interview) they were able to describe part or all of the nursery routine and the circumstances in which particular events took place or they could make certain choices. For example, one girl explained that they knew when it was possible to play outside because 'When you see the teachers getting their jackets on, that's when you go outside'. In response to questions about what they had been doing the children usually started by describing themselves as 'playing' at nursery. Playing appeared to be accepted as their role and to be a positive activity. If prompted further, most children were able to recall more specific activities. One boy described some of his morning activities.

> I used bread. I used the big love heart and then fitted the wee love
> heart in the middle of the big love heart . . . Well then I played with

the clay and coloured in a picture and painted a picture and played with the animals. (*Boy, private all-day nursery*)

Children were able to identify specific activities they enjoyed. At her private sector main provider a girl chose drawing and painting as activities she liked to do indoors and a boy mentioned 'the little house' and playing with the computer. At one of the LA nursery classes one of the girls said she preferred playing outside and that the shoot and the swing were things she liked playing on. Going outside was a generally popular activity, particularly for riding bikes. Some children who attended more than one setting were able to nominate different likes for each setting. For example, a girl said that at nursery playing ballet classes would give her a smiley face although the best thing was playing in the bricks. However, when she moved to the wraparound room the best thing for her was playing on the shoot. A boy chose the computer as the best thing to do at nursery, but said that looking at a Toystory collage he had made was the best thing at the wraparound room.

Receiving rewards was also a source of satisfaction. Asked what had pleased her that day a girl in a private nursery pointed to a sticker she had received for tidying up. Food could also elicit a positive or negative response. One boy was explicit about the way he felt at lunch time and the food he would prefer.

It's horrible at lunch time . . . Cos they have horrible macaroni … I like a piece and jam like in the house . . . I like the fruit but not the other stuff. (*Boy, LA all-day provision*)

Most children chose a happy face to indicate how they felt at nursery and denied that they were ever sad, cross or tired. Questions about how they felt when arriving at nursery or leaving generally provoked little response beyond something indicating 'fine'. On girl admitted that there were some days she would like to stay at home and play in her bunk bed, and a boy expressed ambivalent feelings about the end of the day. Asked what kind of face he had when he was going home he responded

I'm happy and sad. *Why are you sad?* 'Cos I don't want to go home. *And why are you happy?* 'Cos I want to go home. (*Boy, private all-day nursery*)

One child said that she was happy when she went to her nursery class in the morning but felt sad when she went to her other provider (one of the case study private nurseries) in the afternoon; she was unable to explain why she felt like this. Another explained that she put on a 'waiting face' when going to her childminder for the afternoon. (It is interesting to note that she was observed only minimally involved in play for much of the time with her childminder).

When they were talking about feeling happy or having smiley faces children often referred to other children telling them jokes, making them laugh or feel happy.

I get happy because every day when my friends tell me jokes … I tell them too…. We're all silly … we are just like silly guys. (*Boy, private all-day nursery*)

One boy suggested that another was happy. 'When I do funny things … when I tell jokes', and a girl also referred to a friend when talking about being happy.

> Sometimes Nicholas makes me laugh. He tells jokes and I tell jokes and then he laughs. (*Girl, LA nursery class*)

For her, as for others, friends were important. Although she was seldom observed playing with Nicholas during the nursery class, when asked to describe how she felt when arriving at nursery she made a face to demonstrate her feelings to the researcher. She went on to explain that the face indicated that she was 'looking for her friend'. This child denied getting cross about anything at nursery, but was quite explicit about an incident that involved older children at her childminder's home.

> Well, actually me and Nicholas had cross faces when Lizzie and somebody else came. They were playing stupid games and they were stupid … They went inside and they didn't let us come inside and so me and Nicholas made cross faces at the window. (*Girl, LA nursery class*)

Other children could, therefore, be a source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. A girl recalled an incident when one child had given cause her for dissatisfaction, but the others had had a more positive influence; another also referred to children who were a source of annoyance and of pleasure.

> I bumped that bit today which I was very sad about … *How did you get happy?* … People were fun to me but you know Alice pulled me to the ground and did hurt me and I had to have cream on it. *(Girl, private all-day nursery)*

> Sophie makes me happy… That Sophie … She's staying overnight at my house … After Morag sits beside me that makes me angry 'cos I'm not her friend. *(Girl, private all-day nursery*

In describing what made them sad or grumpy children referred to particular incidents (such as a fall) or to more general circumstances such as not having someone to play with, not getting something they wanted or having to do something in nursery that they did not want to do. A few children acknowledged that they got tired and sleepy occasionally, in particular circumstances (e.g. at crèche in the morning, when playing on the computer or 'when Mummy is a bit late').

DISCUSSION

This study allowed the researchers to explore the perspectives and experiences of children whose parents had chosen all-day pre-school provision (in a single setting or from a combination of settings). Gathering this evidence implies a willingness to consider the lessons inherent in it for any improvement or expansion of all-day provision. While they were ready to commission a study that included this evidence the policy makers were less confident about the way in which the children's perspectives could or should be taken into account when considering the implications of the research for policy. They were of course much more confident about including the views of parents and providers and practitioners in the process of policy

formation. Nevertheless the evidence of the children's experience and perspectives does raise pertinent issues for practice and policy, issues not necessarily evident in the data gathered from parents and practitioners.

From the evidence on the range and variation in the nature of the activities selected by children it is clear that a broad range of resources and learning opportunities is necessary if individual children are to be able to find the activity that satisfies them. The differences observed in the activities most often chosen at particular settings suggest that practitioners could profitable look at the choices being made in their settings (and how these change over time) in order to tailor provision and practice to children's actions. The children's pleasure in physical play outside was evident in the choices that they made, their responses and in the observations of their behaviour. While practitioners and providers recognised outdoor play as an essential component of good quality all-day provision it did not receive the priority in planning that might be expected from the children's perspectives nor was it a feature of free play at all of the settings involved in the study. At some it was restricted, for reasons of staffing and ease of access, to brief whole group sessions.

The children expected to play and were able to able to articulate their preferences in conversation with the researcher but it was the 'free play' activities they talked about not the group activities. Their practitioners also made very firm comments on the importance of such choices (espousing a child-led theory of practice), but at the same time our evidence suggested that children were taken away from freely chosen activities to participate in adult-led activities in order to 'balance' their experiences over a specified time period. The external pressure to account for a balanced curriculum, across a series of prescribed strands, is clearly in some tension with the priority to offer child-centred education, characterised by the choices individual children make. One example will serve to illustrate this tension. During every observation in free play one day a girl was recorded intently practicing riding a bicycle, a skill she had almost perfected. However, twice during the day this focused activity was interrupted when she was obliged to join in a small group activity planned to ensure experience (however peripheral) of each curricular area at least once per week.

The children's responses in the recorded conversations made clear the social context of the settings and the influence of other children on the experience of all-day provision. Those children who spent more time than most interacting with other children were more likely to be satisfied if their setting encouraged and supported informal play between peers and arranged for children's attendance patterns to support friendships. Children referred to enjoying the company of others, to jokes and fun and to belonging to a group. For these children satisfaction depended on the opportunities that all-day provision offered for peer groups to develop and for children to have fun together, without adults.

Parents and practitioners talked about children developing social skills in pre-school provision, learning to mix and share, but they were more concerned with this aspect of provision as an outcome than as a source of satisfaction and an integral part of the learning process. The children's evidence suggests that developing a peer culture can make an important contribution to children's satisfaction. In response to this finding it is important that adults seek ways to allow children to create a peer culture and

encourage a sense of belonging to a group. By that is implied the need to allow children to play creatively together, uninterrupted by adults and with a minimum of adult structure. It is generally accepted as good practice that an adult should sit with each small group of children as they eat lunch. Our observations at one setting offered a challenge to this conventional wisdom however. At one nursery where the children knew each other well and attendance was stable the 4-year olds ate together without an adult (a practitioner was in the room and served the food). During that time the children talked, shared jokes and references and played word games. Their behaviour showed clear indications of their mutual engagement and enjoyment and of a developing peer culture. Again, there is evident tension here with the desire to plan for and 'deliver' particular experiences to children, mediated by adults.

Nevertheless adults were clearly important for the 3- and 4-year olds. Many of the observations of children in a positive affective state recorded them listening or responding to adults and interacting socially with them. The children needed adults to comfort them when they were sad, help them to cope when they were cross and to notice when they were tired. On a few occasions adults could be said to give a child cause for dissatisfaction if they prevented him/her from doing something that they wanted to do or corrected their behaviour. There were, however, very few such occasions.

It is more difficult to make inferences about the experience of children who were observed to be *'not engaged'* or wandering. They may have been dissatisfied with the choice available to them at that time, or with their experience in that setting in general. Alternatively they may have been exercising a positive choice to have 'time out', in which case they may have found the opportunity to be disengaged satisfactory. Observations by practitioners who know the children well are needed to explore this aspect of behaviour more fully.

While this study was not designed to gather evidence on the impact of group size on children's behaviour or learning it does suggest that the child's experience is more likely to be influenced by the adult:child ratio in the playroom at any one moment, (particularly, at a time of stress, tiredness or uncertainty) and by the presence of an adult they are familiar with and who has a particular responsibility for them than any general notion of desirable group size. Furthermore during free play 'group size' and engagement with adults fluctuated and was, to some extent, under the child's control. What made a difference to children's affective state seemed to be the opportunity to seek and receive individual attention from adults when needed at different points throughout the day. On each visit to one setting a group of 4-year old girls were observed playing together creatively for a sustained period in the early afternoon. The girls were enjoying each other's company and planned activities and negotiated roles without adult intervention. Elsewhere children were observed to enjoy increased adult support at certain times of day, for instance seeking cuddles or a lap to sit on after lunch or mid-afternoon. The implication of this evidence is that, if children's satisfaction is to be maximised it will be necessary to observation their fluctuating need for adult engagement in any one setting, followed by amendments to the timing of staff breaks or non-contact time or the employment of extra staff at certain times of day (for instance when some practitioners are preparing food or moving furniture or attending to arriving or departing sessional children).

The children receiving all-day pre-school provision in this study cannot be considered a representative sample. They were not selected to represent but to illuminate or indicate the ways in which all-day provision is experienced in a range of settings, across all three sectors (LA, private and voluntary) in Scotland. This paper has discussed implications for practice and policy that would not have been evident without explicit consideration of the children's experience and perspective. The extent to which the issues raised here can be generalised to other contexts must be a matter for the active consideration of practitioners and those responsible for provision.

We began the study by posing questions about the nature of satisfactory or good all-day provision as seen from the perspective of parents, providers and practitioners and children. The evidence we have gathered suggests a number of factors that are important if all-day provision is to give children satisfaction and confirms our premise that children are not just passive recipients who have a service 'delivered' to them but are actors who co-construct their experience. Children's choices shape their curriculum and they have individual and distinct patterns of preferences. Meeting individual preferences is a prerequisite for satisfaction. Any narrowing of the curriculum risks limiting children's opportunities to satisfy their curiosity and drive to learn or pursue areas of development. On the other hand, monitoring the learning opportunities selected and extending the options in those spheres, while at the same time identifying areas unused for the present offers the prospect of enhancing children's experience. Children need adult support, comfort and company. However their need for this (particularly for individual attention) is not constant throughout the day but is an immediate and pressing need when experienced. Meeting this fluctuating need and observing and reflecting on children's choices is clearly a challenge for practitioners and providers and requires both flexibility and sensitivity along with time for professional reflection, action and evaluation.

Perhaps the area in which the children's perspective and influence as social actors is most clearly seen is in their construction of a social context and peer culture that arises from and is mediated through relationships with other children and the satisfaction (and sometimes dissatisfaction) that this gives them, regardless of the adults in the setting. Allowing social (and sometimes physical) space for such satisfying relationships to develop, for the growth of a positive peer culture, will make a significant contribution to the quality of all-day provision as experience by children.

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Figure 1   Type of main provider provision identified in each local authority area

LA1	LA2
• Private nursery offering all-day provision • LA nursery offering all-day provision (all-day provision offered on welfare and educational grounds) • LA nursery class (combined with other service for all-day provision) • Playgroup (combined with other service for all-day provision)	• Private nursery offering all-day provision • LA nursery offering all-day provision (all-day provision offered on welfare and educational grounds) • LA nursery class (combined with other service for all-day provision) • LA nursery class and wraparound provision