Emotional aspects of nursery policy and practice – progress and prospect

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Emotional aspects of nursery policy and practice – progress and prospect

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ABSTRACT: This article argues for a turn in early years policy towards more serious attention to the emotional dimensions of nursery organisation and practice. The article describes three developing bodies of research on emotion in nursery, each taking a different theoretical perspective. The central argument of the article is that these three bodies of research converge in their findings on the importance of staff feeling cared about and understood in enabling staff to more effective in thinking about and responding to the individual children with whom they work. The article illustrates how emotion might be taken more seriously through reference to a number of developing practical initiatives arising from these bodies of work.

RESUME: Cet article plaide pour un changement des politiques de la petite enfance vers une prise en compte approfondie des dimensions émotionnelles de l’organisation et des pratiques dans les crèches. L’article décrit trois types de recherches qui se développent sur l’émotion dans les crèches, partant de perspectives théoriques différentes. Le point central de cet article est que les conclusions de ces trois types de recherches convergent sur le fait qu’il faut que les professionnels se sentent valorisé(e)s et compris(es) pour qu’ils puissent réfléchir et réagir plus effectivement auprès chaque enfant avec qui ils travaillent. Cet article illustre comment on pourrait prendre plus sérieusement l’émotion en tenant compte d’un nombre d’initiatives concrètes qui se préparent et qui émergent de ces travaux.


RESUMEN: Este trabajo aboga hacia un cambio en la normativa de la educación preescolar con el fin de prestar más atención a los aspectos emocionales en la

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práctica preescolar y en su organización. El trabajo describe tres corrientes de investigación sobre las emociones en la etapa preescolar, cada una desde una perspectiva teórica distinta. El argumento central de este trabajo es que estas tres corrientes de investigación coinciden en sus conclusiones con relación a la importancia de que el personal se sienta cuidado y apoyado y que eso hace que a su vez sea más pertinente para responder a las necesidades de los niños con los que trabajan. Este trabajo ilustra como las emociones se deben considerar seriamente y hace referencia a ciertas iniciativas prácticas, actualmente en desarrollo, que están emergiendo de estas investigaciones.

**Keywords:** nursery; policy; emotion; care; well-being

### Introduction

Nurseries have come to play a major role in the lives of babies, young children and families in industrialised countries as family adults increasingly participate in the paid labour market (Stanley, Cooke, and Bellamy 2006). This article argues for early years policy to give greater attention to the emotional dimensions of nursery work and staff experience and the way nursery organisations and nursery communities manage emotions.

The article is structured in two parts. In the first part, through a critical scrutiny of primary and secondary policy documents, I review the main areas of development of early years policy since 1945 with particular attention to the role of emotion. In the second part, through literature searches including both large cohort, longitudinal studies as well as intensive case study research, I identify three broad areas of research and development work on the emotional dimensions of nursery organisation and practice, each with its own distinctive theoretical approach. These are first the contribution and limitations of attachment theory, second the challenges of caring work and the emotional labour of nursery staff, and third, the significance of the unconscious as well as conscious responses of nursery staff to their work and how these are contained and thought about in the whole nursery environment (its interactions and ethos). In a review of the impact on child and adolescent mental health services, where attention to emotion is a primary task, Shuttleworth has examined the influence of the rapidly expanding field of neuroscience and the relation between biological functions, for example the production of cortisol and dopamine, and synaptic generation and attenuation (2002). He proposes that these findings, showing the significance of human interaction on neural development, are beginning to converge with those from the completely different research methodologies of attachment theory or psychoanalytic studies of human development. He heralds the possibility of a unified, a bio-psycho-social theory, of emotion in human development. Such a unified theory might also embrace the way society, families and nurseries interact and the processes of their mutual influence.

The development of such a unified theory of nursery policy and practice is a longer term theoretical and conceptual enterprise. My more pragmatic and immediate argument here is that where staff feel cared about and understood, including their emotional responses to the work, both pleasurable ones and those that are more stressful, staff are likely to be more attentive and responsive to individual children and families. The three bodies of research, and the well-grounded innovations in management and practice arising from them, are showing how subtle but crucial issues in nursery relationships can be attended to. For example, new forms of professional reflection that include attention to staff emotion, are enabling greater sensitivity to how nursery attachments can be
better culturally attuned to home attachments and balanced with attention to the importance of children’s relationships with peers. Such forms of professional reflection are also enabling the demands of the work and better understanding of the roots of stress, burnout and high staff turnover. New observation methodologies, also attentive to emotion, seem to be enabling closer staff attention to the role of emotion in children’s explorations, thinking and learning.

Overviews of the development of early years policy in the UK agree on how much has been achieved since 1945 (Pugh 1988; Sylva and Pugh 2005; OECD 2006) although there have also been significant critiques (referred to later). Policy development includes increasing investment especially in areas of high social deprivation, progress on integration of services and the development of detailed professional guidance on working with young children from birth to five. These overviews also agree on the challenges to turn this progress into an holistic, universally accessible and affordable service – the need for workforce reform, expansion of public funding and better multi-disciplinary working so that early education, child-care and family support ‘join up.’

Such reforms may be unattainable in the short term because of severe financial constraints (Emmerson and Tetlow 2012) and are therefore unlikely to attract serious policy attention. Indeed, the maintenance of current structural standards concerning minimum space and child:staff ratios may be at risk from arguments to reduce the cost of child-care which is seen as a barrier to women’s participation in the paid labour market (DoE 2013; CSJ 2012) although unfavourable cost–benefit comparisons of child-care in the UK and the Netherlands have been refuted (Cooke and Henehan 2012). However, serious attention could be given to the emotional dimensions of early years policy. A convincing case can be made that with a much lower level of additional resourcing than structural reform would require, much could be achieved in enhancing nursery outcomes by implementing some of the well-grounded initiatives arising from the three bodies of work referred to above.

Part one: Attention to emotion in early years policy since 1945

In 1945, the dominant policy position in England and Wales was one of opposition to nursery day care for the youngest children and only provisional commitment to part-time nursery education (Palmer 2011):

… in the interests of the health and development of the child, no less than for the benefit of the mother … the right policy to pursue would be to positively discourage mothers of children under two from going out to work. (MoE / MoH 1945)

Sixty-five years later, the policy position has almost reversed with a commitment to funded nursery education for all three- and four-year-olds, a planned extension to those two-year-olds in the most deprived areas and Ministerial aspiration for a market economy of affordable nursery day care for all parents who want it:

The affordability and availability of childcare are central to enabling parents to … support their families and therefore balance work and family life. The affordability and availability of childcare are seen by many working parents as a growing concern. It is the job of Government to ensure … childcare costs and regulation delivers high quality at good value …. (DfE 2013)
Whilst policy development has been widely applauded (Sylva and Pugh 2005; OECD 2006), substantial critiques have been made of it. Penn (2007) has shown how successive neo-liberal governments have supported mainly private sector nurseries such that the size of the private sector in relation to the public sector now makes the goal of universal, equitable, publicly funded, child centred provision is no longer attainable. Brehony and Nawrotzki (2011) have made a similar critique:

New Labour’s approach, a combination of its perceptions of the need of capital for women’s paid labour…and a strong belief in the ability of education to reduce social inequality has…produced significant expansion…The flaw in this hybrid strategy is its reliance on private providers…Social differentiation is inevitable in child-care…but private provision raises the possibility of even sharper divisions in quality. (2011, 252)

The unwritten rationale for the 1945 position may well have been to pressurise women to vacate jobs for men demobilised from the army. However, there appears to have always been anxiety about nursery day care for young children, especially babies and under-threes, on grounds of emotional deprivation. When employer demands for more women in the labour market and equal opportunity pressures resulted in a private nursery expansion starting in the 1970s (Pugh 1988), McGurk et al showed the persistence of anxiety even amongst researchers about non-maternal care. Referring to the concept of ‘monomatry’ (the principle ‘that children should be reared by a single mother figure’) they argued that the empirical and cross cultural evidence did not support exclusive maternal care as a ‘privileged’ above other patterns:

There can be few other areas of research in child development where, after four decades of enquiry, the same simplistic questions are regularly repeated…Is day care harmful to children? …It is important at the outset to recognise the extent to which research on day care has been located within a particular socio-historical context …. (McGurk et al. 1993, 11)

The idea of maternal deprivation was further refuted in a review by Rutter:

There was an uncritical acceptance of the lasting and irreversible effects of early childhood experience…the initial claims with respect to maternal deprivation (Bowlby 1951) constitute one example. The extrapolation to the supposed permanent damaging effects of day-care…constitutes an even more striking example … (Rutter 2002, 9)

Twenty years after the 1945 circular, there was little shift in official or professional thinking. The influential Plowden Report wanted the tasks of nurseries to be clearly educational, with a firm warning that nursery education should not become a Trojan Horse for introducing publicly supported childcare (Moss and Penn 2003, 28, original italics) facilitating parents’ employment. It was another 30 years, before the first New Labour government of 1997 put in place policies to encourage the co-ordinated and systematic expansion of nursery provision including full time care and education for children in the whole early childhood age phase from birth (Sylva and Pugh 2005). Nursery education for the children aged three and four whose parents want it is now almost universally available and there has been a major expansion of provision through the SureStart Programme and the National Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative in areas of high social disadvantage (Sylva and Pugh 2005, 20). The conclusions of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are consistent with this assessment:
In all areas reviewed … in 2000 – funding; policy coordination; expansion of access; staff recruitment and training; quality assurance and inspection regimes; work-family supports – significant progress has been made. (OECD 2006, 423)

Thus, a first major achievement of early years policy since 1945 is the extent of its response to societal change, the demand of the paid labour market for women employees and the demand of women for greater equality of opportunity to participate in this market and career opportunities.

A second major achievement has been the development of a body of research on the structural and process factors that influence nursery quality and that inform developing policy (see Elfer 2009 for a full review of the research literature in relation to emotional experience). Overviews of research on what counts in determining nursery quality include both structural factors (space, group size, ratios and staff qualifications) and dynamic (adult–child interaction, attachment, friendships and curriculum) (Phillipsen et al. 1997; Melhuish 2004);

In relation to the emotional dimensions of nursery interactions, the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) studies from North America have shown the contribution nursery attachments can make indirectly by supporting home attachments, and directly as part of each child’s experience in nursery (Brooks-Gunn 2003). Data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (Mathers et al. 2007) and the earlier Effective Provision of Pre-School (EPPE) study (DfES 2004) together show the extent of improvements in outcomes for children on a range of measures. However, on ‘diversity’ (staff responses to children as individuals rather than in groups) scores remained unchanged. This may reflect the reluctance of nursery staff to make the close relationships with children necessary to understand and respond to the unique ways they may desire to interact in nursery. The Families, Children and Child-care (FCCC) study (Leach et al. 2006) also makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding about the role of emotion in nursery, showing the interplay of mothers’ attitudes and beliefs about non-home based care, its impact on children and the benefits of maternal employment.

Case study research complements the longitudinal studies, highlighting the complexity of making close relationships with other people’s children whilst retaining a measure of professional objectivity. Yet policy scrutiny and documentary analysis suggests that the sophisticated emotional work required to manage these interactions is only just being recognised in policy. A new statutory requirement in the English and Welsh early years curriculum (DfE 2012) for all staff to have access to regular opportunities for professional reflection is an important step forward).

It can be argued that a third achievement of policy is the establishment of a detailed body of national practice guidance, much of which is underpinned by the main findings of this research and against which nurseries are regulated and inspected (DoH 1991; DfES 2002; DfE 2012). This guidance is not uncontested. One objection has been to the particular view of children embedded in it as vulnerable, in need and subject to adult conceptions of desirable outcomes in their development (Moss and Petrie 2002). Others have objected to the intended learning outcomes as too narrow and detailed and failing to take sufficient account of young children’s emotional development (House 2011).

The major structural developments now required in early years policy and referred to in the Introduction are not likely to be achievable in the short term. However, it would be valuable to develop into practice the findings from the three areas of research
on the emotional aspects of nursery policy and practice referred to above. These are now discussed below.

Part two: Developing attention to children’s emotional experience in nursery

The attachment approach

When Bowlby published ‘Attachment’ (1969), the essence of the theory of human interaction he described was of the critical significance for an infant of a relationship with a more mature person able to provide consistent and individual attention.

The force of this theory lay in the idea that to secure mental health across a life time, infants needed the consistent (rather than constant) attention of a single primary caregiver. This caregiver needed to have the capacity and interest to keep the infant in mind in a way that was both reliably physically protective but also responsive to the infant’s cognitive interests as well as emotional states. Bowlby recognised that infants would form attachment interactions with other carers, in a hierarchy of significance to the child.

In a 25th anniversary review of the publication of ‘Attachment,’ Rutter argued that ‘monotropy’ (or the exclusive importance of the primary care giver) and the emphasis on the ‘critical, all or nothing’ importance of maternal care in the first year, was not supported by empirical research. Rutter also concluded that it was not possible at that time to say, whilst consistency was clearly important, how much interactions with subsidiary carers (nursery workers) needed to be like those with main carers (parents) (1995, 562).

Nevertheless, in today’s context where most children in industrialised countries experience significant periods of non familial care, attachment considerations have become central in policy discussions and professional practice. Most research overviews of the impact on development of non familial care and particular nursery care conclude that optimal outcomes are dependent on nursery providing the conditions in which attachments occur, that is stability of caregiving arrangements, responsiveness and sensitivity (Brooks-Gunn 2003; Melhuish 2004; Belsky et al. 2007). Policy has reflected this by making increasingly detailed references in official guidance to the need for children to have a named member of staff with whom an attachment should be encouraged (DoH 1991; DfES 2002; DfE 2012; NICE 2012).

The application of attachment conceptions from family to extra familial contexts does raise theoretical as well as practical questions. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) have argued that the main emotion underpinning the rationale for attachments in nursery is not to address the separation anxiety of babies and young children but the cultural anxiety of communities in North America and European countries about the departure from exclusively maternal-based care for babies and under threes to more flexible patterns of child rearing. These authors argue that:

Not only is there no need to try in some way to provide a substitute home, but the benefit from attending an early childhood institution, comes from it not being a home. If offers something quite different, but quite complementary, so the child gets … the best of two environments. (1999, 89)

The policy emphasis on nursery attachments has been challenged too on the grounds that other important interactions in nursery with other staff and peers risk being neglected (Degotardi and Pearson 2009). Questions have also been raised on whether sufficient sensitivity is shown to how nursery attachments take account of home
attachments has been questioned too (Brooker 2010). Brooker’s findings resonate closely with those of Ahnert and Lamb (2003) who argue that children’s emotional well-being is partly dependent on the way adults at home and at nursery help an infant mediate his or her feelings in transitions between home and nursery.

This may only occur reliably with better emotional attention to the feelings of parents and their possible anxieties about nursery staff who, initially at least, are strangers providing intimate physical and emotional care for their baby or child (Leach et al. 2006). Other researchers have pointed to the importance of not seeing nursery attachments as having the same intensity as home ones (Lee 2006; Degotardi and Pearson 2009) with the dangers of attachments that become restrictive rather than facilitative of children’s explorations. In contrast to the ‘too much’ argument, Page has shown the importance of attention to both the desire of parents and readiness of staff to engage in relationships that include love:

…it’s a nice feeling of second mum, it’s not oh God I’m being his mum again today, it’s a nice feeling, it’s like sometimes when it’s during the week you’re sort of on the parents’ level in a way, well I suppose that sounds wrong. It’s just you see as much of them as their parents do…. So I suppose that probably sounds weird. (Elfer 2009)

It seems easy to imagine how much this practitioner is achieving in her attention to children’s thoughts and feelings. Yet the quotation also suggests that she has had very little support to develop her thinking about her relationships with children, with professional confidence and without the anxiety of feeling that she is in some way being ‘wrong’ or ‘weird.’ There is a question here about the typicality of this remark which needs further exploration. Overall, it does seem important that whilst attachments may be an important part of policy, there is an opportunity now in professional reflection to give more serious attention to the form, contribution and limitations of nursery attachments as part of the overall nursery environment’s response to children’s emotional experience. Such attention is being given to the theory of nursery attachments as well as how they are being implemented in practice.

A positive factor is the clarity of official guidance on their contribution to emotional security. However, a negative factor is annual workforce turnover put at 17% in UK provision (Stanley, Cooke, and Bellamy 2006) and as high as 40% (OECD 2006,
Attachments may not be implemented, even in nurseries who say they are committed to them (Smith and Vernon 1994; Elfer 2009; Datler, Datler, and Funder, 2010; Drugli and Undheim 2011). Part of the reason for this may be that the ‘permitting circumstances’ of training, good enough ratios and management support are missing. However, from the perspective of emotion taken in this article is the considerable emotional work entailed. This may involve suppressing feelings of dislike towards some children and of favouritism to others. Where attachments do form, there may be anxiety about the possibility of parents’ resentment. The nature of this emotional work and its emotional demands are discussed using the concept of emotional labour, representing the second area of research on emotion, in the next section and from the point of the containment of emotion, both unconscious as well as conscious, as the third area.

The emotional labour approach

It is curious that little attention has been given to the emotional work entailed in nursery work, for example how ‘attachment work’ is learned, how it is produced in practice and how it is regulated and valued (Colley 2006). In a second area of research on emotion in nurseries Colley draws on the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). Hochschild defined emotional labour as entailing three elements. These were face to face or voice contact with the public, the requirement that the worker evokes particular emotional states in others; and the exercise, through direct management control or the establishment of professional practices, of control over the emotional states to be evoked and the means for doing this (Hochschild 1983, 147).

Hochschild’s analysis focuses on the deployment of emotion in caring work generally and in this original work its potential for exploitation. Yet she also acknowledges the creative and fulfilling aspects of caring work, a perspective that has been argued too by Price (2001) in relation to teaching work and by Osgood (2010) in early years work. In relation to the emotional labour of the nursery, Colley explored the processes of training of child-care students and how they came to learn to develop and display the ‘correct’ personal attributes:

...sensitivity, gentleness, enthusiasm, effort and enjoy contact with children. Harshness and detachment are taken as contra indications of quality ... the deployment of emotion ... is a key part of the job. (2006, 14)

Referring to a commercial nursery advert, *Fledglings: offering care, love and education* (2006, 15), she demonstrates the use of emotional labour as a selling point for the nursery and a source of profit. In a feminist analysis of this emotional labour and how it is learned in college, Colley shows how nursery trainees were expected to learn to adopt particular ways of being and behaving, with little account taken of differences based on different cultural or social class norms:

Nursery nurses, looking after other women’s children, are supposed to be ‘nice girls,’ and one group rapidly defined themselves as ‘nice,’ whilst dismissing more disadvantaged students as ‘rough.’ (2006, 24)

She also illustrates the demanding nature of work to manage feelings:

By the end of their first year, the management of feelings had become a central theme in the students’ narratives...the difficulties and stress of dealing with physical injuries, tears,
tantrums, aggression, disobedience and provocations. This involves working on their own and the children’s feelings to suppress extreme emotions and evoke calmer feelings.

(21–22)

My own research revealed many illustrations of the demands of the work and the effort involved to manage emotion:

if you’re a bit overtired or personal problems it’s very hard to keep your cool … when they’re all day for nine hours you’ve had screaming, it does really take a toll on you. That’s why you need the extra sleep because to be overtired you would lose your temper so you’ve got to be calm and collected… (Elfer 2009)

Colley argues that rather than being taught behaviours fitting to the designation ‘nice girls,’ there should be more opportunities for those in nursery work training:

…to understand why they desire the destinies they pursue; to ask critical questions about what these destinies offer and demand … there is little scope in 16–19 education to engage with these critical questions in emancipatory ways. Instead, much of what they learn … reproduces docile subjectivities and uncomplaining caregiving. (Colley 2006, 27)

Although some staff are angry about conditions of service, others rejected these things as unimportant and referred instead to the idea of ‘vocation.’

I do honestly believe that this job has to be a vocation you don’t go in it for the money…. I mean obviously that’s nice to have the money but that’s not my main concern. My main concern is job satisfaction (Elfer 2009).

The underlying attitude here might be understood as distinctly advantageous from the point of view of a financial investor in a commercial nursery not having to deal with a workforce demanding higher levels of pay and distinctly disadvantageous for the individual worker.

Colley’s application of ‘emotional labour’ to nurseries is valuable in raising important questions about how emotional states in children, family members and staff, are evoked, managed, deployed and valued. Osgood has widened this exploration in a study of the conflicts and resentments that arose for nursery staff required to work within market disciplines:

Practitioners … believed that their views and commitments to caring for each other; the local community; and parents and children, were ‘steam rolled’ by reforms that favoured rationality, commercialism and measurable outcomes. (Osgood 2004, 14)

In a later paper (2010) analysing the meaning of professionalism in early years work, Osgood returns to the central part played by emotion, arguing for more recognition of emotion work:

… by increasing opportunities available to reflect upon the emotional toil expended in ‘giving of oneself’. Emotional professionalism should become celebrated rather than denigrated and obscured from public discourse. (2010, 131)

The following year, in the same journal as Osgood reflecting the development of attention to emotional labour analyses, Taggart cites a review of the curriculum for teacher training in six European countries. None referred to the word ‘care’ suggesting it’s taken for granted nature. He concludes that it leaves the expression of care and the deployment of emotion as:
… a largely adventitious and fortunate ingredient in the personality of the successful practitioner. (Taggart 2011, 90)

This is a concern given the current proposals for workforce reform modelled on teacher training (Nutbrown 2012) but which have been criticised on the grounds that they may result in too greater focus on ‘teaching and learning’ and too little to the broader holistic development of children and the emotion characteristics of early interactions.

**The psychoanalytic approach**

The third area of work on emotion in nursery has been exploring the joys, anxieties and stresses of nursery, how these arise from both conscious and unconscious emotional responses to the work, and how they are contained or managed within the nursery environment. The underpinning theory here is psychoanalytic and the concept of ‘container’ and ‘container-contained’ (Bion 1963):

When a baby is upset a carer often emphatically shows they understand by making noises rather like the infant’s … a slightly exaggerated reflection of an infant’s feelings, not quite hamming it up but not quite real, conveying a sense of an emotionally attuned mind alongside them, bearing their feelings and reflecting them back … something that … Bion called emotional containment. (Music 2011, 29)

The essence of the ‘container-contained’ model is that the process of containment (ability to think about children’s emotions rather than being overwhelmed by them) cannot occur unless the person from whom containment is sought, for example a staff member with a distressed child, is herself able to contain her own emotions. In nursery, this may occur through the staff member’s internal resources – emotional maturity, knowledge, experience – but also through her external resources, supportive relationships with colleagues and managers, supervision etc.

The task of being thoughtfully responsive to each child is an intellectually and emotionally demanding one. A worker may find it easy to relate to some children whilst others, and perhaps all at sometimes, ‘wind her up’ or ‘get under her skin’ in some way, for reasons that may not be obvious. Even the most skilful and experienced worker who feels tired or unsupported or both may seek ways to ‘turn away’ or distance themselves, perhaps through displacement activities.

Systematic avoidance of interactions with young children was noted in two pioneering psychoanalytically informed studies (Bain and Barnett 1986; Hopkins 1988). These researchers led discussions with the staff that were designed to develop an atmosphere of trust and openness in which staff felt they could talk about working with individual children and the feelings this evoked. A number of common anxieties emerged including the fear that allowing attachments between staff and children would inevitably result in unfair treatment of some children, that allowing children to get attached would prove painful in the long term, and that parents may resent staff for allowing children to become attached (Hopkins 1988, 103–104). To these should be added the anxiety in contemporary nurseries that any form of physical contact with young children may be viewed with suspicion from a child protection perspective (Piper and Smith 2003).

In the absence of opportunities for staff to speak about these anxieties together, without fear of judgement or criticism, and to have them understood (contained), Bain and Barnett and Hopkins showed how a work culture could evolve, not
necessarily consciously, where staff did seek to protect themselves by avoiding close interactions. Such a culture might include the feeling that children’s demands for individual attention were always ‘attention seeking’ or that time spent with individual children was ‘not proper work’ but also the feeling that such collective attitudes could not be questioned. Such organisational characteristics have been described as ‘social defence systems’ (Jaques 1955) and have been applied in a wide range of social organisations (Menzies-Lyth 1989).

My own research sought to empirically examine processes of containment in an intensive case study of four contrasting nurseries (Elfer 2009). A detailed picture was gradually built up in each nursery of how individual staff experienced their work and how they felt this individual experience was understood and responded to in the working ethos of their nursery. The case studies showed the value of particular aspects of nursery organisation and management in *implicitly* containing staff anxiety, for example by the balance struck between giving staff enough direction to help them feel clear and secure in how they were working whilst also leaving space for professional judgement and discretion. The idea of such *implicit* containment, alongside *explicit* containment (direct reflection on the day to day demands of the work with the support rather than judgement of colleagues) seemed to be an important factor in explaining differences between nurseries in their responses to individual children. The advantage of the idea of containment over that of attachment as the only or primary resource for mediating emotional experience, is that it allows a much wider and more subtle array of responses from the whole nursery environment (staff, friendships, peer groups and nursery ethos), to each child, compared to the responses of one or two key members of staff expected to facilitate individual attachments.

Another strand in this third area of work on the significance of staff conscious and unconscious emotional responses in nursery has been in the development of new methods of observation, adapted from those developed at the Tavistock and Portman Clinic in London, a UK centre for the training of National Health Service mental health professionals (child psychotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists) over the last 60 years (Rustin 2009). Such observations are naturalistic, holistic and narrative in their approach. The observation transcript, including the observer’s feelings but not judgements, is discussed with rigorous attention to detail, in a seminar group of observers trained in and familiar with the method. The scrutiny of the seminar group is partly to help the observer, in a non-judgemental way, think probingly and reflexively to distinguish their own emotional state from that of the child’s (Rustin 1989). Their strength, as adapted for use in nursery, is that they enable attention to emotional atmospheres and communications as well as the details of contexts, sequences of events, and behavioural responses (Elfer 2012a). Their objective is exploratory rather than experimental and in this sense, they are complementary to well established methods of assessing well-being (Laevers 2005).

A final strand that is an important part of this third area of work, is the development of forms of supervision and work discussion that include attention to emotional experience at work. Finally, recent development of early years policy has made it a statutory requirement that all early years staff should have regular opportunity for professional reflection on their interactions with children and families (DfE 2012). A number of models of professional reflection have been developed (see for example Schon 1983; Moss and Petrie 2002). The contribution of psychoanalytic theory has been in the development of forms of professional reflection, that like the observation methods above, seek to include account of emotional experience evoked in the observer/
practitioner by their daily work. Work Discussion has been developed in schools (Jackson 2008) and in nurseries (Elfer and Dearnley 2007, Elfer 2012b). These studies report three important outcomes. First, participants valued the shift from feeling directed by external inspection and audit priorities to feeling more in control of the agenda of professional issues discussed. Second, participants said they felt supported to notice children who might otherwise be easily overlooked or avoided. Thirdly, participants reported feeling better supported to manage the complex emotional interactions that were entailed in many of their interactions with families.

Conclusion

The central argument of the article has been that when staff feel cared about and understood, including their emotional responses to the work, both positive and negative, they are more likely to be more attentive and responsive to individual children and families. The article has argued for a turn in early years policy to giving serious and renewed attention in policy to the emotional dimensions of nursery organisation and practice, drawing on three developing bodies of emotion research and practical innovations arising from them.

In Ofsted’s (the national inspection agency in England and Wales) most recent annual early years’ report (2012), there is no reference to emotion or emotional well-being. Further, the report says that after a period of gradual improvements in nursery standards, these seem to have levelled out. The report points to sharp differences across the country in standards of provision and to the strong links that it has found exist between staff qualifications and standards and assessments of quality. Citing a nursery that achieved an ‘outstanding’ grade in its inspection, the report suggests the importance of ‘learning on the job and how ‘staff share and learn from good practice’ (2012, 18).

The three developing bodies of research work on emotion outlined in this article each start from quite different theoretical perspectives. The convergence of their findings suggests the possibility of a unified bio-psycho-social theory of emotion in early development with relevance for nursery organisation and practice. However, more immediately, they converge on their shared implication of the value of staff groups thinking together about their work in a way that could have the emancipatory element called for by Colley (2006). Such professional reflection groups, including reflection on the emotional aspects of their work, would enable staff ‘sharing and learning’ together and developing the confidence to negotiate what constitutes ‘good quality’ for them and what is entailed in facilitating it.

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