

Statham, J., Dillon, J., Moss, P. (2001) *Placed and Paid For – Supporting Families through Sponsored Day Care*, London: The Stationery Office, paperback, 139 pp

I was fortunate to attend a seminar entitled *Providing day care for children in need* at the Thomas Coram Institute in 1997 hosted by the researchers at an early stage of the project. Much of the debate centred on the policy differences between most European countries and the UK. Our European neighbours promote day care as a universal service that supports optimal development for children and contributes to social well-being by assisting parents. The UK is almost unique in regarding publicly funded day care as short-term support for families and children with difficulties. It has been argued that the Children Act 1989 embodies this philosophy. 'As a substantial plank in a potential policy for young children, the Children Act fails to accept, as other European governments do, that all children have a right to good quality, affordable service that will promote their all-round development' (Pugh 1992: 16).

This study of sponsored day care services for 'children in need' was commissioned by the Department of Health as part of a wider programme of research examining the implementation of the Children Act 1989.

Placed and Paid For is very readable and highly informative. Four short case studies begin the book and remind us that legislative, policy and organisational activities ultimately impact on children and their carers. Day care has become primarily a short-term service for families with parenting difficulties. Since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 '[t]here has been ... a phasing out of policies that offered sponsored day care places to low-income or single parents to enable them to work. (Statham et al, 2001: 35). Although most families allocated a sponsored day care place are poor, placements are used primarily as part of a child protection plan and so are usually part-time and short-term.

The study draws on data gathered from a wide variety of sources including primary and secondary statistical analysis and qualitative data from social workers, providers, referrers and parents/carers. An overview of the legal and policy context in which sponsored day care is provided introduces the study. The authors point out that some features of the 'mixed economy' of welfare are unique to day care. The most significant is that the largest number of providers, childminders are in the main women, working alone in their own homes. Not surprisingly, therefore, sponsored day care is a resource-modest service for local authorities. Rates of pay for sponsored child minders in 1997 were between £1.20 and £3.50 per hour.

It is evident that there are some serious barriers to service development. For example there is little consistency between local authorities as to how places are allocated and few authorities collate accurate information about service usage or cost. Of the sample of twelve authorities, 41% could not even say how much was spent in total on sponsored day care. The finding that sponsored day care is allocated primarily to parents under stress is particularly worrying.

The objectives for children often took the form of expecting them to benefit from improvement in their parents' situation, rather than of seeing the provision of day care services as a way of directly promoting children's development and well-being (Statham et al, 103).

The service children receive, therefore, is often short-term and lacking in continuity. This is contrary to substantial evidence to show a child's optimal development is supported by high quality, long-term day care (Hennessy, Martin, Moss, Melhuish, 1992).

A number of critical policy developments are also identified including transfer of responsibility for the regulation and development of early years' services from the DoH to the DfEE. The authors argue this offers the opportunity for a radical way forward. They propose that all child welfare responsibilities should be transferred from welfare to education. A transformed concept of 'education', is offered however: '[A] broad-based area of public policy dealing with childhood and

families...concerned in the broadest sense with the well-being, learning and support of children and their families' (Statham et al, 123). It remains to be seen whether this call for a return to some form of universal service for young children and their families will be heeded.

Placed and Paid For has much to offer all those who are concerned with children. Not only does the study reveal much about the current nature of sponsored day care but also illuminates the operation of welfare markets and children's services in the current climate. Furthermore, crucial questions are raised and debated about key concepts underpinning family policies, such as the nature of 'family' and its relationship to the state. These are, of course, fundamental to in all family policy development in the current climate.

Bibliography

Hennessy, E., Martin, S., Moss, P., Melhuish, E. (1992) *Children and Day Care. Lessons from Research*, London: Paul Chapman.

Pugh, G. (1992)(ed.) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years – Working Collaboratively For Children* London: Paul Chapman/ NCB.

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