

The New Labour Government Policy and Preschool Education in England

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Abstract : Recently, early childhood education in England has experienced a significant level of government intervention including reforms for improving it. This study examines to what extent new Labour government initiatives impact preschool education in England and how effectively the English government implements its preschool education policies. This empirical study uses a combination of methods, including documentary analysis, questionnaire, and observation. Findings show that recent English government policy, especially the introduction of a national preschool curriculum framework combined with an inspection process and funding mechanism, appears to have had a strong influence on preschool practices.

Key Words : early childhood education, England

I. INTRODUCTION

Until very recently, early childhood education in England has been a comparatively lower priority than other phases of education in terms of educational policy and public funding. However, early childhood education is currently high on the agenda for the new Labour government in England. As a consequence, the English government has initiated reforms for raising standards. Since then, a radical change has taken place concerning preschool education policy in England. The purpose of this study is to examine the new Labour government's policies upon preschool education and their implementation in preschool settings in England.

In 1996, in order to improve the quality of education in early childhood institutions, the

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former Conservative government introduced the Nursery voucher scheme linked to a framework for an early years curriculum: Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning (SCAA, 1996). In order to register for the receipt of vouchers, preschool providers had to show that they were moving children toward the Desirable Outcomes (Kwon, 2002). However, in 1997 the Tony Blair's incoming Labour government abolished the voucher scheme and developed its own plans to improve the quality of early education. Blair's new Labour government paid particular attention to raising standards and proclaimed in Excellence in Schools (1997): "Investment in learning in the twenty-first century is the equivalent of the investment in machinery and technical innovation that was essential to the first great industrial revolution. Then it was physical capital; now it is human capital. Our children are our future as a civilized society and a prosperous nation. If they are to have an education that matches the best in the world, we must start now to lay the foundations, by getting integrated early years education and childcare and primary education right" (DfEE, 1997, p. 15).

1. Early Learning Goals

In 1999, the curriculum for the Foundation Stage of the National Curriculum, the Early Learning Goals, replaced the Desirable Outcomes. The Foundation Stage, introduced from September 2000, is a new stage of education for children aged from 3 to the end of their reception year (5 or 6 years old). The Foundation Stage is so-called because it is designed to lay foundations for children's later learning, while providing a bridge to the programme for key stage 1 (year 1 of primary schools). While the Desirable Outcomes was intended for 3 and 4 year olds, the New Early Learning Goals included 5 years olds (reception year of primary schools).

The Early Learning Goals are organized around the six learning areas: personal, social and emotional development; language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development. The Early Learning Goals emphasize literacy and numeracy as distinct curriculum areas and specifies a large number of learning goals to be achieved by 4 or 5 year old children. For

example, the main contents of the mathematics area in the curriculum guidance of the Foundation Stage are as follows (QCA, 2000):

- count reliably up to 10 every day objects,
- in practical activities and discussion, begin to use the vocabulary involved in adding and subtracting,
- use language such as 'more' or 'less' to compare two numbers,
- find one more or one less than a number from one to 10,
- use language such as 'greater,' 'smaller,' 'heavier,' or 'lighter' to compare quantities,
- use language such as 'circle' or 'bigger' to describe the shape and size of solids and flat shapes.

2. Inspection and funding

Under the government's programme, all settings which receive nursery grant funding must agree to the inspection of their educational provision by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) and they must provide activities that ensure the same quality of learning. The aim of the inspection is to assess whether the education programme provided is likely to promote the Early Learning Goals in each of the six learning areas. The inspectors use a variety of methods to gather the evidence needed to make judgements (Neaum and Tallack, 2000). These include;

- observation of staff, children and activities;
- examination of resources;
- discussion with the head of the setting, staff, children and parents;
- review of documentary evidence;
- determination of how the preschool meets the six areas of Early Learning Goals;
- evaluation of the quality of teaching;
- planning of the educational programme;
- review of the procedures for the assessment of children's attainment;
- analysis of the preschool's links with parents and caregivers.

Kwon (2002) has summarized the early years inspection process: "At the end of the

inspection period, the lead inspector presents oral feedback on the inspection and, within four weeks, the preschool receives the inspection report. It is significant that the inspection report is a public document and available on the internet. If the preschool setting does not meet the inspection requirements then funding may be withdrawn. Thus there is a great pressure on early years educators to promote particular and pre-specified learning outcomes, many of which focus on literacy and numeracy" (p. 6).

3. Early childhood institutions in England

English preschool education is a diverse system in terms of administrative responsibility and types of provision. Responsibility for the maintained provision of preschool services in England is divided between the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), now the DfES(Department for Education and Skills). Historically, two government departments has shared the work because, until recently, it was felt that the care of children under three is mainly concerned with health and physical well-being, while provision for 3 to 5 year olds should be primarily concerned educational development. The DHSS is responsible for day nurseries and playgroups while the DfES is responsible for nursery schools, nursery classes, and reception classes in infant schools throughout the local education authority. However, there is a growing consensus that the care and education of young children are inseparable. Recently, in order to implement more effectively the government policy of planned learning outcomes, the responsibility for implementing and delivering Early Learning Goals in the voluntary and private sectors was assigned exclusively to the DfEE (DfEE 2001).

Local Education Authority (LEA) nursery schools are provided for 3-4 year old children. They each have their own head teacher, specially trained nursery teachers, and nursery nurses as assistants. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) is responsible for controlling the educational building programme and the training of teachers. In general, nursery schools are open during ordinary school hours and are closed on school holidays. Nursery schools usually offer five sessions a week, each session lasting two and a half hours. Nursery classes are attached to primary schools and provide mainly sessional care

for 3-4 year old children. These classes, like nursery schools, are the responsibility of the DfES. The head teacher of the primary school is responsible for the nursery class. Nursery classes are open only during the school term time. Playgroups emphasize the value of parental involvement and a strong philosophy of children learning through play. Playgroups generally operate during school terms only and are mainly open for the morning session, some for fewer than five days a week. Local authority day nurseries operate for the full working day and also during most school holidays. Day nurseries are designed for the care and nurture of young children, aged 0-5 years, and free places are available only on criteria of social need. Day nurseries are designed to meet the needs of children of working parents.

4. Research questions

This study examines to what extent Labour government initiatives impact preschool education and how effectively the English government implements its preschool education policies. The major questions to be addressed by this study are as follows: What are the characteristics of the new Labour government national preschool curriculum and how effectively is it implemented in England? What are the distinctive features regarding preschool education in England, with reference to preschool educators' perceptions and practices?

<Table 1> Main Preschool Institutions in England

Types	Administration	Age	Hours	Recommended Adult/child ratio
LEA nursery schools	DfES	3 - 4	Part-time(2.5 hrs)	1 to 10
LEA nursery classes	DfES	3 - 4	Part-time(2.5 hrs)	1 to 13
Playgroup	DHSS	2.5 - 4	Sessional /varies	1 to 8
Local authority day nurseries	DHSS	0 - 4	Full-time(extended day)	1 to 5

Source: DfES (2001)

II. RESEARCH METHODS

The research design of the study includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection including documentary analysis, questionnaire, and observation.

1. Questionnaire

I developed a questionnaire using categories drawn from other studies (Bennett, 1976; Early Years Curriculum Group, 1989, 1992; Curtis, 1998). The questionnaire is constructed in two parts. The first part asks for factual information about the preschool setting and personal details about the early childhood educators who work there. It includes questions about the number of children attending the setting and the adult-child ratio. The second part is concerned with curriculum and pedagogy; it deals with the attitudes and beliefs of early childhood educators with specific reference to their perceptions regarding educational issues, classroom organization, factors influencing planning, and the availability of activities.

I distributed the questionnaire to early childhood educators in three of the main preschool institutions for four year old children in England: Local Educational Authority (LEA) nursery schools, LEA nursery classes, and playgroups. For the questionnaire, I selected the sample from London, England. In order to reflect the diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, I selected two different regions, one in an inner-London borough and one in an outer-London borough. According to the lists provided by the local educational authorities of the two London boroughs, there were 60 local authority nursery schools and classes and 83 playgroups. All of these institutions were included in the questionnaire sample. A total of 143 questionnaires were sent by post and 91 questionnaires were returned, a return rate of 63%.

2. Observation

The purpose of the observations carried out in this study was to collect detailed information about daily practices and the curriculum offered in the sample of preschool

settings. In particular, the observations were structured to cover classroom organization, the teaching approach, and the content of the curriculum. The observations were made in the main types of preschool settings offered in England. I selected six preschool settings from the questionnaire's respondents to ensure variation across type and location of preschool settings. Observations were carried out in each preschool setting for one week, employing both qualitative and structured methods.

III. RESULTS

1. Classroom characteristics

In England there are different recommendations for staffing ratio depending on the type of setting (LEA nursery school, 1:10; LEA nursery class, 1:13; playgroup, 1:8). The questionnaire responses indicated that the class or group size in most English preschool settings in the sample was between 20-24 children (59.3%). In terms of the adult to child ratio, 65.9% of the English preschools were 1:10 or below, while 31.9% were between 1:11 and 1:20. In the six English preschool settings I observed, staffing ratios were favourable, comparing well with the recommended levels of adult to child ratio for each type of setting.

<Table 2> General information about English preschools in the study (n = 91)

		frequency	%
Number of children in a class	less than 15	10	11.0 %
	15 - 19	10	11.0 %
	20 - 24	54	59.3 %
	25 - 29	17	18.7 %
	over 30	-	-
Adult /child ratio	up to 1:10	60	65.9 %
	1:11 - 1:20	29	31.9 %
	1:21 - 1:30	2	2.2 %
	over 1:31	-	-

For instance, in one nursery school there were twenty children with a staff consisting of one teacher, one nursery nurse and two assistants (1:5). In one playgroup, there were 24 children and four staff (1:6). A supervisor and two assistants worked at every session and mother helpers, working a rota system.

2. Perceptions of early childhood educators

The questionnaire included questions about the English preschool educators' perceptions on a number of controversial educational issues: developmentalism, children's intrinsic motivation, free play and structured play, attitudes towards 3Rs teaching and learning, and the role of preschool educators. The tradition of English preschool education stems from the philosophies of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Dewey and Isaacs (Curtis, 1998), and empirical research confirms that the majority of English early childhood educators hold child-centered beliefs. Traditional early childhood education in England is child-centered, emphasizing individual children's interests, free play, first-hand experiences and integrated learning. And overall, English early childhood educators support developmentalism, children's intrinsic motivation for learning, child-chosen play, integrated learning, and the facilitating role of the educator. Generally, they disagree with extrinsic motivation, separating play time from work time, and using worksheets. <Table 3> shows the perceptions of early childhood educators in England.

However, this study shows some inconsistencies between English educators' perceptions and practices in a number of ways. The majority of English preschool educators claim to have child-centered philosophies and to disagree with structured teaching approaches. In practice, however, a considerable member of English preschools provided these activities. For instance, even though the majority of English educators disagreed with using worksheets, nearly half of English educators reported that they used worksheets (3.3% everyday, 8.8% regularly, and 37.4% sometimes), in the section of questionnaire concerning 3Rs teaching. Observations also confirmed that three out of the six preschool settings used worksheets during nursery and literacy activities.

<Table 3> Perceptions of early childhood educators in England (%) (n = 91)

	Strongly agree	2	3	4	strongly disagree
1. Children learn naturally through ordered stages, so it is no use hurrying them on to later stages.	35.2	54.9	6.6	3.3	-
2. All children have intrinsic motivation to learn.	20.9	29.7	25.3	24.2	-
3. Preschool educators should use competition, prizes and other rewards to motivate children.	-	6.6	22.0	27.5	44.0
4. Preschool children learn best through play which is self-chosen and self-directed.	37.4	36.3	15.4	6.6	4.4
5. Preschool learning should not be separated into subjects, rather all subjects should be integrated.	40.7	47.3	6.6	5.5	-
6. Play-time and work-time should be clearly distinguished.	-	16.5	4.4	37.4	41.8
7. Preschool educators should use worksheets to help children learn math and reading.	-	9.9	29.7	29.7	30.8
8. Preschool educators should use highly structured, adult-directed lessons with small groups.	4.4	12.1	30.8	38.5	14.3
9. A preschool educator should be a facilitator rather than a direct instructor.	18.7	68.1	7.7	1.1	4.4

3. Classroom organization

The questionnaire asked early childhood educators about the kinds of classroom organization that they used in their settings. The questionnaire responses showed that 54.9% of English educators claimed to use child-directed activities very frequently (over half the session). In terms of adult-directed small group activities, 23.1% of these English preschool educators used these activities very frequently and 8.8% of English preschool educators answered that they use whole class activities very frequently.

1) Child directed activities

In one nursery class, my observation showed that the daily session lasted for two and a half hours. Staff provided many activities for children, some were free choice activities and

<Table 4> Typical daily schedule in an English nursery class

time	activity	Contents
9:00	children arrive/ whole class activity	register, news, introduction of activity
9:15	free play	- sand, water, art, painting, play dough, construction - literacy practice (or math) table with an adult - art table with an adult
10:30	snack & whole class activity	snack, singing, math
10:45	free play	outdoor play
11:15	whole class activity	story, discussion
11:30	Departure	

others adult-directed. <Table 4> shows a typical daily schedule in this nursery class. During the free play period, the children were engaged in free play with a range of activities set out on the tables and carpets. Some basic activities (i.e; water, sand, painting, play dough) were provided every day, while additional activities varied from session to session. In general, there were two tables for adult-directed work during free play-time. One staff member worked with two children at a pre-math activity to develop numeracy skills. The other staff member directed activity at the art table. In the computer area, a mother helper played with children.

2) Adult directed activities

There were various forms of adult-directed activities going on throughout the entire session in all six settings. For instance, in one nursery class, staff provided adult-directed activities alongside child-directed activities. There were two tables for adult-directed work during the free play period. One member of the staff worked with a small group of children at a literacy activity. Using worksheets under the direction of the adult, the children used felt-tipped pens to write a letter and colour it in. The other member of the staff directed an activity at the art table, where she made a Christmas wreath with small groups of children. A register was used to make sure that all children had been included in each of these adult directed activities.

<Table 5> Contents of whole class activity in six English preschool settings (%) (n = 91)

Settings	number of occasions	Total time	% time of the session	activity
NS 1	3	35 min.	23%	register, discussion, weather, date, story, maths, movement, game, snack
NS 2	3	37 min.	25%	register, weather, song, rhymes, snack, story
NC 1	3	42 min.	28%	register, introduction of new activity, story, singing, learning words, maths
NC 2	2	38 min	25%	register, weather, story, singing, snack
PG 1	3	45 min.	25%	story, song, snack, movement
PG 2	2	40 min.	26%	story, song, finger play, learning letters, group game, snack

NS - LEA nursery school, NC - LEA nursery class, PG - playgroup

In the six English preschools I observed, there were usually two or three occasions per day when the teacher directed a whole-class activity. <Table 5> shows the duration and focus of whole-class time in six English preschool settings drawn from my observation data. The total length of whole class time was about 25% of the entire session. During whole class activity periods, preschool educators and children participated in various activities such as register, listening to a story, discussion, music, singing, movement, finger play and 3Rs teaching.

4. Teaching approach

1) Lesson planning

The questionnaire asked about the factors which influenced the early childhood educators' planning, such as the Early Learning Goals document (National Preschool Curriculum Framework), local authority guidelines, school policy, and parental demands. <Table 6> shows the factors influencing planning in English preschools. In relation to the influence of Early Learning Goals (QCA 2000), nearly 90% of these educators stated that the Early Learning Goals influenced their planning "very much." Five out of the six educators reported in their interviews that their planning had been extended and become more detailed after the introduction of the Desirable Outcomes document which preceded Early

<Table 6> Factors influencing planning in English preschools (%) (n = 91)

	very much	somewhat	slightly	not at all
Early Learning Goals	89.0	7.7	3.3	0
Local Authority Guidelines	41.8	46.2	12.1	0
School policy	21.8	48.4	19.8	9.9
Parent demands	4.4	33.0	54.9	7.7

Learning Goals. One nursery teacher said that the nursery staff now focused more on learning objectives and tried to make sure the children reached the Early Learning Goals, with particular emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics. One playgroup supervisor also said that until recently the playgroup had had no fixed time table, only rough guidelines. However, new their half-termly plans, weekly plans, and curriculum kept them focused on the Early Learning Goals.

2) Integrated and subject teaching

Traditionally, early childhood education in England is associated with integrated learning. Subject division is considered inconsistent with a child's view of the world. To this effect, Parry and Archer (1974) have argued that the learning process should not be interrupted by artificial breaks such as conventional subject barriers. In a more child-centered approach, children's learning should not be compartmentalized (Bruce, 1991). Current English preschool practice still seems in line with the integrated holistic approach. In fact, the majority of English preschool educators claim to support integrated teaching in a holistic way, without the restrictions imposed by subjects. During my observations in the six English preschool settings, staff took advantage of spontaneous opportunities and practical experiences to teach children holistically. They used play as a vehicle for numeracy and literacy teaching. For instance, during free play-time, children were encouraged to play with sand and water and to experiment with shape, measures, and quantity. Staff taught mathematical concepts through number songs and nursery rhymes. For instance, children sang number songs such as "1, 2, 3, 4, 5 once I caught a fish alive" and "5 little speckled frogs".

They were also encouraged to count at tidying-up time, and at snack time. In one nursery

school, when the children shared a plate of fruit at snack time, a nursery teacher provided an opportunity for children to use mathematical language. Children were encouraged to experience and discuss mathematical concepts as this brief extract shows.

Teacher: I wonder how many children are in our group.

Children: There are thirteen.

Teacher: Is that more than ten?

Children: Yes. (some children .. silence)

Teacher: Yes, 3 more than ten. Can you count backward from 10 to 1?

Children: ten, nine, eight..

Teacher: (Continuing to provide mathematical concepts)

“Would you like some fruit?” “How many pieces all together?” ,

“ Is there enough for every one?” and “How many are left over?”

The observation shows that while English preschools are maintaining their integrated teaching approach, at the same time they also provide separate literacy and numeracy activities.

5. Curriculum content

The respondents were asked to state the frequency of certain activities and the availability of materials in their settings. A comprehensive list of activities was provided, and respondents were asked to check their frequency. The finding shows that most of the English preschool settings in the study claimed to provide the following activities very often: water, sand play, home corner, puzzles, imaginative play, art, story telling, physical activities, and construction toys. However, few English preschools were provided with materials such as TVs, video player, and computers.

1) 3Rs teaching

Responses from this questionnaire showed that a considerable number of English preschools claimed to provide literacy and numeracy activities every day. In terms of

literacy and numeracy practice, English preschools provided pre-reading (20.9%), pre-writing (23.1%), and pre-math (44%) activities every day and a majority (over 80%) provided these activities at least 1-3 times a week. There was also no significant difference in the availability of pre-academic activities between the different types of institutions. The observation data also showed a similar picture. The structured observations in the six settings showed that 21% of the children's time was spent in 3Rs activities (including pre-3Rs) and 53% of their time was spent in other play activities. One playgroup supervisor reported that after the introduction of the Desirable Learning Outcomes, the playgroup started to introduce more formal work in literacy teaching. I found evidence for this change in the teaching of the 3Rs from the playgroup's first inspection report in 1997. The inspection report criticized a lack of emphasis on teaching the 3Rs: "In language and literacy, most children are unlikely to meet the recommended outcomes in writing by the time they are of statutory school age. This is due to a lack of emphasis on the development of early writing and early work on letter sounds." However, during my observation in 2001, the same playgroup had a separate literacy and numeracy time for 4 year olds, with adult-directed structured activities twice a week. During the activity, children chanted letter sounds and completed worksheets. In one nursery class, the staff provided adult-directed literacy activities alongside child directed activities. For example, a worksheet (colour the numbers to finish a parrot) was provided for the children during an adult-directed small group activity.

Teacher: Olivia! Can you come to do the worksheet?

(calling Olivia while she is playing)

Where is number 1, please?

Olivia: (points to number 3)

Teacher: No! That is number 3. Find number 1.

Olivia: (points to number 1)

Teacher: Clever girl!

Colour that in red...

Can you find number 2 for me?...Colour that in green, please.

(They continued this activity until the child finished colouring the parrot with seven colours.)

Direct teaching was also practised at one nursery class. During the whole- class time, a member of the staff using flash cards taught simple words such as “it”, and, “on”, “I”, “you.” Her methods to introduce literacy and numeracy while using worksheets and flash cards is an approach that is at odds with the traditional English child-centered approach. The displays on the walls emphasized literacy and numeracy: ‘g...is for golden girl, b...is for Bouncy Ben, c... is for cat.’ and ‘How many spots can you count? How many legs do spiders have?’

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examines to what extent Labour government initiatives impact preschool education. This study shows that recent Blair’s government policy appears to have had a strong influence on preschool education in England. This empirical study shows that the Early Learning Goals (national curriculum guidance) have been widely established as the basis for activities in preschool settings. This study shows that even though the majority of early childhood educators claim to have child-centered philosophies on the whole, there are signs of a back-to-basics approach in curriculum content. The introduction of curriculum guidance for the foundation stage, combined with the statutory inspection process, appears to have had a strong influence on the planning of preschool classrooms. Preschool educators are now required to conform to Ofsted inspection criteria, in order to meet their government’s demand to raise standards. David et al (2000) observed that “...the main reason they gave for engaging the children in these formal literacy encounters was their fear of the Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspections and what they understood to be the expectations of such inspectors “ (p. 73). This study shows that early childhood educators are changing their planning to meet the demands of the Early Learning Goals document. More formal instruction in literacy and numeracy teaching is being directly and indirectly imposed upon young children. Government initiatives and inspection have

started to change the traditional nature of English preschool settings.

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