



## Pre-school Education: parents' preferences, knowledge and expectations

## Enseignement Prescolaire: preferences, connaissances et attentes des parent

## Educación Preescolar: preferencias, conocimiento y expectativas de los padres

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**ABSTRACT** *Constructive partnerships between pre-school service providers and parents need to be established on the basis of a clear understanding of what parents want and expect for their children from pre-school provision. A questionnaire survey to 911 parents across Scotland, together with in-depth interviews with 91 parents in the Glasgow area, elicited information concerning preferences, beliefs, knowledge and expectations when choosing suitable provision. Results showed that parents prioritise the safety and care of their children above all else and that, beyond this, selection of type of provision (playgroup, local authority or private nursery) depends upon the relative value they attached to education, setting, convenience and meeting parents' needs. Results are consistent with the theory of planned behaviour that predicting actual choice of provision depends upon parents' knowledge, strength of desire to place their child, social support and perceived control over available options.*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Des partenariats constructifs entre prestataires de services préscolaires et parents doivent être établis sur la base d'une compréhension claire de ce que les parents veulent et attendent des prestations préscolaires pour leurs enfants. Les réponses à un questionnaire de 911 parents dans toute l'Ecosse, ainsi que des entretiens approfondis avec 91 parents de la région de Glasgow, ont permis de dégager des informations sur les préférences, les croyances, les connaissances et les attentes des parents choisissant une prestation. Les résultats ont montré que les parents donnent la priorité à la sécurité et à l'accueil de leurs enfants par-dessus tout, et que, après cela, la sélection du type de prestation (garderie, crèche municipale ou privée) dépend des valeurs relatives qu'ils attachent à l'éducation, au cadre, au côté pratique et à la capacité de la structure à répondre aux besoins des parents. Les résultats confirment la théorie du comportement basé sur un objectif qui prédit que le choix*

*de prestation dépend des connaissances des parents, de la force de leur désir de placer leur enfant, du soutien social et de leur perception de leur contrôle sur les options disponibles.*

**RESUMEN** *Las asociaciones constructivas entre los proveedores de servicio preescolar y los padres deben establecerse en base a un entendimiento claro de lo que los padres quieren y esperan de sus hijos y su provisión preescolar. Una encuesta realizada a 911 padres de Escocia, junto con unas entrevistas exhaustivas de 91 padres de la zona de Glasgow, aportó información sobre preferencias, creencias, conocimiento y expectativas cuando se escoge una provisión adecuada. Los resultados demostraron que los padres ponen en primer lugar la seguridad y cuidado de sus niños, por encima de cualquier otra cosa, y que, después, la selección del tipo de provisión (grupo de actividades, autoridades locales o guarderías privadas) dependen del valor relativo que agregan a la educación, posición, conveniencia y a satisfacer las necesidades de los padres. Los resultados son consistentes con la teoría de comportamiento planificado, que dice que pronosticar una selección actual de provisión dependen del conocimiento de los padres, intensidad de deseo de colocar a su hijo, asistencia social y control percibido sobre opciones disponibles.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that 'pre-school education should be among a nation's first priorities' (Ball, 1994). Government in the UK is firmly committed to a National Child Care Strategy to integrate childcare and early learning services, to enhance the quantity and quality of pre-school provision and to tackle social exclusion from the earliest age (SOEID, 1997). It has fulfilled its pledge to make a part-time education place available, free of charge, to every child in the pre-school year by the winter of 1998/1999 and is now setting new targets for 3-year-olds, to place young children in the 'best possible position to make progress' (Government spokesman, Radio 4, August 1999).

However, the success of this strategy cannot simply be measured by delivery of sufficient free places. Quantity does not guarantee quality, and quality itself is multifaceted. It can be measured on a variety of dimensions, e.g. achievement of the child, adequacy of facilities and staff-child ratios (Elfer & Wedge, 1996; Mooney & Munton, 1998). Importantly, it also depends on the extent to which provision lives up to the expectations of the stakeholders themselves, especially to the expectations and values of parents. Parents are still the primary educators of their children (SOEID, 1997) and have legal responsibilities to ensure that their children receive a suitable education (Parents' Charter, 1995), as well as a right to child care (Nisbet & Watt, 1994).

Emphasis upon meeting the expectations of parents in pre-school education clearly implies greater involvement by parents. This involvement has emerged as a widespread response to increased pressure for reform and democratisation across the whole educational spectrum in many countries, such as the UK, Australia and Norway (Rust & Blakemore, 1990; Dimmock *et al.*, 1996). In the US parental involvement has stemmed from concerns about social justice, particularly in relation to federal initiatives aimed at promoting equity and equality among the poor, Blacks, disabled and other minorities (Berger, 1991; Dimmock *et al.*, 1996).

However there has also been considerable debate about the precise nature of this involvement (cf. Clark, 1988; David, 1993; Ball, 1994). Central to this debate is the fundamental dilemma of parents, on the one hand, being stakeholders in shaping and managing provision and, on the other hand, being recipients of a service.

In practice, the traditional view of parents purely as 'consumers' has largely given way to

recognising them as partners, and undeniably bestowing upon them a stronger voice. The rhetoric of partnership is very compelling:

Real partnership demands a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and willingness to negotiate. It requires open, regular and reciprocated communication where achievements are celebrated, problems confronted, solutions sought and policies implemented *jointly and together*. (Ball, 1994, p. 44)

However, such a vision of partnership, whilst welcomed in principle, is to some extent still an ideal. Both staff and parents may be uneasy about the empowerment of parents and what this means in practice (Stacey, 1991). Staff may be ambivalent because of the perceived threat to their professional status (Edwards & Knight, 1994). Parents may be nervous about taking on increased responsibilities for which they feel untrained and unprepared. Because of legislation and budgetary controls, parents may not have much actual power and it may not be of the kind they want (Stacey, 1991). Parents may trust the staff implicitly to lay down the curriculum and organise the classroom, but may become quickly concerned about issues relating to individual children and staff–parent communication, especially if things appear to be going wrong.

## Research Background

Nonetheless, partnership between parents and providers is now central to the Government's notion of planning pre-school provision (SOEID, 1997). Any uncertainty amongst providers and parents about the nature of that partnership is all the more justification for research to establish what the respective stakeholders might expect to gain from such a relationship. To this end, consultation with parents is paramount, so that provision can be 'responsive to the needs and preferences of users' (SOEID, 1997). Whilst local authorities do consult on many local issues, little is known about the broader picture of expectations, knowledge and beliefs and how these are reflected by parents' satisfaction with provision.

The purpose of the present research, sponsored by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), was to survey parental opinion in order to gain a wider perspective on parents' perceptions of the quality and sufficiency of provision across the whole of Scotland. More specifically, the research was designed to explore factors which influence parental preference for particular types of pre-school provision and to assess what parents specifically want their children to gain from pre-school provision. It was also designed to tap parents' knowledge of and satisfaction with different types of provision.

Whilst several national or large-scale surveys of parents' views have been conducted in recent years, they have not altogether painted a consistent picture. There is no disputing the high (increasingly high) levels of attendance of children in some form of pre-school provision (e.g. 94% attendance reported by Stratford *et al.*, 1997) and that parents are at least reasonably happy with their childcare arrangements (e.g. Long *et al.*, 1996). There is also a general consensus that parental values and priorities are related to choice of type of care (Haystead *et al.*, 1980; Johansen *et al.*, 1996).

However, on other issues there is conflicting evidence. Some surveys have shown parents to be quite knowledgeable on what different types of provision have to offer (e.g. Haystead *et al.*, 1980; Johansen *et al.*, 1966; Stratford *et al.*, 1997). Other studies have suggested that parents are confused over differences between types of provision (Kysel, 1982) or report that there is little evidence that parents can differentiate the type of childcare services available (Long *et al.*, 1996). Similarly, in studies that have addressed the reasons why parents send their children to pre-school, social opportunity to mix with similar aged children has been reported

as a high priority by some researchers (e.g. Haystead *et al.*, 1980) but as a low priority by others (e.g. Long *et al.*, 1996). Sharp and Davis (1997), in a study most comparable with ours but undertaken in six areas of England, examined factors that were important in parents' choice of provision. They found that the pre-school establishment's reputation and the childrens' safety and happiness were more important than practical issues like proximity to home, opening hours and costs. However, this research did not take into account family circumstances (e.g. socio-economic or residential status), whether preferences shift over time nor how preferences match up to types of provision.

## The Study

Previous research has identified factors such as 'values', 'preferences', 'knowledge', beliefs and 'expectations' as contributors to parents' decision making and choice about appropriate pre-school provision for their children. However, it has not explored the interconnections between such variables nor their causal linkage to selection of provision. To argue, for example, that parents placed their child in a nursery class because they wanted an educational orientation for their child assumes implicitly that parents already *believe* that their expectations for educational progression are more likely to be met in a nursery rather than in any other type of provision. But, of course, even when other options are equally accessible, parents may place their child in a particular establishment, or type of provision, for any number of initial reasons and then rationalise their decision subsequently. It is likely that satisfaction with childcare arrangements quickly lead parents to expressing what they have come to perceive as the good qualities of that provision as if those qualities were the original reasons for placing their child there.

Involving, as it does, parents' knowledge, beliefs, intentions and actions, the process of parental choice is aptly embraced by the theory of planned behaviour, which is a general model for linking attitudes with behaviour (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Ajzen, 1989). In attempting to predict behaviour from beliefs and knowledge, the model takes account of subjective norms, attitudes towards behaviour, perceived behavioural control and behavioural intentions. Translating this into the terms of parental choice about pre-school provision, the model enables us more accurately to predict choice if we know: (i) what values parents hold (i.e. their preferences for their children); (ii) what knowledge, beliefs and expectations they have about different forms of provision; (iii) what they perceive others' beliefs to be about suitable provision; (iv) what their actual attitudes are (i.e. the strength of their desire to find suitable provision for their child); and (v) the options they have (i.e. the belief that they can exercise control over their choice). Perceived control may be relatively low in areas where available provision is extremely limited but high where there is substantial choice. It is self-evident that if choice is limited, then parents are less likely to be able to place their child according to their strongest preferences.

Taking account of family circumstances, the present study seeks to explore the linkages between these variables using the theory of planned behaviour to clarify our understanding of the processes whereby parents make decisions about appropriate pre-school provision. The specific research objectives were to identify and clarify:

- (a) parents' preferences for pre-school provision and how those preferences change over the pre-school years;
- (b) parents' beliefs and knowledge about different types of provision and what can be expected of them;
- (c) sources from which parents obtain their knowledge about pre-school provision;

- (d) the extent to which values and preferences, knowledge and expectations are inter-related in determining choice of provision and changes in choice of provision;
- (e) parents' satisfaction with their experience of pre-school provision and the relationship between satisfaction, preferences and expectations.

### *Method*

The study was conducted over two successive stages, the first stage involving the distribution of a survey questionnaire to a large-scale sample of parents and the second stage involving detailed interviews with a sample of parents whose children were currently attending pre-school provision.

#### *Stage 1: Survey*

*Respondents.* The survey was conducted with parents of Primary One children (first year in primary school). These parents were selected in preference to parents of children currently attending pre-school for several reasons: (i) they would have a wider experience of provision because their children would have completed their participation in pre-school; (ii) they should naturally reflect the proportions of parents whose children attended different types of provision; and (iii) they should feel less inhibited in expressing their views candidly.

A sample of primary schools across all regions of Scotland was derived from the Scottish Office database. To ensure representativeness, schools were selected in proportion to the populations of children within each Education Authority. Selection was also designed to give representative coverage of urban and rural communities as designated by the database and of broad socio-economic status as indexed by the provision of free school meals. Primary One classes were targeted from a total of 126 schools across 32 local authorities, with whose permission questionnaires plus pre-paid envelopes were distributed to all Primary One children with a request to take them home for completion by parents.

A total of 3315 questionnaires were distributed in two batches, the second batch targeted especially at schools in those areas which were under-represented in the responses to the first circulation. In all, 911 questionnaires were returned, representing a 27.5% response rate, varying from 17 to 52% across the local authorities sampled. Given a 12 page questionnaire with 34 questions, many of which had multiple parts, this relatively low response rate was fully anticipated and justified the large initial circulation. Close checks on the sample of respondents through the questionnaires returned, which were coded by school, showed that respondents were representative of the original sample selected. There were no differences in response rates as a function of residential status (i.e. urban, intermediate or rural), based upon six categories of population densities used by the Scottish Office database. There was a small fluctuation as a function of socio-economic status (SES): those schools with 0–7% free school meals comprising 34% of the returned questionnaires and those schools with over 33% free school meals comprising 23% of the return and, therefore, slightly under-represented.

Characteristics of the respondents were also derived from questionnaire responses: 91% of respondents were mothers; 54% of the questionnaires were completed by the parent of a boy; in 86% of cases respondents were married or living with a partner; in 99% of cases they were white (UK, Irish or other), which precluded an analysis of data for ethnic origin. The 1991 census revealed an ethnic minority population of 62,600 across Scotland, which is only 1.3% of the total population. The survey figure of slightly over 1%, therefore, does not under-represent this group.

TABLE 1. Types of pre-school provision attended (percentages based on  $n=882$ )

	All attendances	One type only
LA nursery	79	27
Playgroup	64	15
Private nursery	22	6
Other	7	1

Respondents' employment status was also analysed using four categories: full-time (21%); part-time over 16 hours per week (27%); part-time under 16 hours per week (12%); unemployed (35%) (missing data = 5%). Respondents' partners were very likely to be in full-time employment (72%). Although these figures represent respondents' and their partners' employment situation at the time of completing the questionnaire, they very closely reflected the situation throughout the whole pre-school period (i.e. children aged 0–5) for which data were collected separately.

For convenience, pre-school provision was grouped into four types:

- (a) Local Authority (LA) nurseries: schools or classes, between which parents did not appear to make a distinction.
- (b) Playgroups.
- (c) Private (day) nurseries.
- (d) Other types of provision, including day centres, LA day nurseries and family centres.

Table 1 shows the percentages of parents in the sample whose children attended each of these types, the left-hand column showing the percentage attending the type at some stage during their pre-school career and the right-hand column the percentage attending that type to the exclusion of all others (the left-hand column includes the right-hand column data). The high percentages in the left-hand column for LA nurseries and playgroups indicates that many parents (in fact 48%) sent their children to both types of provision. In most of these cases children's attendance at two or more types of provision was sequential, but 17% of respondents whose children had attended more than one type indicated that their attendance had been concurrent, for example, attending playgroup in the morning and nursery in the afternoon. Because such a low proportion of parents sent their children to 'other' types of provision, this category was dropped from the analysis.

*Questionnaire.* On the basis of extensive piloting, the questionnaire consisted of 34 items. A variety of formats was used to offset response biases and provide interest for respondents: multiple choice, response boxes to tick and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was structured into four main sections:

1. 'Your Child and Family': demographic information about the parent(s) and child.
2. 'Your Experience': types of provision attended by the child, duration of attendance and parental visits to pre-schools.
3. 'Contact with Pre-school Provision': information about parents' choice of provision as well as their active involvement in activities associated with the provision.
4. 'Beliefs and Expectations': parents' knowledge and beliefs about different types of provision and their perceptions of the main benefits and drawbacks.

## Stage 2: Interviews

*Sample.* The interviews involved parents whose children were currently attending pre-school provision. The purpose was to probe in greater depth some of the issues arising from the questionnaire, including those relating to changes over time.

Parents were selected from pre-school establishments across four local authority regions within a 20 mile radius of Glasgow, to cover both relatively affluent and deprived areas, in keeping with the survey sample of Primary One parents. From 75 establishments contacted, 16 were visited: nine LA nurseries, five playgroups and two private nurseries. These were establishments with variable levels of parental involvement. In total, 91 parents were recruited during the visits and interviewed later by telephone.

*Interview schedules.* Although parents' interviews were designed to expand on areas covered by the survey, they also explored other issues. Questions ranged across the children's attendance and the settling-in process, the advantages and disadvantages of pre-school education, parents' preferences for different types of provision at different ages, the extent to which provision was perceived as meeting parents' and children's needs and general issues concerning the desirability of parental involvement and the adequacy of existing provision. Parental participation in the delivery of pre-school provision was another theme of the research, but these data are reported elsewhere, along with data from interviews with staff (Howe *et al.*, 1998).

## Results and Discussion

Results are drawn from both the survey and the interviews.

### *Parents' Preferences for their Children*

Parents' desire to place their child in some form of pre-school provision was overwhelming: 98% of respondents reported that their children had attended some type of provision in the pre-school years. No attempt was made to exclude parents whose children had not attended, but their very small number made separate analysis of their responses impossible.

Parental preferences were assessed directly by ratings of 24 separate factors which might have been considered when choosing provision in the year prior to formal schooling. These factors were selected on the basis of pilot work and from literature and surveys which suggested their relevance to parents' choices. The importance of each factor was rated as 'essential' (1), 'very important' (2), 'quite important' (3) or 'not important' (4), similar to the rating categories used by Sharp & Davis (1997).

The mean factor ratings and their associated cluster standard deviations are shown in Table 2. Statistical analysis revealed five distinct clusters which, in descending order of importance, are: care and safety, education, setting, convenience and parents' needs. These clusters were all significantly different from each other at  $p < 0.001$  on a series of Friedman tests. The  $\alpha$  coefficients for the reliabilities were in the range 0.69–0.80 and are also shown in Table 2.

Care and safety emerged as the paramount concern for parents, followed by educational progression and the quality of the pre-school setting. Convenience and attention to the needs of the parents were least important. The very low standard deviation for care and safety, in particular, shows how universally this was rated as 'essential' or 'very important' at worst. The higher standard deviations associated with the other clusters demonstrate greater variability in what parents were looking for in pre-school provision. However, this variability was not

TABLE 2. Importance of factors when selecting pre-school provision (scoring scale: 1 = essential; 4 = not important;  $n = 816-873$ )

		Mean rating
Care/safety	Happiness of child	1.2
	Safety and security	1.2
	Quality of care	1.3
	Attitude of staff	1.3
	Cluster mean	1.23
	SD	0.38
Education	$\alpha$ coefficient	0.79
	Reputation of pre-school	1.5
	Preparation for school	1.5
	Staff qualifications	1.6
	Settle in school	1.6
	Educational standard	1.6
	Reading and maths	2.5
	Cluster mean	1.69
Setting	SD	0.52
	$\alpha$ coefficient	0.80
	Number of children	1.9
	Individual attention	1.8
	Play and toys available	1.7
	Information and advice	1.9
	Cluster mean	1.77
Convenience	SD	0.60
	$\alpha$ coefficient	0.72
	Travelling distance	2.3
	Cost	2.8
	Convenient hours	2.4
	Cluster mean	2.52
Parents' needs	SD	0.83
	$\alpha$ coefficient	0.69
	Classes for parents	3.4
	Sponsored places	3.4
	Provision for under 3s	3.3
	Multi-cultural approach	2.8
	Special needs catered for	2.9
	Parental involvement	2.6
	Another child attending	3.2
	Cluster mean	3.02
SD	0.72	
$\alpha$ coefficient	0.79	

related to any of the demographic factors, such as full-time or part-time work, ascribed SES, urban or rural residential status or living singly or with a partner. The conclusion is that parental preferences and priorities are broadly similar across all sections of the community.

### *Parents' Knowledge and Beliefs*

In addition to establishing what parents valued for their children in the immediate pre-school year, the survey also addressed parents' beliefs and knowledge about different forms of pre-school provision, as a means of gauging whether they felt their needs were more likely to be met in one form of provision than another. Comparing LA nurseries, playgroups and private nurseries (other types of provision not included here), respondents were asked to indicate their beliefs about five knowledge domains: (i) the type of staff employed; (ii) cost to the parent; (iii) weeks open; (iv) daily sessions; and (v) age of children accepted. Table 3 summarises the



TABLE 3. Knowledge about different types of pre-school provision (percentages of respondents ticking each box, multiple responses allowed;  $n$  = total number of respondents who ticked in each row).

Type of staff	Teacher	Nursery nurse	Parents	Play leader	$n$	
Local authority nursery	84	75	26	15	786	
Playgroup	6	22	77	91	759	
Private nursery	44	86	8	25	596	
Cost to parents	No fee	Minimal fee	Full fee	Voucher	$n$	
Local authority nursery	31	53	7	37	789	
Playgroup	5	67	27	12	752	
Private nursery	0	3	0.95	30	629	
Weeks open	All year	School year				$n$
Local authority nursery	6	96				800
Playgroup	8	93				754
Private nursery	89	13				640
Daily sessions	All day	School day	Half day	$n$		
Local authority nursery	14	34	66	792		
Playgroup	4	9	91	753		
Private nursery	60	9	9	635		
Age of children accepted	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	$n$
Local authority nursery	2	4	10	72	81	805
Playgroup	9	17	59	74	37	622
Private nursery	77	74	83	86	82	768

percentages of parents checking each response category for each knowledge domain and for each type of provision.

Multiple responses across categories prevented any reliable statistical analysis of these data, but it is clear from inspection of Table 3 that parents generally made well-informed differentiations between the three different types of provision. For example, very high proportions associated teachers and nursery nurses with LA nurseries and play leaders and parents with playgroups. Similarly, respondents were particularly aware that LA nurseries and playgroups follow school year opening times, whereas private nurseries are likely to be open all year round.

We conclude, therefore, that parents are able to differentiate between the main types of pre-school provision and that their differentiation is based on a reasonably accurate understanding of how the provision operates, a conclusion which is consistent with Ball's (1994) analysis and the survey findings of Haystead *et al.* (1980).

Further survey questions were directed at assessing what parents saw as the main aims of pre-school provision and whether parents were also aware of any differences in the objectives of different types of provision. In general terms, parents stressed preparation for school as the single most important aim of pre-school, mentioned by 77% of those who responded. Other aims mentioned were: socialisation—the opportunity to mix with other children (29%); education (23%); exposure to a range of activities (7%); independence (5%). When asked specifically to compare nurseries (LA plus private combined) and playgroups, 62% of respondents thought that their aims were different. Of those who commented on the differ-

TABLE 4. Parental preferences as a function of type of provision: mean weighting (scoring scale: 1 = essential; 4 = not important;  $n = 816-874$ )

Preference	LA nursery	Playgroup	Private nursery
Care/safety	1.27	1.23	1.15
Education	1.66	1.89	1.73
Setting	1.77	1.84	2.58
Convenience	2.44	2.54	2.28
Parents' needs	2.96	3.18	2.09

ence, 72% defined it in terms of education as the focus of nurseries and play as the focus of playgroups, as illustrated by parents' observations:

The playgroup was just supervised playing. At nursery his education had started, although he thought it was just playing.

Nursery classes are far more structured and follow local authority guidelines and curriculum. Playgroups tend to be more play ... and less organised.

This separation in the parents' minds between education and play is distinctly at variance with current policy which promotes learning through play (e.g. Scottish Office, 1997). Thus it is a source of possible tension between the aspirations of parents and those of educators, as also observed by Mooney and Munton (1998). No other perceived differences between nurseries and playgroups produced the same high level of contrast.

#### *Parents' Preferences for Different Types of Provision*

From these analyses emerges a picture of parents with: (i) a clear set of preferences for provision during the immediate pre-school year; (ii) a fairly accurate knowledge base of how different types of provision operate; and (iii) a firm notion that nurseries focus more on education and playgroups on play.

Turning now to consider parents' actual choice and usage of particular types of provision, several questions arise:

- (a) Do parents select a particular type of provision in order to realise their aspirations for their child?
- (b) Is choice of particular types of provision aligned with parents' individual preferences and priorities?
- (c) Do their preferences and priorities change over the pre-school years?

These questions are closely inter-related and are important for testing the theory of planned behaviour by establishing whether parents' preferences and priorities actually shape their decisions about provision for their children.

It is evident that many parents select nurseries for their child in the year immediately preceding school: 71% of the survey sample reported using LA nurseries and 9% reported using private nurseries. The question is whether their choice was determined by their preferences. Table 4 shows that when the preference clusters (depicted in Table 2) are broken down by type of provision, then considerable variation occurs in the mean weighting of clusters as a function of type of provision.

It has already been established that care and safety were the predominant concern (see Table 2) and it is no surprise given the low standard deviation, that all parents, regardless of the type of provision they actually used, were consistent about the importance of this factor. However,

TABLE 5. Use of types of provision by children's age (percentages)

Type of provision	Age of attendance			n
	0-3	3-4	4-5	
Playgroup	22	45	12	795
Private nursery	13	13	10	634
LA nursery	3	38	51	867

it is very interesting that users of nurseries, particularly LA nurseries, weighted education more heavily than users of playgroups ( $p < 0.001$ ). It is also of interest that users of private nurseries placed more emphasis on convenience ( $p < 0.001$ ) and on meeting parents' needs ( $p < 0.05$ ) than users of other types of provision, but they placed less emphasis on setting ( $p < 0.05$ ). Taken together, these results suggest that preferences and priorities are closely related to patterns of usage. Parents who place a high value on education are more likely to have their children in nursery provision of some kind than those who do not value it so highly. Parents for whom convenience and own needs are important are more likely to have their children in a private nursery than in any other kind of provision, especially when both parents are in full-time employment ( $p < 0.01$ ).

One exception to the close association between preference and usage comes from the data on residential status. LA nurseries were rarely used in rural areas: 11% usage, in comparison with 47% in urban areas and 43% in intermediate areas. Yet it has already been noted that residential status made no difference to the weightings assigned to the five preference clusters: rural parents valued education as much as parents in urban or intermediate areas. Their lower usage of nurseries appears to be due to a paucity of nursery provision in rural areas. Implicit in this, of course, is the suggestion that preferences were driving decisions, being thwarted in rural areas by lack of choice or, in terms of the theory of planned behaviour, by limited 'perceived behavioural control'. These findings for residential status are hard to reconcile with the converse view that, far from dictating choice, parental preferences may be rationalisations of the provision that has been selected.

Thus a model is emerging of parents having a set of preferences, having beliefs about how those preferences can best be met and then choosing within available options. Moreover, this model of active selection in accordance with preferences is given further support by survey and interview data relating to changes in preferences over time. We have already mentioned that 48% of survey respondents reported using a combination of playgroups and nurseries across the pre-school years. Table 5 shows the pattern of this shift with LA nursery attendance increasing systematically from 0 to 5 and playgroup attendance, most prevalent at ages 3-4, dropping at ages 4-5. Attendance at private nursery remained moderately constant across all pre-school ages. The shift is therefore from playgroup to LA nursery as the child becomes older. This pattern is confirmed by the high proportion of respondents (83%), using a combination of playgroup and nursery, who reported sending their children to playgroup *before* sending them to nursery, in comparison with the 17% who sent them to playgroup and nursery at the same age.

Since children are not ejected from playgroups when they reach the age of 4, these data strongly suggest that movement from one type of provision to another is the outcome of a process of active selection. When asked their reasons for moving their child from one type of provision to another as the child grew older, 69% of parents cited either 'preparation for

school' or 'natural progression', often qualified with an educational bias, as illustrated by the following comments:

It was a natural progression from mother and toddlers to playgroup, then on to a more structured surrounding in the nursery.

Pre-nursery playgroup was attended for 6 months before nursery, but I felt my child was older and the curriculum of nursery was more suited to him.

The idea that choice was driven by preferences in decisions to move the child from one type of provision to another is further reinforced by the interviews with parents. When asked why they were sending their child to the current type of provision, 50% of nursery parents reported 'preparation for school' and only 14% attributed it to their child's age. Amongst playgroup parents, in contrast, only 20% mentioned preparation for school and 20% mentioned the child's age. This was against a background in which 81% of the interview sample reported that there were alternative types of provision accessible to them, suggesting that, in most cases, a genuine choice existed.

Despite our thesis that parents make active decisions based upon knowledge and beliefs and upon preferences which change as children grow older, parents do not engage extensively in shopping around. The survey questioned parents about the number of pre-school establishments they had visited before deciding where to place their child. As many as 45% of respondents reported having made no visits whatsoever (in contrast to only 8% of parents in England, as reported by Sharp & Davis, 1997). Of the remainder 19, 20 and 14% visited one, two and three or more establishments, respectively (2%, no response). From questioning about the sources of information utilised, it was clear that social contacts, mainly family and friends, were hugely more influential (52%) in guiding decisions than any other single source. Professional sources (e.g. health visitors, social workers and doctors) accounted for a further 22% and the remaining sources of information used were leaflets, posters and directories. Parents come to decisions on the basis of information gleaned through their informal social networks much more than through any printed literature. Reliance on others' knowledge and beliefs is wholly consistent with the theory of planned behaviour, which stresses the importance of social norms in guiding action.

### *Parents' Satisfaction*

Parents' evaluations of their children's pre-school provision were tapped directly and indirectly. Direct questioning concerning the perceived benefits of pre-school provision revealed an overwhelmingly high level of satisfaction, coupled with a unanimous view that children enjoyed being at pre-school. Through the survey parents' satisfaction was evaluated primarily by their reactions to the way staff dealt with issues and by their suggestions for improvements. Table 6 lists seven key functions of staff in relation to parents, along with mean ratings, on a 1 (highly satisfied) to 4 (dissatisfied) scale. High ratings of all seven functions are immediately evident, as is the small range of scores (1.43–1.65), and there are no significant differences between functions. Follow-up Kruskal–Wallis tests to compare ratings as a function of type of provision revealed only one significant difference: playgroup staff were rated as less willing than other staff to deal with parents' questions and concerns ( $p < 0.01$ ). Nonetheless, within the pool of playgroup ratings this function still obtained the second highest proportion of 'highly satisfied' respondents.

Further survey questions invited parents to express their satisfaction with the feedback received on their child's physical and emotional needs (89% satisfied) and on their child's activities and development (91% satisfied). In explaining the reasons for satisfaction respon-

TABLE 6. Satisfaction with staff behaviour: mean weighting (scoring scale: 1 = highly satisfied; 4 = dissatisfied;  $n = 846-877$ )

Behaviour	Mean rating
Staff discuss concerns	1.43
Contact with staff	1.46
Staff attitudes to parents	1.50
Staff dealing with complaints	1.57
Feedback on child	1.59
Making special arrangements	1.63
Parents' views considered	1.65

dents gave open-ended answers which emphasised the value they attached to face-to-face communication with staff. Of the 10% only of respondents who registered dissatisfaction, this was leveled at lack of staff interest and insufficient contact. Staff are clearly central to parents' thinking about their evaluation of pre-school provision and it is not surprising that their feelings of satisfaction revolved around their contact and communication with staff.

Satisfaction with pre-school provision was also evaluated more indirectly through the perceived benefits which parents attributed to it. The survey revealed 'social interaction' or the opportunity to mix as by far the most frequently cited benefit, mentioned by 74% of respondents, followed by 'independence' (22%) and 'routine/discipline' (19%). These expressions of social adjustment are illustrated by parents' comments, such as:

It helped with socialising with other children of the same age, i.e. communicating and sharing. There was also learning how to be part of a group ... .

The main thing was the development of friendships which helped make primary school less strange ... .

She learned the concept of group activities: graded independence from one-to-one at mother and toddler, one-to-ten at nursery and one-to-thirty at school.

Social interaction (35%) and learning a routine or discipline (23%) also featured as the most widely reported benefits of pre-school education for helping children settle into primary school. Educational preparation was reported less frequently (11%) at the point of transition to primary school, probably because parents' thoughts are focused upon their children's general well-being and adjustment to new class mates, new teachers and a new environment.

Nonetheless, since what parents find satisfactory about pre-school provision at the transition to primary school does not align perfectly with their longer term preferences (i.e. educational preparation), it is interesting to explore the relationship between preferences and satisfaction more broadly. This was done by taking the mean scores obtained by survey respondents on the five preference clusters (care/safety, education, setting, convenience and parents' needs) and correlating these with mean 'satisfaction' scores derived by pooling ratings of staff behaviour. Correlations between preferences and satisfaction amongst parents from LA nurseries, private nurseries and playgroups ranged from  $-0.04$  to  $0.22$ , a number of which were significant. Satisfaction was significantly higher (i) for those respondents using only playgroups who placed more emphasis upon care/safety ( $r = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), (ii) for those respondents using only LA nurseries who placed more emphasis upon education ( $r = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and (iii) for those respondents using only private nurseries who placed more emphasis upon parents' needs ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results are entirely in accordance with the results for parental preferences in each type of provision: the value which parents attach to care/safety, education and parents' needs are most salient in the initial selection of playgroups, LA nurseries and

private nurseries, respectively. The conclusion to be drawn is that the more that playgroups and nurseries match up with parents' preferences, the more satisfied those parents are.

## General Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the survey and interviews with parents provide considerable support for the theory of planned behaviour and its appropriateness for predicting parental choice of pre-school provision. Parents' preferences, knowledge, beliefs and expectations contribute collectively to determine choice of provision, reinforced by satisfaction when expectations are met. The strength of the theory is that it provides a clear and systematic pathway amongst the variables that link the original attitude with action, rather than a loosely connected array of factors or considerations, out of which a decision emerges.

To expand this analysis we start with the initial desire (attitude) of parents to place their children in suitable provision; from the survey, this amounted to 98%. The parents hold or acquire certain beliefs about provision, both in terms of the desirability of using provision (over 90% saw the benefits to their children) and more specifically in terms of their preferences for one kind of provision over another. These beliefs derive from different sources:

- (a) *Behavioural beliefs*. These include the set of values or preferences which were prioritised as care and safety, education, setting, convenience and meeting parents' needs. These preferences were found to be relatively uniform across all parents and were independent of factors like socio-economic and residential status. Preferences shift as the child progresses: whilst care and safety is an ever-present high priority throughout the pre-school years, parents' concern about educational progression increases as the child approaches primary school. Behavioural beliefs also include what parents know about different types of provision: for playgroups, LA and private nurseries they have a moderately accurate understanding of what can be expected in cost, times of availability, staff employed and age of children admitted.
- (b) *Normative beliefs*. Whatever beliefs or knowledge parents may have acquired, they need social support to reinforce those beliefs and incline them towards appropriate action. It is perhaps not surprising then that their social networks, through family and friends and, less markedly, through professional sources such as health visitors and doctors, are so influential in guiding their decision making. Much of their beliefs about the advantages and disadvantages of specific types of provision and about specific pre-school establishments undoubtedly come from this source, possibly because of their uncertainty or unawareness about other sources of information.
- (c) *Beliefs about opportunities and resources*. Action is of course constrained by limitations of choice which are outside parents' control. There may be relatively few places available of the type preferred by parents in the community in which they live and at the age their children have reached. Our data for rural areas revealed a paucity of pre-school places in LA nurseries and a demand that is not adequately being met. We know that parents living in rural areas have just the same preferences for their children as parents living in more urban areas.

Notwithstanding the possibility that some parents will not have their expectations met by available provision, the general outcome of the research is that most parents are able to find accessible provision which matches their preferences and expectations and which, within the theory of planned behaviour, leads them to formulate clear and stable behavioural intentions about placing their child, which they follow through in action. Subjective norms play an

important role thereafter, because to the extent that most parents are satisfied with the type of provision selected, their satisfaction feeds back into the community to become part of the culture which serves to reinforce the next generation of parents when they come to select a particular type of provision. Given the level of knowledge parents have acquired, it is in one sense a tribute to these networks and informal sources of information that they work so well in passing on to parents a realistic idea of what to expect.

From a practical perspective, if parents are reluctant to visit establishments for themselves, and if they prefer to glean the information they need from family and friends, then any steps that can be taken to improve knowledge about local pre-school facilities should be encouraged. Certainly, the more contact parents have with their pre-school unit and the more interest they take in their child's activities inside and outside pre-school, the more likely it is that accurate information will circulate widely within the community. For policy purposes this is an argument for increased participation on the part of parents whose involvement can only strengthen the accuracy of the information that is disseminated to others. The issue of parents participating with staff as fellow providers of early years services is crucial to providing high quality provision and is followed up elsewhere (Howe *et al.*, 1998).

Advocacy for parental involvement brings us full circle to the issue of partnership between stakeholders and the need for service providers to keep in close contact with parents' needs and preferences. Our research has established that while there is common agreement about care and safety as the major concern for all parents, there are subtle but significant differences in the priority which parents attach to factors like education and setting, according to the stage of development which children have reached. Moreover, parents' own circumstances may influence the priority they give to lower order features like convenience and parents' needs. To the extent that the primary needs are universally met by most kinds of available provision, then selection within that provision becomes a balance between parents' perceptions of their own needs and their perception of their child's needs.

However, broader political and economic factors, such as the state of the labour market, also have a direct bearing on choice, because of variations in the availability of employment for parents and consequential fluctuations in the need for full-time provision. Such considerations also affect policy development with respect to parental involvement, with acknowledged shifts in emphasis between market-driven consumerism, on the one hand, and partnerships among parents and providers, on the other (Woods, 1988).

Diversity of choice in pre-school provision is a desirable political and educational ambition and one embraced by several recent governments. However, policies on choice have tended to assume that all parents can exercise their choices equally. As David (1993) has emphasised across the educational spectrum, there may be considerable limitations on choice amongst those living in constrained circumstances even though, as this research shows, their preferences and expectations are no different from those parents better placed to exercise their choice.

### **Acknowledgement**

This research was sponsored by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department. The views expressed in this paper are strictly those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department, the contractor or the Project Committee.

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