Childcare and social class: caring for young children in the UK

**Carol Vincent, Annette Braun and Stephen J. Ball,
Institute of Education, University of London.**

**Centre for Critical Education Policy Studies,
Institute of Education,
20 Bedford Way
London
WC1H OAL**

**Tel: 0207 612 6915
Email: c.vincent@ioe.ac.uk**

Carol Vincent is a Reader at the Institute of Education, University of London, and the Director of CeCeps (the Centre for Critical Education Policy Studies). She is currently directing an ESRC-funded research project on working-class parents' engagement with childcare. Her research interests include social class and education, parental engagement with education and care systems and markets and education. Her most recent publication was *Childcare, Choice and Class Practices* (co-authored with Stephen Ball) (Routledge, 2006).

Annette Braun is a Research Officer at CeCeps at the Institute of Education. She is currently a researcher on the ESRC funded project 'Local Childcare Cultures: working class families and choice of pre school childcare' and completing a PhD on young women graduates choosing teaching as a career at the beginning of the 21st century. Previously Annette has worked on the national evaluations of the Excellence in Cities Policy and the Pupil Learning Credits Pilot Scheme at the Centre for Educational Research, London School of Economics.

Stephen J. Ball is the Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He has written and researched extensively in the area of education policy and a collection of his writings have recently been published: *Education Policy and Social Class* (Routledge, 2006).

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Abstract
This paper draws on the results of two qualitative research projects examining parental engagements with the childcare market in the UK. Both projects are located in the same two London localities. One project focuses on professional middle class parents, and the other on working class families, and we discuss the key importance of social class in shaping parents' differential engagement with the childcare market, and their understandings of the role childcare plays in their children's lives. We identify and discuss the different 'circuits' of care (Ball et al 1995) available to and used by families living physically close to each other, but in social class terms living in different worlds. We also consider parents' relationships with carers, and their social networks. We conclude that in order to fully understand childcare policies and practices and families' experiences of care, an analysis which encompasses social class and the workings of the childcare market is needed.

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> *But there is one additional reform that has the potential to transform opportunity for every child and be a force for renewal in every community, and on which the Government wishes to make further progress today. While the nineteenth century was distinguished by the introduction of primary education for all and the twentieth century by the introduction of secondary education for all, so the early part the twenty first century should be marked by the introduction of pre-school provision for the under fives and childcare available to all* (speech by Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Statement to the House of Commons, Spending Review, July 2004).

In this paper, we report on and analyze the engagement of parents from different social class and income groups with the childcare market in the UK. This market has a very substantial private component, although the UK has over the last eight years seen a major development in state sector provision. Government intervention is through Sure Start, now encompassing Children's Centres, which aims to provide integrated care, education, health and welfare facilities for the under- 5s and their families. Provision and support are targeted at socially disadvantaged areas, and the exact forms of support are locally determined[1]. As a result of this action and investment, childcare has been transformed during the last eight years, from a 'political backwater' (Penn 2006, in press) to one central to the contemporary social policy agenda in the UK. Thus childcare is being re-defined as a public rather than a private issue. Although, the government intends childcare provision to remain a 'mixed economy' of public, voluntary and private sector providers, the expansion of the state sector has had the effect, most noticeably, of increasing the amount of childcare provision available (mostly through places in day nurseries) and making those places accessible for some working class families through the related introduction of tax credits for low income families[2].

We have recently completed a two year qualitative project exploring professional middle class parents' choice of childcare, looking at such issues as how parents – and

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[1] The success of Sure Start has been contested, but most local programmes are due to be wound up as Children's Centres appear (these will provide integrated services on one site, the 2005 New Labour election manifesto promising that eventually there will be a Children's Centre in every community).

[2] Working Tax Credit supports working people (whether employed or self-employed) on low incomes by topping up earnings. If you are responsible for a child or young person you can claim working Tax Credit and work at least 16 hours a week. The amount of Working Tax Credit depends on household income, hours worked and number of children. For example, for the tax year 2005-06, a household with an annual income of £10,500 and one child, can get up to £4,160 in tax credit. For two children, the figure rises to £5,855. Comparable numbers for a household with an annual income of £15,000 are £2,495 and £4,190 respectively.

There is extra help with the costs of 'registered' or 'approved' childcare. This is called the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit and it can cover up to 70% of childcare costs (up to a maximum cost of £175 a week for one child and £300 a week for two children). Thus it is worth up to £122.50 for one child and £210 for two children. The amount received depends on household income.

which parent - found information on different care options, made a choice of care, evaluated different kinds of provision, developed relationships with carers, and balanced their caring responsibilities with other domestic and paid work demands (see Vincent & Ball 2006 for full details). We are currently undertaking a project which looks at similar issues – how families engage with finding and managing care for their young children - in relation to working class parents from the same London localities as our professional middle class sample.

In this paper we first discuss why we consider social class to be such a crucial variable. Second, we describe the studies and the research participants. Third, we focus on the data and discuss three issues, looking at the differentials across class groups i) the types of childcare chosen by the middle and working class families and some aspects of their perceptions of that care; ii) the relationships with carers across the class groups and iii) the social networks of which mothers are part. We conclude that in order to fully understand childcare policies and practices and families' experiences of care, an analysis which foregrounds social class is needed. First, we give a brief explanation for our focus on social class.

The 'death of class'?
For some scholarly commentators, 'the rise in individualization is regarded as having made social class obsolete in social explanation' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gilles 2003 p.132). These arguments largely focus on the way in which a coherent traditional working class, dependent on a manufacturing base, and with identifiable patterns of lifestyles, values and expectations no longer exists in many localities. Some commentators, most notably Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), have argued that a 'disembedding' has occured, a 'removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments' (such as strong class collectivities) (Beck 1992, p.128, cited in Savage 2000 p.103) leading to a situation in which individuals can 'reflexively construct their biographies and identities' (Skeggs 2004 p.52).

Weis (2004), however, focusing on the white industrial proletariat in America, argues that this group has remained a distinct class fraction, albeit one with several key characteristics (gender relations for example) that are altered from those of its earlier incarnation. Certainly there have been changes and re-alignments in the class structure (and, importantly, these have different workings out in different localities, hence the need to embed place firmly within analyses of empirical findings), but we would agree with Weis, Savage, Skeggs and others that these re-configurations do not mean that class is no longer crucial in shaping life chances, life experiences. Several commentators (Weis 2004; Skeggs 2004; Ball 2003; Savage 2000; Reay 1998; Lareau 1989, 2002) employ Bourdieu's theories on class and culture and habitus in order to illuminate the pervasiveness of class, at a time when people (in the UK at least) often deny class labels (Savage 2000). Bourdieu's concept of habitus – a set of dispositions, of assumptions, of perceptions derived from the assimilation of learning from family, school and the wider social environment (see Weis 2004 p.11-12; Reay 1998) - is valuable in explicating class as process not category (Ball 2003). Habitus does not predictably determine behaviour, but rather describes 'tendencies to think, feel and behave in particular ways' (Reay 1998 p.27). Crucially influenced by the economic context, habitus shapes aspirations, responsibilities and anxieties, which in turn influence choices and practices. Importantly, those choices and practices are also shaped and influenced by the opportunities made available by state policies (see Ball

2003, p.9) (state support for the provision of childcare to enable women to return to the paid workforce is a good example here, Crompton 2006).

The work of Bourdieu (1986, 1990, 2004) helps us to understand patterns of distinction and boundary, families' differential possession and activation of capital, and the way in which class-based distinctions and identifications 'are realized within the everyday interweaving of diverse tapestries of behaviour. Class is made visceral and palpable in the practical closures and exclusions of choice which are achieved and maintained within families and social networks, and in the interactions between families and social networks and social institutions' (Ball 2003 p.177).

Such an understanding of class does not focus on romanticized notions of class as 'heroic collective agency', but rather on class as implicit, as 'encoded in people's sense of self worth and in their attitudes to and awareness of others – in how they carry themselves as individuals' (Savage 2000 p.107), their bodies, tastes and values. Savage continues,

> What Bourdieu's arguments point towards is the need to consider the nature of contemporary identities in ways which are not premised on simplistic contrasts between either class collectivism on the one hand, or individualized identities on the other, but which are attentive to their inter-meshing, (2000, p.108).

What we hope we have done and are doing in our two projects is to gain a sense of the articulation between structural constraints and individual agency, both between and within social classes. In order to do this we focus on one aspect of parents' lives: their use of childcare provision. In a period marked by 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin 2000b, cited in Skeggs 2004 p.56) – choice is mandatory for the active, self-managing individual. And how individuals make arrangements to care for their children is part of their wider understanding of their own identity, and their location within the social world.

We have set up this paper so far as a comparison between middle and working class parents, presenting two distinct groups. Although space does not permit a digression here, we note that the apparent binary of working class/middle class is not as fixed as it is often presented by common sense assumptions. Elsewhere we have presented analyses of the differences and distinctions in values, attitudes and beliefs, as well as areas of commonality *within* class groups, (Ball et al 2004, Ball & Vincent 2007, Vincent, Ball, and Braun 2007).

However despite the importance of attending to the small differences and nuances of intra-class fractions, we must eventually ask questions about the overall significance of these small divisions. Where should primary emphasis be given in an analysis, to the nuanced differences *within* the middle and working classes, or to the commonalities across them and the far weightier seal *between* the classes? Elsewhere, we have discussed the different degrees of agency amongst working class respondents (Vincent, Braun & Ball 2006). Yet this is, in all cases relative, highly limited in comparison to that of many middle class professionals with financial security, credentials and qualifications, insurance policies and home ownership. The working class parents, were, should they wish to move, mostly subject to housing association

and council property availability and regulations. They were a less well credentialed group so had fewer assets with which to negotiate the labour market, and they were not able to insulate themselves from the unsafe aspects of their localities, as effectively as the middle class sample[3]. The complex financial calculations which allowed the working class families to work and pay for childcare were often facilitated by, if not entirely dependent on, tax credits, a confusing and occasionally inefficient system (see Braun et al 2006).

The study

This paper is based then on two qualitative funded research projects. The first exploring the childcare options and choices of professional middle class parents in two areas of London, Battersea and Stoke Newington, and the second exploring similar issues with working class parents from these same two localities.

This paper draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews. The first project involved a respondent group of 57 mothers and 14 fathers from professional middle class families. Twenty of the mothers were re-interviewed to track changes in their care arrangements. In addition 21 childcare providers (nursery staff, childminders, nannies) were interviewed. From the second project which is on-going, the paper draws on an initial analysis of 55 first round interviews with working class mothers and fathers. We used the criteria of educational qualifications, housing and occupation to locate individuals as either middle class or working class. We have several parents in the working class project who could be considered in terms of 'intermediate' occupational groupings, engaged as they are in para-professional occupations. However, they had largely reached these positions by non-traditional routes.

The middle class parents in the first project were mainly white (except three), and mainly in heterosexual, married/co-habiting relationships (except one). Parents participating in the second project are from a range of different ethnic groups (with 25 being from African or Caribbean backgrounds and 21 being white UK / white other), and living arrangements were more varied and complex. All had at least one child of or under five.

The material contexts of mothering

Now we turn to the data and examine three issues across the middle and working class samples: the types of care chosen by families and their perceptions of that care, relationships with carers, and the social networks to which mothers had access.

Choosing and using childcare

As might be expected the middle class and the working class parents engaged with different 'circuits of care' where nurseries were concerned. The former interacted mainly with a largely private childcare market, and the latter exclusively with state or voluntary sector provision, where fees were lower than in many of the exclusive private settings. They also had far less choice of provider, (see also Hays 2003). The cost of childcare is an issue for both groups, as UK costs are very high with parents

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[3] Although the latter often lived in close proximity to the working class respondents, crime and personal safety were much less frequently discussed when their opinions on their locality were solicited

bearing about 75-80% of the total[4], but many (not all) of the professional middle class sample were able to pay to get the care they wanted, whether that was nanny, nursery or childminder. Most of the working class parents were highly dependent on tax credits. Although many of the mothers acknowledged that they would not be working without the financial injection to pay for childcare, the system also caused anxiety and uncertainty as some benefits were over-paid and then claimed back, leaving families suddenly very short of money. Tax credit administration was indeed heavily criticised by two 2005 reports, from the Parliamentary ombudsman and the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB (CAB 2005).

It was notable that the assumptions made by the interviewees, their common sense understandings about 'appropriate' provision, were very different between the two class groups. Concerns about different types of care elicited some of the most emotive language in the interviews. The working class mothers anxieties and disapproval focused on 'stranger' childminders, and those of the middle class mothers on babies in nurseries. The working class parents were more fearful around their children's safety than their middle class counterparts, and commonly opted for nurseries, rejecting childminders unless they are previously known to them. This was striking throughout the sample.

> We really- we didn't want to [employ a childminder]..Because, to be honest with you, because I haven't got that much friends and like, as I said, family around here, I didn't know how to look for it, I couldn't trust anybody (Nisrine, SN.)

> Because I've seen people doing childminding and they've got these children all over the place – that market there, that market there….. Sometimes it's raining – the child hasn't got no hat on their head, or sometimes it's cold […] And things like that kind of put me off. And then you hear stories in the media regarding these childminders that are registered and they're still, you know, doing this to these children. And sometimes it's not the childminder but it's the partner of the childminder or family member or someone else. (Diana, SN.)

> Yeah, it was always going to be nursery because for me, I do not like childminders, because I do not like my child to be locked up in a house with adults, […] What do they do with them? Do they take them out? No. You know at least at the nursery, I know there's a schedule. I can clearly see it….I don't know anyone, even at work, I don't know anyone that uses childminders (Amy, B.)

One of the few mothers we had in the working class sample who used a childminder emphasised that she chose her carer because she knew her well, and without that prior knowledge would not have left her child with one individual. It is interesting to note the importance of media 'horror stories' here, as well as the choices of other 'people like me'. There is a fear of neglect and even abuse, and a sense of not knowing and

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[4] Average inner London costs in 2006 for a week of nursery care are £197 for an under-two and £175 for an over-two, with average costs for a childminder in Inner London, ranging from £142-146.

not trusting individuals to act responsibly in a private space. The public space of nurseries is by contrast open to scrutiny, as the workers are policed by each other.

A majority of the middle class parents however (54% in Battersea, and 70% in Stoke Newington) chose nannies or childminders for their under threes, with nurseries becoming more popular for children in the immediate pre-school period (3-5 years) due to the perceived intellectual, creative and social advantages offered by a nursery environment for this older age group. They were far more likely than the working class parents to emphasise the importance of small, intimate care spaces, especially for the under threes. In this they are following the dominant ideology emanating from public policy in the post war period which has accorded normative status to care in the home by the mother (Gregson & Lowe (1994), also Dahlberg et al 1999). This was challenged by many of the working class mothers (see below).

A majority of the middle class mothers were uneasy with the idea of group daycare for babies and toddlers. To give just two examples here.

> I hadn't gone round nurseries, but I kind of knew it wasn't an option I was keen on…I know there are great nurseries, but I didn't like it was really the concept I didn't like. I didn't like the idea of warehousing….I think warehousing a lot of babies together in a room didn't really seem particularly healthy to me. I don't think from a social point of view it was a particularly natural state of affairs having 12 babies in a room with 4 adults…Too many people, too many babies…That doesn't seem to me to be a particularly natural way for small children to be raised……There's a lot less chance of a child being battered in a nursery [but] I thought there was quite a high chance of them not getting what I would think of as appropriate love and attention…People who seem to choose nurseries seem to choose them from a safety angle and because, I don't know how to describe it, but from a jealousy angle. They didn't want one individual forming a close bond with their child…but I think if you're working 5 days a week, actually you do need another mummy while you're at work, and that might be painful to admit…[but] why would you want your children to have anything less than a mummy? (Isobel, B.)

This quotation illustrates the way in which one woman and one or more children in her home is seen as the most appropriate, indeed 'natural' form of care for small children. Angie echoed Isobel's feelings about nurseries:

> She was 6 months when I went back to work, she was only just sitting up, I just didn't feel comfortable with her going there [day nursery] so I felt like she needed one to one care. I just didn't feel like I wanted her to be in that kind of institutional environment, no matter how nice it was…It's just the routine and environment that's imposed upon them (Angie, SN)

These mothers tended to stress the risk of emotional neglect in nurseries whereas the working class mothers appeared more concerned about the possibility of physical neglect or harm from childminders.

The working class mothers who used nurseries, were clear about the developmental benefits of group provision (a view shared by the middle class minority), even where babies were concerned. The constant presence of a peer group was understood as encouraging very young children to talk, and learn to socialise effectively and at an early age[5]

> But I felt that my daughter being with my sister all day she's not really learning much as if she was- as she would if she was in a group, you know, with other kids. […] And she's, you know, picked up so much since she's been with a group. (Taysha, B.) (child approx. 15 months when starting fulltime at nursery).

> He's very- he's a happy baby, he's a happy child. […] My [older] son …. he was at home for such a long time that when he did go out to nursery he didn't know how to share or anything like that. He'd say, "It's mine, it's mine." He would be hitting. But I noticed from [younger son] he's not like that. (Diana, SN., son went to full time nursery from 6 months)

The working class mothers tended to present nursery as preferable to the home setting. At home the child would be bored. This emphasises the very different material contexts of mothering for the two groups. The working class mothers generally did not have the space or the resources of their middle class counterparts, many lived in cramped conditions without gardens and with the surrounding outdoor space perceived as dangerous. Going out, even to the park, required money as children would ask for drinks or crisps. The space or the facilities available were not at all comparable to those offered by the nurseries. Bernice's son started nursery at 15 months, and she explains that nursery care is both right and necessary for him.

> After a while, you're sort of bored with your own company, there's only so much shopping you can do when you haven't got any money…..He's a very friendly, playful child. So it was time, because it would have been selfish of me to keep him at home full time, all the time. I'm bored, he's bored. [….] There's things you want to do [in the house] [……], and they're running under your feet, because they don't want to play with toys, they haven't got enough attention. So if it's just you and the child at home, they want to see you twenty four/seven…….Like I've been washing the dishes, and there's nothing wrong with him, the TVs on, his toys are there, and he will come and he'll sort of push me [……] There's only so much you can do [….] I need more adult stimulation as well. Because you know, if you're not staring at a TV, cleaning, or whatever or you walk up and down the road and all you're talking to is probably the shop assistants. (Bernice, B.)

Bernice's reasoning is clear. Both she and her son need other sources of stimulation. The mother-child relationship, traditionally presented as all-encompassing and as key to a child's social, moral and emotional development (Gerhardt 2005) is here recognised as limited, partial and highly context dependent.

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[5] The arrival of Steve Biddulph's (2006) controversial book, 'Raising babies: Should under threes go to nursery?' claims that aggressive tendencies and anti-social behaviour are a result of being in nursery for significant periods of time at a young age.

The working class mothers who had returned to work tended to discuss the period when they were at home on maternity leave in similar terms as Bernice, as a kind of period of blankness, of boredom, of emptiness.

> Yeah, because I…I was in work, you know, so obviously working in the school as well, so it was actually, well, being on maternity leave was actually quite depressing really…you know, because I, sort of, I missed the children at work and I missed my friends and socialising and, yeah, things like that. So being at home was…I sort of felt a bit left on the shelf, you know? (Jocelyn, B.)

This reflects the low status role that being a carer has in our society. The middle class mothers at home, however, while they were aware of (and in some cases deeply felt) the risk of loss of self and identity inherent in exchanging careers for low status motherhood, were able to take a different approach. In a climate where 'caring' is casually disconnected from 'proper' work, mothers have to remake those connections for themselves and others. Thus the middle class mothers who were at home full time emphasised that mothering is an important and valuable job, or even a 'vocation' as one referred to it. These redefinitions are easier to achieve for affluent stay at home mothers who have wide social networks for support, and the economic capital available to them to bring in support in order to help with the house-work, to attend activities to entertain the children, or give them a break from childcare. Several did voluntary work of some sort, including co-ordinating National Childbirth Trust (NCT) branches, or editing a magazine[6].

Mothers from both projects who engaged in paid work agreed that employment was important to their sense of self and happiness. The middle class mothers were also positive about the benefits childcare brought to their children. However the emphasis differed between class groups. Only one of the middle class mothers, (a full time worker) suggested that the children were better off for not being looked after by her.

> I don't think I've got the skills to…I can spot some of the stuff eventually, but I think I'm probably less ambitious for them, perhaps than the nursery is. So I tend to see them playing with something at the nursery and then think 'oh that would be a good idea to get at home'…or I can be surprised by what they're doing. (Monica, B.).

Monica's comment suggests that she recognises a role as a pedagogue to be part of a mother's responsibilities. However, in her own case, as she feels less skilled in playing this role than the professionals, it is a valid and rational decision to hand this responsibility over to them. As Walkerdine & Lucey argue many middle class mothers are 'manacled to sensitivity' (1989, p.83), accepting responsibility for all aspects of the child's development including their early intellectual development .

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[6] The phenomenon of 'mumpreneurs', mothers who combine motherhood and running a business, often small cottage industries developing goods and services for the children's market, is becoming increasingly recognised and now has its own website: www.mumpreneurs.com

> The learning environment becomes the entire home, every possible permutation of events, actions and conversations becomes a 'not to be missed' opportunity for a valuable lesson…The good mother must always be there. And so, not only the 'formal' lesson or the 'educational game' but imaginative play, mealtimes, house work, conversations, questions, demands, resistance and arguments all become the site of leaning (1989, p.82-3)

Unlike Walkerdine and Lucey's research, our studies did not include observations of the mothers at home with their children, so we cannot comment on their practices (although see Vincent & Ball forthcoming on 'enrichment' activities). However we can say that, with the exception of Monica, none of the middle class mothers suggested that the nursery was offering their children a superior experience to the one they received at home, it was often recognised as different (because of the presence of peers and a wider range of activities), but not better. The working class mothers however saw the carers as professionals who were there to further the children's development and had the skills to do so. This stance is unsurprising, considering working class women have long been the recipient of state-sponsored messages concerning the inadequacies of their own parenting (Clarke 2006).

Relationships with carers
Both working class and middle class mothers had apparent difficulty establishing relationships with carers in which they felt they could speak freely and their opinions would be well-received. There is a sense amongst the mothers that the providers' style is unchangeable. To give just two examples.

> The only thing is that they're putting [babies] out in the garden even on a windy day, and I mean a moderately chilly day. Because I did question them. Several times I've questioned it [….] They said 'oh it's nice fresh air'…And I think it's something they've been doing maybe for years and they are just going to do it anyway, whatever I say (Tomi, B., participant in working class project)

Judy describes how both her nanny and her childminder were very much in control of the care relationship.

> and I think one of the problems, the downside of [childminder] was that she was one of these very 'my way goes' people [….] So [nanny] took us on; and very much took us on and, again, slightly in control. I have to say, [she], again, even though she's a nanny, she was quite a, you know, she ran her show (Judy, SN. Participant in middle class project)

We have argued elsewhere (Vincent & Ball 2006, ch. 6) that the mother-carer relationship is one of opposing and rival standpoints. The potential for antagonism is ever-present. It does not often manifest itself as hostility, but rather the possibility of fracture and dissension remain (see also Nelson 1989, 1990). When mothers do attempt to go beyond formal and rather limited contact with carers in nurseries, they are often beset by uncertainty as to their claim on providers' time.

>Sometimes I think 'Oh gosh they're probably wanting rid of me?" because I spend like ten minutes or so when I pick her up just talking to them. ….I mean..they don't tend to say anything like 'Oh well, Alanis, you've been here for ten minutes now, it's time for you to go', but sometimes you do feel like, 'I think I've been here a bit too long now' (Alanis, B., participant in working class project p.13)

The middle class mothers may be expected to be, by virtue of their possession of particular social and cultural capitals, more confident and more effective in using their 'voice'. However, they are often restrained from activating these capitals by their emotional involvement with the child which makes them wish to preserve untroubled relationships with carers for the children's sake (see Vincent & Ball 2006 ch. 6 for further examples). As Connie says, 'I don't know, no, I'm not very good at saying, you know, "It's not on," and all that' (Connie, SN). Kathryn (B.) describes sacking her nanny as 'one of the worst days in my life'. However the middle class families do generally have more options. Kathryn does go ahead with sacking her nanny, and employs another, and Judy (SN) moves a child from one nursery to another (very expensive) one, when the first became 'chaotic' ('So, then we walked down the road to [private nursery] and went in and said, "can we look round?"). Moving care, choosing another care environment seems and is possible, even relatively straight forward. This contrasts with the difficulties two of the working class mothers saw in changing nursery despite their considerable misgivings concerning the current settting.

Thus, although both groups are vulnerable to feelings of intense anxiety about their children's well-being whilst in childcare, and both find developing a full and open dialogue with carers difficult, the middle class parents were willing to 'exit' unsuitable care situations, feeling fairly confident that they could find another alternative.

Social networks
The working class mothers had different kinds of social networks to their middle class peers. The latter group, especially those who stayed at home or who worked part-time had large networks built around other 'mothers like me'. These networks often established at NCT groups, and/or at children's activities, were very effective in providing mothers with support as well as 'hot knowledge' (personal recommendation and opinion, Ball and Vincent 1998) about care and education settings locally. The networks are based on a set of common needs and concerns, what one respondent called a 'grapevine of mothers' which operate within fairly homogeneous social groupings. (Holloway 1998 reports the importance of such networks in her study of middle-class Hallam, as does Mackenzie 1989 in Brighton, and Dyck 1996 in a Canadian suburb). The words of these middle class mothers talking about their own particular networks show how these are built and sustained.

>Oh, NCT yes, yes, did NCT, yes. Yes, did NCT, and got some very close friends through it, yeah. So, any other groups? Only did NCT with [son], my first, didn't do it with anybody else. No, no, nothing else, I don't think [……]Oh through the school, yes. And this road particularly, there's lots of neighbours who, who I know well, well enough to, you know, have

> in for drinks or whatever, and go round for- the children go round for tea and things. So, yeah, it's very, very tight knit, sort of, social support system, which is great (Kathryn, B.).

> So, we've got a really nice network of friends from the nursery….So, we see them, sort of, socially as well. [……] Oh, I joined the NCT before [daughter] was born, and- but I ended up going to a … Fulham class, which means I'm in touch with, sort of, half a dozen girls and we see each other, sort of …..once a fortnight. (Jill, B.)

Ann chose her child's crèche – a very small childcare facility established and managed by parents – on the recommendations of friends.

> Well I suppose it was there was a, because I was recommended by a friend………..there was about three or four people that I knew [there]…I mean new friends from like…mother friends, mother friends you know…that I knew they were going and they recommended it and we'd met somewhere…an NCT group, blah blah blah…yoga…and they were recommending it. And that was what helped me decide (Ann, SN)

Despite the existence of romanticised notions of working class community, we found many working class mothers with few contacts especially with others with young children, what Ann refers to above as 'mother friends'. Family members however, particularly, respondents' mothers and sisters were much more important, especially if they were living nearby. Jackie for example refers to her mother as 'a saint' and stresses 'she's been my support, my support; I don't know what I would have done without my mum' (Jackie, SN). In contrast, only one family in the middle class group had parents who lived in the same immediate locality.

Other mothers, especially those recently from abroad, seemed isolated and lonely. Moona, at home with a three year old, describes how she has to manage herself, with limited help from her husband and mother in law. 'I don't really know much other people'. She contrast the situation with that in Ghana where she was born and brought up,

> It is different because back home you have a lot of family and even friends you can, you're going somewhere you can say to your friend, 'Oh can you look after my daughter for me?' or something like that. It's different. But here you and your family are at home – nobody [else] (Moona, SN.)

In these circumstances, paid work for those who had it became even more important. For Joycelyn, a lone mother with six children (five of whom live at home) as with many of the mothers, work is a major source of social contacts. Outside working time she lacks other adult contact, apart from her older children,

> I think at weekends, I clean at weekends, because obviously like your friends are with their families and things like that you know. And obviously, being a single parent, some weekends it's just me and my children….And much as friends say 'oh pop up' or whatever you know, I sort of think weekends, evenings are for them, and their families. So I

mean, then I sort of, I do feel a bit isolated then you know. But I just get on with it, (Jocelyn, B.)

A few of the working class mothers who were not in paid work were regulars at toddler groups and had made friends through them. As one, Alex (SN), says 'I've got a whole new circle of friends now'. Her friend, Caitlin, agreed, adding,

> I used to force myself out of the house…because the screaming sounds less when you're outside with a child….When you're somewhere like [playgroup], you know, if there's other people around they can sympathise with you, and it just makes you feel better about having children and you're not alone. And what you're going through is not unusual. (Caitlin, SN.)

However this sort of network, ubiquitous in the middle class sample, was less visible in our conversations with working class mothers.

> I've got no friends round here anyway, not really and now I've got nobody, nobody else with a baby, except Tracey [a work colleague] (Ruth, B.)

> My mum comes round. She comes to visit anyway on Tuesdays and Fridays, so you know, she enjoys that. We might go out somewhere as well for the day. But that's about it. I don't really know any other mums with babies of the same age […] I'm always at home, you know […] You can sometimes feel it's always just me (Kim, B.)

The extensive networks of most of the middle class mothers, developed at NCT groups, playgroups, and children's activities, and sustained through play-dates and the like, required 'investment', such as mobility and hospitality, and had real costs, coffee, lunch, visits and so on. However, they also had a value beyond the immediate as the middle class respondents generally generated considerable social capital through their networks of 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973). In a latter commentary on his theory of the 'strength of weak ties', Granovetter (1983) noted,

> It follows, then, that individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate them from the latest ideas and fashions but may put them in a disadvantaged position in the labor market, where advancement can depend, as I have documented else- where (1974), on knowing about appropriate job openings at just the right time

We have noted elsewhere (Vincent & Ball 2006) the importance of middle class mothers' networks of social capital for the transmission of knowledge and information about childcare, and childrearing more generally, as well as support and friendship, and all these are lacking for some – but by no means all – of the working class respondents. However, as we noted above, few of the middle class group had family close to hand, having grown up outside rather than within inner London.

Holloway (1998) finds a similar imbalance between the working class and middle class mothers in her study, with the latter relying on family more than friends.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that social class is crucial in any consideration of families' use, experience and perceptions of childcare. We started by discussing the continued salience of class in strongly shaping (but not fully determining) lifestyles, opportunities, dispositions, choices and practices. We then turned to the data to consider three issues. First, the types of childcare open to and used by middle and working class families. Here we identified the limitation on choice for the working class sample, constrained by their dependency on tax credits to pay the high costs of private nurseries, or indeed nannies. We illustrated the differential understandings of 'appropriate' care inherent in the choices made for the under threes, especially babies – a private 'home' setting, with a carer who may be initially unknown to the parents, or the public institution of the nursery. We linked this to the way in which many of the working class mothers appeared to resist the sense of responsibility for all aspects of their child-rearing, feeling that their general development could more effectively be overseen by professional carers, with limited additional input from themselves. Our second issue concerned relationships with carers. Here we found that all the mothers, regardless of their class position found it difficult to develop full and productive dialogues with carers. Although the middle class mothers possessed useful cultural and social capital with which to exercise their voice, they were often restrained from activating these capitals because their emotional entanglements with the child lead them to wish to preserve untroubled relationships with carers. Finally we considered the social networks of the two groups, and argued that although family members were often of great importance and support to the working class mothers, they appeared to have fewer social networks of other mothers. This lack of 'weak ties' meant they could loose out on the transmission of 'hot knowledge' regarding childcare and schools, as well as alternative sources of friendship and support.

It is clear from interviews with parents in both research projects, that the possibilities of who their children are, their subjectivities and individualities - how their days are structured, their activities, for example - who they mix with, who cares for them, what they learn (in the broadest social sense), and who they might become are, for these very young children, shaped by the nuances and detail of their parents' classed locations and practices. In this paper we have briefly indicated some aspects of different habituses of mothering, how different material and economic conditions, histories and social experiences give rise to different 'logics of practice', that is different versions of what is 'natural', obvious and necessary around childcare. Our discussion of the middle and working class parents' varying understandings of the status and role of nurseries in young children's lives is one example of these different 'logics of practice'.

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