

A RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION IN THE MARKET PLACE

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SYNOPSIS

The expansion of pre-school provision has proceeded following the introduction of a voucher scheme based on a 'market' philosophy. This paper describes how such a market worked when one of the competing sectors, the local authorities, had a very substantial monopoly power over the others, namely the private and voluntary sectors. A combination of qualitative and quantitative explorations of views of both providers and parents showed that their reactions to vouchers and to the provision offered did not necessarily conform to government intentions, or to the predictions of those who have argued for the implementation of vouchers, or to the warnings of those who have regarded their introduction as misguided. Parents have clearly welcomed what they have seen as free guaranteed places for their children. However, their personal involvement in the provision has decreased. The voluntary sector has turned out to be the most fragile. The private sector has scored with working parents, but it is to the local authority sector that most families turn even when other choices are available.

INTRODUCTION

In 1996 the then Conservative government introduced a voucher scheme to promote educational provision for pre-school children in Scotland. This offered parents of four-year-olds a voucher worth £1100 to purchase provision for a year and was extended nationally into a second year (1997–98 session) by the incoming Labour government. Although the scheme will be discontinued after its second year, it is to be expected that governments, opposition parties or other educational commentators will continue to return to the idea of vouchers in the future. The idea has high face validity for those who place emphasis on parents' or students' choice in the market place and who believe that competition will improve the quality of provision. Very often voucher systems are used to stimulate demand for goods, but in the area of pre-school provision the demand was already there. The priority was, therefore, to stimulate the supply of adequate numbers of places.

The performance of voucher systems in this country is sparsely documented in the educational literature. It is important, therefore, to record and analyse Scotland's limited experience of such systems. In this paper the special circumstances, where one of the players on the supply side (the local authority sector) already had a substantial degree of monopoly power over the others, can provide a variety of insights into how the educational market-place is working. In particular, it can focus attention on how traditional educational assumptions about the value of collaborative partnerships can be undermined in a competitive environment.

The aim of the paper is to provide an overview of the findings of a study, funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), which looked at the first year of the scheme in four local authority pilot areas. It is important to emphasise that these pilot areas were by no means typical of Scottish authorities; in particular, sparsely populated rural areas with traditionally low levels of provision were over-represented. The research design, which included both qualitative and quantitative approaches, is described in the next section, and this is followed by a commentary on different aspects of the findings.

The research addressed a variety of questions: the extent to which the intended expansion of provision had been achieved; the nature of the responses of parents and pre-school providers to the scheme; the impact of the initiative on particular forms of provision; market displacement effects; and matters of finance. In this summary article the findings are grouped into six sections. First, what is taken to be the primary objective of the whole initiative is addressed: the expansion of pre-school provision. Secondly, the market basis of the scheme which encapsulates the government's basic assumptions of how best to bring about change is examined. Thirdly, attention is given to collaboration and partnership among the sectors (local authority, private and voluntary); both the Conservative and the Labour (from May 1997) governments placed substantial emphasis on the need for such partnerships. Fourthly, the focus is on parents' responses to the new opportunities and provision. Fifthly, choices available to parents in their selection of providers for their children are considered; parental choice has been a major element in government thinking about education for a decade and a half. Sixthly, a brief comment is made on the impact that the scheme has had on parental involvement in the provision; traditionally parents have been significantly more actively engaged at the pre-school than at school levels, especially in playgroups.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was designed to use initial small-scale collections of qualitative information to help subsequent surveys identify and focus on the features which were of greatest salience to those involved: the parents and the providers. The quantitative elements from the surveys enabled the research to give more precise estimates of the relative importance of different factors and outcomes. It should be noted, however, that the specification for the research, agreed with the Scottish Office, required us to gather considerably more data from the private and voluntary sector providers than from those in local authorities. Local authorities, therefore, are reflected to a lesser extent in these findings.

Table 1 provides a summary of the three phases of data collection. Each phase of collection and analysis built on the previous stage either by expanding the database (for example, the move from group interviews with parents to a large-scale telephone survey) or by exploring further issues which had emerged in the earlier stages (as in the first and second rounds of interviews with providers).

Data collection was primarily by interview (face-to-face and by telephone) but also included some documentary analysis and observation. The interviews ranged from the very loosely focused (e.g. in early conversations with groups of parents) to the highly structured (e.g. the parents' survey). Site visits were made to 31 providers in the local authority, private and voluntary sectors. A total of 787 parents and 116 providers were interviewed. Additional interviews were carried out with parents of children with special educational needs (19), and with parents who had decided not to redeem their vouchers (15). Forty-six of the providers were interviewed a second time. Interviews were also carried out with the following: Scottish Office officials (Her Majesty's Inspectors and administrators) with responsibilities in this area; directors/assistant directors of education and pre-five officers in the pilot local authorities; and officers from umbrella organisations (5) with a remit for playgroups or nursery provision. Quantitative data on the up-take of vouchers and registration of providers was obtained from the voucher management agency commissioned by the government.

Unfortunately the research had to be suspended for a period of six weeks when a general election was called. This delayed a large part of the survey of parents and resulted in the random sample being rather smaller than the 'one third of those eligible for vouchers' for which we had planned (about 3700 were identified as 'eligible').

Table 1: Data Collection: Timetable and Sources

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
Local authority - Education	Interviews with directors, assistant directors and pre-five officers	Evaluation Seminar	Return interviews Evaluation Seminar
SOEID/HMI	Interviews with SOEID Division and HMI		Return interviews
Umbrella Groups	Interviews with representatives of five organisations	Evaluation Seminar	Return interviews with three organisations Evaluation Seminar
Parents	Group interviews at sites visited + some individual telephone interviews (116 parents)	Telephone interviews (671 parents) Telephone interviews with: parents of children with Special Educational Needs (19) parents not redeeming vouchers (15)	Telephone interviews continued SEN interviews continued
Providers	Site visits in all local authority areas (31 sites: 14 local authority, 8 private, 9 voluntary) Telephone interviews with all private and voluntary providers not visited (85 in total)		Telephone interviews with 46 providers

EXPANSION OF PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION

A primary aim of the government's scheme was the expansion of provision for four-year-olds in the local authority, private and voluntary sectors. This section considers the extent and nature of that expansion.

The intention to expand was clearly achieved within the local authority sector, but not in the voluntary and private sectors. The local authorities had the potential for expansion within their own system and institutions. They could call on other budgets to mask the full costs of implementation, and they had considerable flexibility of

staffing available to them. The other sectors had more difficulty in finding finance to support expansion in circumstances where all were agreed that voucher income was insufficient to cover full costs. In any case, uncertainties of a commercial nature, the apparent preferences on the part of a majority of parents for local authority provision, and the 'scare' stories in the media about likely policies of an incoming government, all combined to undermine plans for expansion. Indeed, the voluntary sector expressed fears of a rather bleak outlook for a future with considerable contraction, and there was some evidence that such contraction had already started.

The expansion in the pilot local authority areas was substantial: 75 per cent on average with one rural authority increasing its pre-school places by a factor of 10. The total numbers of available places increased from about 1600 to about 2800. However, the group of authorities selected for the pilot was atypical of the country as a whole in containing an over-representation of those areas where pre-school provision was previously low. The ways in which local authorities talked about the expansion reflected a general agreement about the need to increase provision, but there were also widely differing views about whether or not the voucher scheme was the appropriate way to do this. Local authority expansion was primarily within existing accommodation, was achieved through a variety of means (e.g. 'robbing' the school building programme), reflected a wide range of costs in different areas (particularly expensive in island communities), and was extremely labour-intensive of officers' time.

The voucher scheme might have been expected to increase provision in the other sectors for four-year-olds, or to have had some impact on the extent of provision for younger children. Overall, however, the survey of providers suggested that patterns of provision for different age groups by the voluntary and private providers changed very little with the introduction of the scheme. Uncertainties about demand for provision for four-year-olds, and concern to maintain or capture the loyalty of parents of younger children, seemed to have prevented any major shift of attention among age groups. Waiting lists were rare and rather more than half of the private sector providers had empty places. Only a few were seeking to improve their facilities or to increase staffing, marketing and the hours (or weeks) of opening.

No Gaelic-medium pre-school provider was involved in the scheme. Despite the efforts of early Scottish Office publicity, applications for registration were not forthcoming.

From qualitative data collected from a sample of providers at the end of the pilot scheme (well after the survey and the general election which resulted in a change of government), there was an indication that there may be changes in provision for younger children. The data show that parents were reported to have increased their demand for places for two- and three-year-olds, that some private providers had moved to accept children below the age of three, and that a major concern that local authorities might recruit more three-year-olds to fill empty places where there was over-provision was expressed by the other sectors. The notion of a progression for the individual child from playgroup to nursery seemed to be growing in acceptance as the norm, implying that parents were putting more emphasis than in the past on formal education for four-year-olds.

THE MARKET-BASIS OF THE INITIATIVE

It was the intention of the voucher system to make Scottish pre-school educational provision much more explicitly market-based. There were two important factors here. First, the government deliberately encouraged competition among local authority, private and voluntary providers. Secondly, the funding (partly taken from local authority block grants, partly new money) was ring-fenced; this contrasts with the established block grant from central to local government where decisions on how the

grant is to be spent are taken locally. However, the circumstances of this market were those in which the local authority sector had a degree of monopoly power and was clearly the dominant provider. Despite the dominance of the local authority sector, one aspect of the patterns of provision highlighted a distinctive feature of the private sector in comparison with the other two. The private providers more commonly than the others offered longer hours (beyond the 9.00am to 4.00pm period), they had children attending afternoon sessions, and they were open for periods beyond the school year. In some cases, they also set up collection and drop-off services. The more flexible pattern of opening of this element of the market was attractive to working parents.

One of the interesting questions was the extent to which an opportunity of this kind would encourage parents to return to, or take up, work and so have an impact on the labour market. In general, the data suggested that parents were not looking for work and were happy with half day provision. It seemed that rather than increasing opportunities for employment, parents in the private sector were taking advantage of the chance to use vouchers as a discount on the costs of child-care. The parents' survey indicated that for the large majority of parents (85 per cent) the scheme had no impact on their economic activity. Among the remaining 15 per cent, however, small numbers (mainly in the private sector) returned to employment, increased their hours, started training or undertook voluntary work

Parents as consumers in this market were concerned with whether or not the timing and availability of the provision was satisfactory; how much provision they received in return for their vouchers; and what it would cost them to seek more provision beyond the voucher. Parents' first preference was for morning rather than afternoon sessions, and this produced an imbalance in daily provision, especially in the local authority sector. There was also evidence that parents, especially in the voluntary sector, wished (and would be prepared to pay) for more sessions. At the same time there were empty places elsewhere. For a variety of reasons it was not possible to match closely supply and demand across sectors and the country.

The 'exchange rate' for vouchers varied within the private sector though the common pattern was one voucher for a 2.5 hour session. Payment for sessions provided before 9.00am was not accepted in the form of vouchers, and initial registration fees (up to £10) were often charged. Charges for extra sessions in the private sector (£4.50 –£7.50) were typically two to three times those of the voluntary sector. Estimates of the real cost of having a child attend each morning for a school year covered a very large range in the private sector (£265 to £2200, on average £1090) and appeared substantially higher than those in the voluntary sector (on average £390). Extra payments were already being made for top-up fees, but mostly in the private sector and averaging £12 per week. Other payments were largely for snack funds, especially in the local authority sector, and averaged £2 per week.

Of particular interest to the government were the estimates of 'deadweight' in this market: that is the amount parents would have been prepared to spend had there been no voucher scheme. This was approached in two ways: direct questioning on the matter (but not, of course, requiring the parent to pay anything), and estimates of actual payments for previous children. The findings in this part of the study have to be treated with caution but they suggest that parents, on average, would have been willing to contribute something between £400 and £590 annually for pre-school provision for their child. This willingness to pay was clearly influenced by a number of factors relating to the circumstances of the individual family. The circumstances most likely to lead to an increase in what parents were willing to pay were those cases either where both parents were working (especially those living in suburban areas) or where the voucher scheme had enabled one parent to take up work.

If we assume that the private-sector average is the best estimate of true costs, there

appears to be a gap of around £600 between the cost of pre-school education and what parents are willing to pay. This is the value which our surveys indicated would be required as a subsidy to construct a viable private market in pre-school education.

PARTNERSHIP AMONG PROVIDERS

The government's voucher initiative had an uneasy dual emphasis: first, on competition among providers in the market place; and secondly, on the importance of supportive partnerships or collaboration among the different sectors. These plans for partnership, however, were interpreted as expectations that local authorities would provide support for other sectors.

A majority of providers (about three quarters) in the private and voluntary sectors suggested that links with others were mostly informal and had been unaffected by the introduction of vouchers. Competition from expansion in the local authority sector was evident, particularly since parents were attracted to the continuity from pre-school to primary offered by local authority provision as part of the wider education system.

Support which is expected to be provided by one of the competitors within a competitive market is unlikely to work well, and the reports from umbrella organisations in both the voluntary and private sectors reflected this. Voluntary and private providers commented on the scarcity of meetings, training sessions or other aspects of support, together with some concern about the overlap of local authority social work and education responsibilities. In general, the introduction of the market, in an area where one sector already carried the responsibility for education provision, left the local authorities free to exert and extend their near-monopoly power even though the initial intention of the government may have been to undermine that power.

Having said this, however, there were clear indications that local authorities were much more ready than they once might have been to consult with other sectors. They often chose not to compete with other providers and in many cases allowed other sector providers to remain operating (frequently rent free) in school premises. Furthermore, new consultation procedures were in place to allow more communication among parents and providers generally.

PARENTAL REACTION TO THE SCHEME

The assumption that there was a clear market demand for pre-school educational provision was amply justified. Almost all parents took advantage of the availability of vouchers, and a massive 91 per cent of those eligible used all those allocated to them. However, the evidence from the qualitative aspects of the research reinforced the notion that parents, while warmly welcoming what they saw as free, guaranteed, pre-school places for their children with some choice of provider, were largely indifferent to the mechanism of the vouchers as a way of achieving this. Only when there were administrative hold-ups or complexities did they express direct views on the scheme, usually negative. One group where proportionately more direct mention of the voucher scheme was made comprised the parents of children with special educational needs (caution is necessary here because of the very small numbers). These parents attributed both improved resources and the establishment of some local authority provision to the scheme.

The very high level of take-up and redemption of vouchers was confirmed by the scarcity of parents identified in the survey as not having used their vouchers. Inevitably this small number (15) provided largely idiosyncratic reasons for not becoming involved, and there were few obvious implications for policy in the data collected from them. One interesting feature, however, was that all of the non-users of vouchers were using some kind of pre-school provision, and proportionately more

of these were in the private sector. The reasons for this tended to be personal: the child or sibling was already using some other (non-registered) provider (sometimes outwith the scheme's pilot areas), or it was more convenient for the parents.

For parents, information through the media, particularly television news, was particularly effective. This was supported by local authority meetings and postal leaflets. Helplines were, for the most part, valued although there were some issues on which information was, at best, sketchy. Information for providers came in a variety of ways but, for the private and voluntary sectors, the umbrella organisations were important. Child-minders and Gaelic playgroups, however, saw themselves as too often 'left-out' or as 'lumped-in' with other organisations who were in no position to speak for them.

Although this study was not designed to explore the quality of pre-school provision in relation to the voucher scheme, the evidence from parents indicated that their main concerns were that:

- their children's learning would be encouraged;
- they would be helped to mix with other children;
- they would be prepared for primary school.

The vast majority of parents, from all three sectors, expressed satisfaction with the provision. This general satisfaction suggested that variations in quality were not factors in parents' choice of provider. The emphasis on the educational aspects pre-school provision was a clear encouragement to the expansion of nursery classes in preference to other forms, such as playgroups. However, while it might be argued that the voucher scheme accelerated this expansion (especially in the local authority sector), there was already evidence, before the introduction of the scheme, of declining parental participation in the voluntary sector playgroups, and a tendency to change to local authority providers as places became available.

Most parents, when questioned about their child's pre-school provision, indicated that the experiences had been better than those of older siblings, especially in education-related aspects. Rather fewer saw improvements in other aspects, such as care or flexibility of hours. Only just over half, however, were prepared to relate these changes to the voucher scheme *per se* and, among these parents, those in the private sector were more evident than the others. A substantial proportion (40 per cent) of the private sector parents recognised that the scheme had provided more flexibility of hours and had enabled them to take advantage of provision which they would not otherwise have been able to afford.

There was clear evidence of increasing attention to quality assurance in the private and voluntary sectors. This appeared to have been underway, however, as a general professionalisation process before the introduction of vouchers. Nonetheless, the Profile of Educational Provision (PEP) required for registration and scrutinised by HML, together with subsequent inspections of providers, had positive effects on their planning and on implementation of systematic programmes for the pre-school year. These quality assurance initiatives (among other things) had put particular burdens on the voluntary sector. Playgroup committees were expected to adopt very different and more demanding roles at a time when, as we shall see, parental involvement in the provision was declining. This was happening within a general pattern of convergence and a reduction of diversity in the quality of pre-school provision. There was substantial, albeit anecdotal, evidence that the money provided for the voucher scheme had stressed the formal education aspects, had led to a greater emphasis on the employment of trained teachers (rather than other staff), and had influenced staff development.

The proportion of parents in the survey giving a positive response to the question

on whether their child needed special help with his or her learning (about 6 per cent) was high in comparison with common estimates of two per cent or less of the school population requiring a Record of Needs. Some of these children may, of course, resolve their problems before or during the early years of primary, and be seen as no longer requiring special support. Of the 20 children with SEN whose parents were interviewed, most had specific medical or physical problems and used local authority provision. A small majority of these children had transport provided free by the local authority.

Records of Needs were being, or had been, opened for ten of these children (about 1.5 per cent of those surveyed). Provision reflected the range offered in the school system generally with a variety of support staff, special equipment, therapies and case conferences. Parents' responses varied from very positive comments about dedicated staff, good facilities, and integration with the mainstream, to concerns about the general standards of local authority support. These were remarkably similar to those which might be expected from parents of school-aged children.

In the case of this scheme, there did not appear to be evidence to support the arguments of Ball and Gewirtz (1996) and Gewirtz (1996), relating to secondary schools, of vouchers leading to a shift of resources away from those with special needs and learning difficulties. There was, however, very little information about the role of SEN work within our data collected from providers.

PARENTAL CHOICE

Only about 13 per cent of parents in the survey sample reported having no choice of provider. The most important factors in parental choice overall were the proximity of the provider to the home and the general convenience for the parents. In addition, however, they were influenced by the good reputation of the provider (rated the most important factor by the private sector parents), and the child's future attendance at a primary school associated with the provider (especially in the local authority sector).

The proximity of the school had implications for the time and money incurred by parents in taking children daily to and from the provider. For all three sectors the average time per day was about half an hour. More than half the children were transported by car (more than two-thirds in the private sector), and over a third on foot (more than half in the voluntary sector).

Apart from some initial anxieties about whether their chosen provider would be accepted for registration, parents reported in interviews that choice was a relatively straightforward matter and they were satisfied with the provider they had selected. One group who reported having little choice, however, comprised parents of children with special educational needs. For them, it seemed that the specialist local authority provision was the only satisfactory option; other providers in the private or voluntary sector were generally seen as lacking expertise and resources, and as unlikely to be able to cope with the special needs of these children.

The flexibility built into the scheme to allow parents to use multiple providers, or to move from one provider to another, was sparsely used. To an extent this was the result of the parents' preference, but some providers (most especially local authorities) were reported as reinforcing the barriers to flexibility by asking the parents to hand in *all* their vouchers in advance.

The final set of qualitative data from providers at the end of the pilot year indicated some concerns about parental choice in rural communities. Suspicions were expressed that local authorities would operate a 'two-tier service' with nursery nurses instead of nursery teachers in areas where the numbers of children were very small. Indeed, there was some evidence of parents' willingness to transport their children considerable distances to enable them to attend a registered primary school nursery class for at least some sessions.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PROVISION

Several of the sources of evidence in this study suggested that parents' involvement (especially 'helping out') in pre-school provision had substantially decreased in all sectors with the introduction of the voucher scheme. This was most marked in the voluntary sector where, according to the parents, those offering casual assistance fell from about 45 per cent to about 13 per cent; and in the local authority sector, where the fall was from 38 per cent to 8 per cent. Two factors appear to have had an influence here. First, there may have been a change in parental attitudes, especially in the voluntary sector; it was suggested that the introduction of voucher income was seen as releasing parents from a responsibility to support a voluntary enterprise. Secondly, increased emphasis on higher educational standards, manifest in the PEP requirements and inspection process, may have suggested that unqualified or untrained parental contributions were inappropriate. However, although the numbers of parents helping out in the nurseries or playgroups had decreased, the time spent by those who did participate was reported by them as having increased by more than 50 per cent (2.3 hours per week on average).

DISCUSSION

Although the debates of the 1980s and 1990s made frequent reference to the potential of voucher mechanisms as a way of achieving educational change, such mechanisms have rarely been implemented (apart from a limited number of experiments in the United States). The introduction in the mid 1990s of the pre-school pilot voucher scheme in Scotland was, therefore, a considerable departure from traditional policy and practice. The scheme was also different in function from typical voucher schemes which have been used in settings other than education. Frequently vouchers have been seen by policy makers as a way of stimulating demand for goods; in this Scottish case, however, the intention was to extend the supply. Furthermore, unlike some markets (e.g. food stamps in the USA), these vouchers had no re-sale value since they were redeemable only for a specific child. While the focus of recent voucher schemes in North American education has often been on improvements in academic performance (e.g. Currie and Thomas, 1996; Rouse, 1997), the Scottish scheme was concerned with increasing the amount of provision rather than changing its quality. The issue of quality was addressed by introducing specific criteria for registration (the PEP) and by the formal inspection of providers, rather than by relying on the market competition for vouchers among providers.

The justifications in the literature for educational voucher schemes (e.g. Chubb and Moe, 1990; Cobb, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 1990) tend to cite issues such as making education available to all children (especially the poor and ethnic minorities), improving the effectiveness of providers and increasing the involvement of parents. It is assumed that parents will shop around in choosing what is best for their child and so drive the providers in a competitive market to improve their product.

In the Scottish scheme, it was clear that provision did increase, although only in the local authority sector, and so became available to a wider range of children. This wider range did not necessarily focus on the disadvantaged. Previously local authority provision had given priority to those whose social circumstances or special educational needs gave cause for concern. What the voucher scheme did achieve, however, was access to provision for some children whose relative geographical isolation had made such access difficult in the past, and it also facilitated some choice of provider for those in more urban areas. Although there were signs of improvement in the quality of the provision, these appeared to arise from the introduction of the PEP, the inspection by HMI and by a general trend in the development of quality assurance measures, rather than as a result of the vouchers *per se*. What evidence there was suggested that although parents were enthusiastic about their opportunities

to take up provision, especially when the provider was associated with their child's future primary school, their actual involvement in the education and care processes had, if anything, decreased. Of the simple market model, implying that vouchers result in parents shopping around and driving quality upwards, there was little sign, (a finding shown also in the USA (Schrag, 1993)).

The arguments which have opposed voucher schemes (e.g. Coons and Sugarman, 1990; McGee and Kissane 1994; Raywid, 1987) have suggested that providers might profiteer from or misrepresent their programmes and discriminate against disadvantaged sections of the population. In addition there could be a deterioration of standards and most of the benefits would be likely to accrue to those parents who already have the greatest economic resources and power. Our findings confirmed none of these propositions, with the possible exception of the final one. For those parents who had already placed their children with private providers, the vouchers resulted in their either no longer having to pay for that provision, or being able to purchase significantly more for the same cost, or being in a position to afford provision for a younger child.

The introduction of vouchers to change the dynamics of the education market was undoubtedly successful in that it resulted in a large increase in the supply of pre-school places. This increase was concentrated in the local authority sector which was already by far the largest provider in the market. The increased number of places were eagerly taken up by parents seeking such provision for their four-year-old children. If this demand was so buoyant, the question of why the private sector had not expanded to take account of this at an earlier stage has to be asked. In this study we have estimated that it would have required a subsidy of about £600 per child *per annum* above what parents, on average, would be willing to pay for provision in order to have extended a private sector market on a scale comparable with the pilot voucher initiative. Whether Scottish parents would have been prepared to enter such a private market is, of course, a moot point.

A particularly interesting aspect of this pilot innovation was the fact that it was implemented by the use of ring-fenced funding from central government (some new money but substantially originating from that already assigned to the local authority budgets). This approach cut across the normal pattern whereby central government provides block grants for local authorities who then make the decisions about allocations to, and within, education. In principle, such an approach implies an undermining of the power of local authorities to make their own financial decisions and was probably an important reason why some authorities, despite being in the vanguard of pre-school provision, chose not to become associated with the pilot scheme. At the same time, the encouragement by central government of expansion in the private and voluntary sectors provided a challenge to local authority control of this area of education. The expectation that the local authorities could then be cajoled into providing extra support for their market competitors appears curiously naïve, and we have little evidence that it was achieved on anything but a very small scale.

In the private sector, there were few discernible changes in the extent and patterns of provision. This sector retained its relatively strong position, however, in the eyes of working parents through its more flexible hours and wider services. The position of the voluntary sector in relation to provision for four-year-olds seemed more fragile. The increasing emphasis on educational quality appeared to have had an impact on parental preferences which tend more and more to favour the formal aspects of nursery classes and schools over playgroups. It may be that there will emerge a common pattern of under-fours going to playgroup and then moving on to nursery provision. These changes are a particular concern for Gaelic medium provision, not represented in the pilot scheme, which has an added responsibility for acquisition of a minority language. Within the voluntary sector generally, there were

some whose philosophical convictions about these early years opposed what they saw as the imposition of highly structured educational approaches and demanding systems of accountability. There was certainly evidence that playgroup management committees within this sector felt that they were now faced with responsibilities and decision-making far beyond what they had bargained for.

Over the last decade, parents have clearly become a force in the debates about pre-school education and care. Location of the provider and concerns about the future primary school careers of their children have been the most salient features of parents' choice of provision. The increasing formality of the pre-school system appeared to have reduced parental involvement in the activities of the providers. There was no doubt, however, that while they were largely indifferent to the vouchers as a mechanism for the expansion of their opportunities, parents greatly appreciated those opportunities which they believed gave them a guaranteed free place with the provider of their choice. (In fact, places were not guaranteed for all four-year-olds in the pilot scheme and some had little or no choice.)

There remained differences in the extent to which politicians and professionals regarded the voucher scheme with approval or contempt. In general, the negative reactions became more muted as the scheme progressed. While we remain neutral on this point, we believe that the achievement of an expansion of good quality provision, on the scale we are seeing now and in a very short period of time, required some innovative kindling and an effective spark to get the existing system going. Other means than vouchers could have been used but, in the event, they set pre-school education in Scotland onto a new path. In the twenty first century, this sector is likely to have a prominence in the education system which has eluded it until now.

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