

# A Critical Analysis of the Motivations Behind and Effectiveness Of Childcare Access For Children Under Three in France and England Since the Mid-1990s

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## Introduction

‘Childcare has become a much-debated issue in all developed countries.’<sup>1</sup> This article will review childcare policies for children under three in France and England since the mid-1990s. First, childcare policy in the two countries will be outlined. Secondly, their position in theoretical models will be described. Thirdly, the main body of the article will analyse the motivations behind childcare access in France and England. The main differences in childcare access and the effectiveness of childcare policies in meeting parental needs in both countries will be considered. It will be argued that despite some convergence in policy (in terms of looking to the private sector), childcare models in France and England still differ. Policies in France have been more universal in nature and focused on promoting parental choice, influenced by work-family-life issues and natalism. Policies in England have been market-dominated and motivated by welfare-to-work ideologies, and tackling child poverty. Parental leave is more generous in France than England. Childcare is cheaper and public childcare provision greater in France than England. Nevertheless, neither system appears to satisfy parental needs. Regional disparity in supply and high costs constrain parental choices.

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<sup>1</sup> Chiara Saraceno, ‘Childcare needs and childcare policies: A multidimensional issue’, *Current Sociology*, 59 (2011), 78-96 (p. 78).

## Definition of Childcare

Childcare is ‘heterogeneous, with provision ranging from informal providers of care such as family members and babysitters to more formal settings such as nursery schools and day-nurseries, and pre-schools.’<sup>2</sup> This article will concentrate on formal childcare policies, exploring policies aimed at improving childcare facilities, and helping parents to afford childcare. The article will focus on policy relating to children under three.

## Aim of Article

The Equality and Human Rights Commission observes that ‘there is strong evidence of the importance of quality, flexible, accessible and affordable early years’ education and childcare for improving life chances and social mobility.’ Although some parents choose to stay at home with their children, most want to combine work and care. Childcare is key in providing this choice.<sup>3</sup> This article is motivated by the greater universal childcare provision in France than England. It contributes to debate by providing detailed analysis of trends in childcare policy in both countries since the mid-1990s in order to suggest reasons behind this difference. The article further develops the issue by considering the effectiveness of current provision under the two systems. Existing studies either focus solely on childcare policy and provision in one country,<sup>4</sup> on a particular form of childcare,<sup>5</sup> or those articles which do compare

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Waldfogel, ‘Child care, women’s employment, and child outcomes’, *Journal of Population Economics*, 15 (2002), 527-548 (p. 529).

<sup>3</sup> EHRC, ‘Working Better Childcare Matters: improving choices and chances for parents and children’, *Equality and Human Rights Commission*, November 2012  
<[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/research/working\\_better\\_childcare\\_matters.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/working_better_childcare_matters.pdf)> [accessed 06/08/2012].

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Mary Daly, ‘Shifts in the UK under New Labour’, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 20 (2010), 433-443; Claude Martin, ‘The reframing of family policies in France: processes and actors’, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 20 (2010), 410-421; Jérôme Tournadre, ‘La «Troisième Voie» et la lutte contre la pauvreté au Royaume-Uni’, *Politiques sociales et familiales*,

childcare provision in both countries do not focus explicitly on access to childcare and are dated.<sup>6</sup> As described below, childcare provision for children under the age of three is more similar in France and England than childcare provision for older children. The younger age group was chosen as the focus of this article, since whilst provision may be similar, it is interesting to understand the motivations behind these policies.

### **Childcare Traditions in France and England**

Traditions of childcare differ in France and England, providing justification for comparison. The UK prior to 1998 was near the bottom of EU league tables on childcare services, ‘had no parental leave, and statutory maternity leave that was neither very long nor very well remunerated.’<sup>7</sup> Childcare was considered a family, primarily maternal, responsibility.

The New Labour governments instigated a new approach to childcare, described as ‘*une petite révolution*’ (a small revolution).<sup>8</sup> 1996-2007 witnessed £21 billion of investment. First, wide-ranging reform of childcare and early learning services was introduced. The first National Childcare Strategy was launched in 1998

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104 (March 2011), 37-46; Helen Penn, ‘Childcare Market Management: how the United Kingdom Government has reshaped its role in developing early childhood education and care’ *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8 (2007), 192-207.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see François Marical, Jérôme Minonzio and Muriel Nicolas, ‘La PAJE améliore-t-elle le choix des parents pour un mode de garde’, *Recherches et Prévisions*, 88 (June 2007), 5-20.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Vicky Randall, ‘Childcare policy in the European states: limits to convergence’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 7 (2000), 346-368; Anne Daguerre, and Peter Taylor-Gooby, ‘Adaptation to Labour Market Change in France and the UK? Convergent or Parallel Tracks?’, *Social Policy & Administration*, 37 (2003), 625-638; Mary Daly, ‘Changing conceptions of family and gender relations in European welfare states and the Third Way’ in *Welfare state change: towards a Third Way?*, ed. by Jane Lewis and Rebecca Surender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 135-154 (p. 142).

<sup>7</sup> Jane Lewis, ‘Childcare Policies and the Politics of Choice’, *The Political Quarterly*, 79 (2008), 499-507 (p. 500).

<sup>8</sup> Anne-Marie Daune-Richard, and Marie-Thérèse Letablier, ‘L’accueil des enfants : enjeux des réformes et appel aux entreprises dans quatre pays européens’, *Politiques sociales et familiales*, 103 (2011), 33-45 (pp. 35-36). All translations into English are translated by the author of this article as a guide only.

with the number of childcare places doubling from 1997 to 2007.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, increasing financial support was offered to families with children to help with childcare costs, e.g. through the expansion of the Tax Credits system.<sup>10</sup> 450,000 families benefitted from Childcare Tax Credits in 2006.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, family services were developed. The Sure Start programme introduced in 1998 ‘heralded significant innovation’ as an early-intervention service for the families of children aged three and under in low-income neighbourhoods. Although services were not means-tested, the programme had rigid catchment areas. La Valle and Smith estimate that Sure Start provided assistance to only 30% of poor and needy families. From 2004 the focus of the programme changed to childcare. Childcare was linked to activation drives, particularly for lone parents. A final strand of New Labour childcare policy sought to address work-family reconciliation. The 2002 Employment Act established paid paternity and adoption leave and the right for parents of young children to request (but not necessarily obtain) flexible working arrangements. Maternity leave and pay were extended.<sup>12</sup>

Four key objectives of Labour childcare policy were: flexibility, availability, quality, and service provision.<sup>13</sup> The present UK coalition government seeks to better target services for the poorest parents within an overarching aim of deficit reduction and public sector cutbacks.<sup>14</sup> Sure Start services face 21% funding cuts in 2012.<sup>15</sup> In 2013 Universal Credit will be introduced, allowing all working parents potential

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<sup>9</sup> Daly (2010), pp. 435-436.

<sup>10</sup> Daune-Richard and Letablier, pp. 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> Daly (2010), p. 435.

<sup>12</sup> Daly (2010), pp. 435-437.

<sup>13</sup> Daune-Richard and Letablier, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> For information on targeting, see, ‘Labour: Cuts leaving Sure Start ‘starved and shrinking’’, *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 27/04/2011 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13206802>> [accessed 28/05/2012].

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Watt, ‘124 Sure Start centres have closed since coalition took power’, *Guardian News and Media Ltd*, 14/11/2011. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/nov/14/sure-start-centre-closures-coalition>> [accessed 28/05/2012].

access to the childcare subsidies within Working Tax Credits, irrespective of hours worked (unlike the current requirement to work 16 hours per week).<sup>16</sup> In 2012, reflecting the political importance of childcare, the coalition government established a Childcare Commission looking into reducing the cost and increasing the availability of childcare.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of the 1990s France was one of few countries with an established, formally organised, functional childcare policy. Whilst policy far from covered all the childcare needs of families, it was more comprehensive than in the UK. The principle of public intervention was established, with a focus on supporting working families.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to this (somewhat convoluted) established policy, over the next decade there was less radical change in childcare policy in France than in England. The 1990s saw the introduction of social and fiscal measures to diversify and individualise childcare. The *Allocation de garde d'enfant à domicile* (AGED, Child Home Care Allowance), which encouraged parents to employ a domestic worker to care for their children at home, was extended, whilst the *Aide à l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agréée* (AFEAMA, Allowance for Hiring a Registered Child-minder) further improved support for parents who employed a registered child-minder, and the *Allocation Parentale d'éducation* (APE, Parental Leave Allowance), which supported parents of three children who reduced their hours, or left the job market to look after their children, was made available after the birth of a second child.<sup>19</sup> The 2000s have seen the introduction of further measures to better respond to the needs of families, and to

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<sup>16</sup> DWP, 'Universal Credit Policy Briefing Note 10 Childcare', *Department for Work and Pensions*, 10/10/2011 <<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/ucpbn-10-childcare.pdf>> [accessed 29/05/2012].

<sup>17</sup> Ellen E. Jones, 'Government to launch childcare commission', *The Independent*, 19/06/2012 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/government-to-launch-childcare-commission-7865510.html>> [accessed 20/06/2012].

<sup>18</sup> Daune-Richard, and Letablier, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Hélène Périvier, 'Bilan et enjeux du dispositif de garde des jeunes enfants', *Informations sociales*, 137:1, (2007), 108-117 (p. 109).

involve new actors in childcare.<sup>20</sup> In 2004 several allowances were merged to create the *Prestation d'accueil du jeune enfant (PAJE*, Young Children's Early Days Benefit). This supports parents by paying for a child-minder, or by providing a parental allowance, thus permitting the parent to leave the job market or reduce their hours spent caring for their children (this varies according to the number of children the parent has).<sup>21</sup> The establishment of *Le crédit d'impôts famille* (Family Tax Credits) provided benefits to businesses if they became involved in childcare. *Communes*, the lowest administrative district in France,<sup>22</sup> were made more responsible for running childcare in 2006, with an emphasis on targeting support in the most deprived areas. The *Plan Petite Enfance* (Early Childhood Programme) was introduced in 2006 to increase the number and diversity of childcare places 2007-2012.<sup>23</sup> The French childcare system appears thus far to have been somewhat resilient to recession cuts.<sup>24</sup>

### Theoretical Frameworks

Discussions on welfare regimes help us to understand the context in which childcare in France and England operates. Esping-Andersen highlighted welfare regime clusters, classifying the UK as a 'liberal' welfare state with means-tested assistance and modest social insurance schemes designed to encourage the market. Esping-Andersen described France as 'corporatist' since it has less emphasis on market efficiency, limited redistribution as status differences are upheld, and the

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<sup>20</sup> Daune-Richard and Letablier, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, p. 414.

<sup>22</sup> INSEE, 'Commune Définition', *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*, no date given <<http://www.insee.fr/fr/methodes/default.asp?page=definitions/commune.htm>> [accessed 06/08/2012].

<sup>23</sup> Daune-Richard and Letablier, pp. 35-40.

<sup>24</sup> Jeanne Fagnani, 'Recent reforms in childcare and family policies in France and Germany: What was at stake?' *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34 (2012), 509-516 (p. 512).

granting of social rights is ‘hardly ever a seriously contested issue’.<sup>25</sup> Lewis criticised Esping-Andersen for missing ‘the value of unpaid welfare work that is done primarily by women within the family, and in securing those providers social entitlements’.<sup>26</sup> Lewis developed a typology incorporating gender, classifying the UK as a ‘strong male-breadwinner’ state since women’s participation in the labour market was traditionally marginalised, with minimal state provision of childcare, minimal maternity leave, maternity pay, etc. France is labelled a ‘modified male-breadwinner’ state since ‘women’s labour market participation has been historically stronger’, with women working predominantly full-time and benefitting indirectly from the social security system which has ‘prioritised horizontal redistribution [...] between families with and without children.’<sup>27</sup> The investment in childcare in the UK under New Labour would suggest that the UK moved towards being a modified male-breadwinner state. State childcare provision improved and female employment was promoted to a greater extent. The coalition government is cutting childcare investment, thus moving the UK back towards a male-breadwinner state. It is doubtful whether Britain has moved in Esping-Andersen’s classification. Despite innovations under New Labour, childcare policies in England have continued to be market-dominated and means-tested.<sup>28</sup> The more universal classifications for France still appear applicable (due to the continued existence of crèches and the less severe cuts to public childcare under the recession) although some movement towards a ‘liberal state’ can be identified in individualistic measures (e.g. policies encouraging parents

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<sup>25</sup> Gøsta Esping-Anderson, ‘The Three Political Economies of the Welfare State’, *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 26:2, (1989), 10-36 (pp. 25-29).

<sup>26</sup> Jane Lewis ‘Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes’, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 2 (1992), 159-173 (p.160).

<sup>27</sup> Lewis (1992), p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Daly (2010), p. 437.

to hire private child-minders and the promotion of private childcare in the *Plan Petite Enfance*).

How one views childcare depends upon one's political viewpoint. A minimalist perspective (e.g. the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) asserts that the priority of childcare is to reduce dependence on the welfare state. Minimalists highlight the effectiveness of the private sector in providing affordable, good childcare.<sup>29</sup> Maximalists give more priority to universal childcare but still within existing resources. The EU, which has set targets for member states concerning the provision of childcare, is closer to a maximalist perspective.<sup>30</sup> Childcare in England can be considered closer to the OECD than the EU position, explaining the differences in access to childcare provision found in France and England. Private sector childcare is more established, and benefits are less substantial in England than France (which is closer to the E.U. position).

### **Childcare Policy Motivations**

The greater provision of public childcare in France than in England can be linked to contrasting governmental policy motivations. In England under the Conservative Party (1979-97), childcare was viewed as a family rather than public responsibility. Provision was poor; 'bifurcated between a limited and diminishing stock of publicly funded child day care, which had strong overtones of welfare and stigma, and a growing private sector'.<sup>31</sup> Under New Labour, childcare provision was diversified but remained market-dominated. New Labour continued the Conservative policy of 'encouraging the creation of markets in childcare' and promoted service

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<sup>29</sup> OECD, 'Babies and Bosses' *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, July 2008 <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/12/2/34566853.pdf>> [accessed 29/05/2012] (pp. 3-7).

<sup>30</sup> Europa, 'Childcare Services in the EU', *Europa*, 03/10/2008. <<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/08/592>> [accessed 29/05/2012].

<sup>31</sup> Lewis (2008), p. 500. Daly (2010), p. 434.

delivery partnerships between the government and the private sector.<sup>32</sup> Although ‘the national childcare strategy and a number of government initiatives have sought to increase the accessibility, affordability, and quality of childcare and early education services [...] most of the places created are part-time and targeted at 3- and 4-year-olds’.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, parents of younger children were forced to rely on informal or private childcare provision. New Labour’s active childcare policy should be understood in the context of its labour market policy which aimed to ‘[encourage] welfare dependents, in particular lone parents, into work and off benefit’.<sup>34</sup> A target employment rate of 70% of lone parents was set. Tax credits and expanding childcare supply were key to activating policy.<sup>35</sup> Welfare-to-work is emblematic of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ approach; saving public money while combating ‘the harmful effects of “social exclusion” through the moral and social benefits of hard work’.<sup>36</sup> Childcare policy should be considered as central to the UK’s emphasis on tackling child poverty – in 1997, the UK had the third highest child poverty level among OECD countries.<sup>37</sup> Tournadre argues that politically, child poverty was ‘une cause assez peu coûteuse’ (a not very costly policy). Despite involving large sums of money, child policy was considered as a political way of tackling poverty without being deemed too ‘socialist’. Numerous opinion polls at the time highlighted public suspicion towards people living in poverty, with the exception of children.<sup>38</sup> Limiting public provision of childcare and promoting the private sector fits with this emphasis.

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<sup>32</sup> Daly (2010), p. 437.

<sup>33</sup> EU Expert Group on Gender, Social Inclusion and Employment, *Reconciliation of work and private life: A comparative review of thirty European countries* (Luxembourg: European Communities, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Randall, p. 366.

<sup>35</sup> Daly (2010), p. 436; Lewis (2008), p. 501.

<sup>36</sup> Helen Penn, and Vicky Randall, ‘Childcare Policy and Local Partnerships under Labour’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 34, (2005), 79-97 (p. 83).

<sup>37</sup> Daune-Richard and Letablier, p. 36; Tournadre, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Tournadre, p. 42.

In France greater public childcare coverage can be viewed as the result of less government emphasis on the marketisation of childcare provision. Although the government introduced some measures to promote private childcare (e.g. the *PAJE* benefit involves the promotion of ‘marketised’ childcare in parents’ or child-minders’ homes<sup>39</sup>, and the *Plan Petite Enfance* includes a focus on expanding private provision),<sup>40</sup> these policies were introduced in the context of the state promoting free choice for parents rather than welfare-to-work as in England. The *PAJE*, aimed at protecting and developing parents’ freedom of choice with regards childcare,<sup>41</sup> providing support to parents who want to remain in employment (by reimbursing a proportion of child-minder fees, thus embracing the private sector), and to those who wish to care for their children (through an allowance for parents who reduce or cease work to look after their children).<sup>42</sup> Employment motivations were the opposite of welfare-to-work – generous parental leave packages were motivated by a desire to encourage low-qualified mothers to withdraw from the labour market.<sup>43</sup> The French government continued to fund crèche services leading to greater universal provision of childcare than in England. Public expenditure on collective childcare facilities by the *Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales* (the National Family Allowance Fund), the family branch of social security, ‘[rose] steadily over the last decade and

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<sup>39</sup> Martin, p. 415.

<sup>40</sup> Philippe Bas, ‘Présentation du plan petite enfance’, *Ministère délégué à la Sécurité sociale, aux Personnes âgées, aux Personnes handicapées et à la Famille*, 7/11/2006. <<http://www.petiteenfancegestion.com/plan.pdf>> [accessed 30/05/2012].

<sup>41</sup> Daune-Richard and Letablier, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Caisses d’Allocations Familiales Prestation d’accueil du jeune enfant (PAJE), *Caisse d’allocation familiales*, No date given <<http://www.caf.fr/wps/portal/particuliers/catalogue/metropole/paje#>> [accessed 29/05/2012].

<sup>43</sup> Jane Lewis, Trudie Knijn, Claude Martin and Ilona Ostner ‘Patterns of development in work-family balance policies in France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK during the 2000s’ in *Work-Family Balance, Gender and Policy*, ed. by Jane Lewis, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009), pp. 119-141 (p. 124).

despite an overall background of cost containment in other public services, the system of public crèches [...] suffered no cutbacks in funding.’<sup>44</sup>

Work/family life issues have played a more explicit role in childcare policies in France than in England. France ‘has developed an explicit family policy owing to the predominance of the model of the working mother’,<sup>45</sup> leading to extensive childcare provision designed to support working mothers. Childcare policy in England in the context of gender and the family can be seen to be ‘very much in third place’ after welfare-to-work and child poverty concerns. Although female Labour MPs were influenced by second wave feminists, and ‘helped to ensure’ the government addressed the issues to some extent, ‘policy has not been couched in terms of gender equity so much as an acceptance that in practice many mothers want or have to go out to work.’<sup>46</sup> This difference in policy emphasis provides an explanation for the lack of a universal, publicly funded childcare network. Unlike France, where the development of state childcare support dates back to the 1970s and 1980s and has been more the result of demographic considerations as the country needed women as workers and mothers,<sup>47</sup> UK policy has not been designed with the needs of the ‘working mother’ in mind from a gender point of view. Rather, policy has been motivated by more recent economic and social needs (e.g. welfare-to-work and tackling child poverty).

Family leave policies in France and England were also motivated by different agendas. In France natalist policies for the ‘working mother’ can be seen to have

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<sup>44</sup> Fagnani, p. 511.

<sup>45</sup> Daguerre, and Taylor-Gooby, p. 633.

<sup>46</sup> Penn and Randall, p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> Jane Lewis, ‘The Failure to Expand Childcare Provision and to Develop a Comprehensive Childcare Policy in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, (2012), 1-26  
<<http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org.eresources.shef.ac.uk/content/early/2012/05/22/tcbh.hws011.full.pdf+html?sid=9b5b63a9-ed48-41f3-9878-6544fe9d71fd>> [accessed 12/08/2012].

influenced policy.<sup>48</sup> For example, the income replacement component of the *PAJE* is limited to six months for women with a single child, but lasts up to three years for women with two or more children.<sup>49</sup> In England, the equalities lobby and market can be considered as important factors behind leave policies.<sup>50</sup> New Labour ‘gave a high profile to the business case’ behind leave policies.<sup>51</sup> In addition to the *écoles maternelles* (nursery schools which provide free childcare for three to six year olds), the generous French parental leave provision for parents of children up to three should be viewed as a reason why public childcare provision is so much higher in France for children over three compared to children under three.

Attitudes towards institutionalised childcare in the two countries also differ. ‘Using childcare facilities, including for babies aged 3–4 months, is considered as quite normal’ in France, whereas opinions in the UK are ‘more mixed concerning the desirability of full-time formal childcare, and the use of formal childcare for children younger than 3 [years].’<sup>52</sup> Such views are likely to have contributed significantly to the establishment of greater formal childcare access for children under three in France than England. The average weekly hours children under three spend in formal childcare is greater in France (32 hours in 2008 compared to 16 hours in the UK).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Milner, ‘“Choice’ and ‘flexibility’ in reconciling work and family: towards a convergence in policy discourse on work and family in France and the UK?’, *Policy and Politics*, 38 (2010), 3-21 (p. 10, 14).

<sup>49</sup> Caisses d’Allocations Familiales.

<sup>50</sup> Milner, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Daly (2010), p. 437.

<sup>52</sup> European Commission, *The provision of childcare services. A comparative review of 30 European countries*, (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009), pp. 53-54.

<sup>53</sup> OECD, ‘PF3.2: Enrolment in childcare and pre-schools’, *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, 14/06/2011 <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/46/13/37864698.pdf>> [accessed 29/05/2012] (p. 4).

## Effectiveness of childcare policies

Several important differences in access to childcare can be identified in France and England. Public childcare coverage is wider in France. The coverage rate (the number of places in public or publicly-subsidised childcare facilities as a share of the number of children) for children under the age of three in 2007 was 43% in France, compared to 26% in the UK. The coverage rate for three to five year olds showed an even greater gap (mainly due to the *écoles maternelles*) – 100% compared to 26%.<sup>54</sup> The UK figures are unlikely to have improved significantly given the recent financial situation. Furthermore, childcare appears to be more expensive in the UK. In 2008 childcare represented 27% of the income of the average UK family, more than in any OECD country bar Switzerland, and double the 12% figure in France.<sup>55</sup> Maternity and parental leave are considerably longer in France.<sup>56</sup>

However, analysing the effectiveness of childcare policies is not straightforward. ‘Men, women, different social classes, ethnicities and regions may all have different views on how childcare should be provided and by whom.’<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, it would appear that provision in both countries is not meeting the desires of a significant number of parents. This contradicts Hakim’s preference theory which states that women obtain the family policy that they want.<sup>58</sup> In France, the proportion of parents failing to find the type of childcare they thought most suitable was 43% in 1997 and 40% in 2003.<sup>59</sup> Whilst this may have fallen further with the impact of the *Plan Petite Enfance*, it is unlikely to have decreased dramatically. One

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<sup>54</sup> Saraceno, p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Truss, *Affordable quality: new approaches to childcare* (London: Centre Forum, May 2012), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Saraceno, p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Lewis (2008), p. 499.

<sup>58</sup> *Emploi des mères et garde des jeunes enfants en Europe*, p. 242.

<sup>59</sup> *Bilan et enjeux du dispositif de garde des jeunes enfants*, p. 109.

third of parents who used the parental leave component of the PAJE stated that they gave up work due to lack of suitable childcare.<sup>60</sup>

Childcare choices in France and England are closely linked to family income.<sup>61</sup> Despite the introduction of the *PAJE*, lower-income households cannot afford registered child-minders. Instead they largely use informal childcare or collective facilities.<sup>62</sup> Polarisation is occurring between educated, higher-paid women who remain employed after childbirth, and less-educated women who take up the allowances to care for their children.<sup>63</sup> Wealthier families increasingly use ‘bought’ services, while the crèches are ‘more and more servicing the children of the working classes’ whereas ‘historically, the crèche [...] not only represented a conception of the appropriate way of bringing up children but stood for a certain form of equal opportunities for children from different backgrounds’.<sup>64</sup> 86% of parents benefitting from the *PAJE* incentive to employ a child minder had very high incomes in 2005. Only 1% of families with very low incomes received the same allowance. Low-income parents represented 30% of the beneficiaries of the allowance for parents who gave up employment following the birth of their second or subsequent child provided they had been in previous employment. Only 14% of parents with a very high income opted for the allowance.<sup>65</sup> In England childcare can also be considered to vary along income lines. Daly comments that ‘more affluent areas are mainly served by private providers, with services fashioned by market forces and increasingly concentrated in

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<sup>60</sup> Marical, Minonzio and Nicolas, p. 11.

<sup>61</sup> Ronan Mahieu, ‘Les modes d’accueil des enfants de moins de 3 ans : effets d’offre et de demande’, *Recherches et Prévisions*, 82 (2005), 43-55 (p. 43).

<sup>62</sup> Martin, p. 415.

<sup>63</sup> Milner, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Daly (2004), p. 142.

<sup>65</sup> Marical, Minonzio and Nicolas, p. 8.

the hands of large corporate chains. ‘Deprived areas’, in contrast, are reliant on government intervention and a mix of public and voluntary-sector providers.’<sup>66</sup>

In England, a lack of services and the poor quality of such services are highlighted. The European Commission notes the ‘relatively low’ qualification level of UK childcare employees.<sup>67</sup> UK childcare is market-based and quality varies according to cost.<sup>68</sup> Penn underlines the very high costs of private sector childcare, especially in wealthy areas such as parts of London.<sup>69</sup> The Daycare Trust warned in 2012 that with childcare costs outstripping wage increases, families are being forced out of work and into poverty.<sup>70</sup> A more active policy in terms of supply and reducing costs would probably increase the employment rate among the mothers of preschool-age children.<sup>71</sup> Tax credits have been criticised for hindering mothers’ employment. Although they provide a significant sum of money for families with one child, they help parents for a only short daily amount (which will continue under Universal Credit), comprise only a proportion of the costs involved, cover only formal childcare even though low-income families frequently use informal childcare, and only support working families.<sup>72</sup> Daly provides a just assessment of childcare provision in the UK: the ‘part-time nature of the childcare guarantee fits with a liberal view of the appropriate (limited) role of public provision in the lives of young children’.<sup>73</sup> Further expansion of childcare provision would require considerable ideological movement on

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<sup>66</sup> Daly (2010), p. 438.

<sup>67</sup> European Commission, p. 46.

<sup>68</sup> Bilan et enjeux du dispositif de garde des jeunes enfants, p. 114.

<sup>69</sup> Penn, p. 200.

<sup>70</sup> Daycare Trust, ‘Childcare Costs Survey 2012’, *Daycare Trust*, 2012  
<<http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/pages/childcare-costs-survey-2012.html>> [accessed 20/06/2012].

<sup>71</sup> Sabine Chaupain-Guillot, Olivier Guillot, and Eliane Jankeliowitch-Laval, ‘Choix d’activité des mères et garde des jeunes enfants : une comparaison européenne’, *Comparaisons européennes*, 90 (2007), 41-54 (p. 52).

<sup>72</sup> Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby, p. 635; Daly (2010), p. 438; Christine Skinner and Naomi. Finch, ‘Lone Parents and Informal Childcare: A Tax Credit Child Subsidy’, *Social Policy & Administration*, 40:7 (2006), 807-823 (p. 805); Lewis, p. 502.

<sup>73</sup> Daly (2010), p. 440.

behalf of the British Government. Despite the creation of the Childcare Commission, such movement currently seems unlikely.

Regional disparity in childcare access is criticised in both countries. A comparative review of childcare services in European countries found that big cities have much greater childcare services in France. According to the European Commission, ‘the national average is 6.3 crèche places per hundred children under 3 years, whereas in Paris it is 23.9.’<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, in the UK ‘despite the expansion in formal childcare services there are still problems with availability’, as the European Commission states that ‘there is a mismatch of supply and demand across the country, with sizeable vacancies in day care, out-of-school and childminder places in some areas and heavy shortages in others’.<sup>75</sup> Attempts to tackle regional disparity in childcare provision appear greater in France than England. The *Plan Petite Enfance* aimed to create an additional 12,000 childcare places per year between 2007 and 2012, and had specific components to stimulate the number of crèche places in rural areas.<sup>76</sup> Current policy in England does not appear targeted at reducing regional disparity. The aims of the Childcare Commission do not refer to regional disparity.<sup>77</sup> The cuts to Sure Start services may make shortages in some areas even more critical, and expand differences in childcare provision along regional and sub-regional lines according to income.

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<sup>74</sup> European Commission, pp. 41-42.

<sup>75</sup> European Commission, pp. 41-42.

<sup>76</sup> Bas, p. 7, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> Department for Education, ‘Commission calls for views on childcare’, 19 July 2012, <<http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a00211981/commission-calls-for-views-on-childcare->> [Accessed 06/08/2012].

**Conclusion**

This article has examined formal childcare policies for children under three in France and England since the late 1990s. It has shown that considerable change in policy occurred during the period, especially in England. New Labour revolutionised childcare provision but continued to operate within a market-dominated approach. France moved towards individualistic childcare choices but retained more of a universalist structure through the crèche network. Some path convergence between the two countries can be noted (looking to the private sector) but differing national models and attitudes towards institutionalised care must be recognised as remaining. Policies in France have focused on promoting free choice for women (and on employment concerns), and have been more universal in nature. Policies in England have been motivated to a greater extent by welfare-to-work ideologies and tackling child poverty. Work/family life issues have played a more explicit role in childcare policies in France than England. Overall access to childcare remains greater in France than England. Policy in England is closest to OECD views on childcare, whilst French policy shares some characteristics of EU childcare policy goals. Neither the British nor the French system appears to completely satisfy parental requirements. High costs, poor quality services, and regional disparity in supply constrain parental childcare access. Parental childcare choices in both countries continue to vary according to household income. This article has touched on childcare policy during the recession, noting that it appears stronger in France. This is an important area for future work, and we must now ask parents how they feel the recession has influenced their childcare choices.