

Is this Hackney nursery the future for London's childcare industry?^[1]

New Economics Foundation prepares to pilot co-produced nurseries in effort to tackle London's 'failing' childcare model

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EXCERPTS

In one corner of the large, light room a two-year-old carefully dollops red paint on to an egg box. Elsewhere kids play together, or chat to one of the several adults present, and occasionally a young girl in a long yellow dress sweeps past.

This is Grasshoppers in the Park, an east London nursery where professional staff and parents work together to create childcare that is cheaper than a private nursery while having more adults on hand to help. In the UK, childcare eats up 27% (pdf) of family income (more than double the 12% OECD average) and in London average costs are more than a third higher (pdf) than in the rest of England.

By getting involved at Grasshoppers parents can reduce fees. All 30 families are expected to contribute in some way, from DIY to helping with the daily walk to the park. They also help with the finances, fundraising and admin (much of which can be done out of office hours) or simply by taking home a bag of laundry over the weekend.

Parents able to take on a bigger role are invited to help in the classroom for a regular day a week. Like other larger roles, "parent days" attract a monthly discount of £120 off the fees, which are already banded according to household income. That might be less than most mums and dads could earn in that time, but it is not solely about the money.

Katya (at Grasshoppers, everyone goes by their first name), whose son attends the nursery, helps out one day a week. Sitting on a child-sized chair as the kids munch their mid-morning snack, she tells me she values her parent days as she knows what her son does and gets to meet the other children. "Parents and staff learn from each other," she adds.

Dafydd, a primary school teacher and parent director of Grasshoppers, agrees. "It is a real community," he says. "We pay over the odds, in a very low paying sector, and our staff are fantastic." Four out of five of them have degrees, two are (unusually) men, and only one role has required recruitment, albeit twice, in the last four years.

The co-production model of childcare is well-established in countries such as Sweden, New Zealand, Canada and the US. In the UK, however, it is rare, says Lucie Stephens, head of co-production at the New Economics Foundation (NEF). Stephens has found just a handful of such nurseries in the UK, almost all in London. Most started with a few families getting together to share childcare before becoming formalised over time, in Grasshoppers' case as a not-for-profit limited company.

NEF is now working towards providing a structure for the creation of more co-produced nurseries in Britain, particularly in low-income urban areas. Working with the Family and Childcare Trust, which campaigns to reduce pressures on family life in the UK, they hope to start the first pilot in London in the spring.

Innovation in the provision of childcare is essential, Stephens insists, particularly in London where existing structures are largely failing all but the wealthiest. She also believes being non-profit making is key: "Parents giving their time and effort want to feel it is to benefit their children, not faceless shareholders." This has additional potential benefits when trying to get support from other organisations. NEF hopes to work with housing associations and local authorities, which may be able to provide low-rent premises for a service that would benefit their tenants.

So can private nurseries learn anything from the Grasshoppers model? While the private sector is always looking for innovative ways to remain sustainable, says Claire Schofield, director of membership, policy and communications at National Day Nurseries Association, early years practitioners are dedicated specialists in their field.

"Having too many unqualified parents, however enthusiastic, may dilute this quality of provision for children," says Schofield. "Creative solutions like co-production can be part of the picture to solve our childcare challenges, but can't be a substitute for the major reforms to our childcare policy and funding needed to provide the volume of high-quality, affordable places that parents need."

In terms of the practicalities for working parents, Schofield adds that “most parents who choose childcare do work and may not be time-rich in this way.”

Luciana, the acknowledged linchpin of Grasshoppers, worked in more typical nurseries (“where they can’t wait for parents to leave”) before she came to Grasshoppers but prefers her current workplace, despite the challenges. Finances can be insecure, she admits, and there is some concern about the government’s move to raise “free” childcare for three- and four-year-olds from 15 hours per week to 30 since Grasshoppers (like most private nurseries) makes a loss on the government-funded hours.

Another key challenge is trying to widen access to the nursery. Despite moving into the heart of a Hackney estate a year ago, and providing three free days for two-year-olds entitled to the government’s 15-hour low-income families’ scheme, the nursery remains predominantly middle class. Many parents may be on quite low incomes but most are well educated and only one child comes from the estate.

Grasshoppers does everything it can to reach out: advertising, talking to people and running free open music and play sessions every Friday. “Even if parents could find the time,” says Dafydd, “some seem intimidated by the idea of getting involved,” though he insists they needn’t be. Like Luciana, he thinks NEF’s plans for co-produced nurseries in deprived areas will be difficult to implement but both agree that the benefits make it worth persevering.

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