

Early years workforce 'becoming less qualified' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last week, new analysis of the early years workforce revealed a troubling picture of the sector, with a downward trend in the proportion of qualified staff and the prospect that in the future the workforce may be less qualified than it is now.

The research by the Education Policy Institute (EPI), 'The early years workforce: a fragmented picture', found that career progression has slowed with fewer staff working towards higher qualifications, particularly the younger generation. For the first time in years, qualification levels are on a downward trend. Separate survey data shows that those with at least a Level 3 fell from 83 per cent in 2015 to 75 per cent in 2016.

The EPI warns that this could hamper the Government's expansion of funded childcare and in the long term have a negative impact on young children.

The report's author, Sara Bonetti, associate director of early years at the EPI, (right), said, 'The picture is pretty gloomy at the moment. There are so many factors. What is really needed to ensure sustainability of the workforce is a systematic approach.'

She added that while there had been some positive measures, such as increases in pay, the analysis highlights 'a number of unwelcome trends emerging', posing a threat to the quality of provision. 'Staff qualification levels remain low – with levels even declining among staff working with the very youngest children. In the near term, a lack of highly trained staff may hinder the recent expansion of childcare entitlements. In the long term, there is considerable risk that a continued fall in qualification levels will have a negative impact on children, particularly the most vulnerable.'

Ms Bonetti highlighted a number of causal factors. One is the rise in the cost of studying for a Level 3. While 16- to 19-year-olds are funded for those aged over 19 (who are not apprentices) the cost can be prohibitive.

The report points to research by PACEY, which found that the cost of Level 3 courses rose from £250 to £1,900 in 2015. The EPI research finds that graduate-level staff (Level 6 or higher) are more likely to be older, with almost half of staff with at least a Level 6 qualification aged over 40, and a fifth over 50 – with the latter approaching retirement in the next 10 to 15 years (see chart below).

[Graph available to view online, "Age profile of group-based staff by qualification level"]

Although we do not know the number of staff aged over 19 without a Level 3, Ms Bonetti said, 'First, we can look at the proportion of staff older than 19 that holds a Level 1 or 2. That is about 9 per cent. The picture is more interesting when we take a look at the subgroup of the staff qualified at Level 1 or 2. Only 16 per cent are in the 16-19 age range, while 84 per cent are older than 19, the age cut-off to receive free training.

'If those [practitioners] want to upskill and obtain a Level 3, they would do so at a pretty steep cost. The data adds reasons to worry about the future sustainability of a qualified early years workforce.'

There is also a lack of awareness about Government support. Early years Initial Teacher Training courses are funded and the Government offers support to providers if a staff member takes time out to train to be an EYT. But providers and staff are often not aware of this, as evidenced by the recent Save the Children and Nursery World report, which found that 58 per cent of managers employing an EYT were unaware of funding.

Despite increasing evidence that the workforce is key to high-quality provision, there has been a decline in the number of providers with highly qualified staff. The percentage of two-year-olds cared for by a graduate fell from 45 per cent in 2014 to 44 per cent in 2016.

Such trends may be down to the increasing financial strains on the sector, increasing cost of obtaining qualifications and lack of financial and status incentive to pursue higher qualifications.

The financial strain also means that accessing continuing professional development is becoming harder for many providers. The EPI report

says, 'The financial pressure due to the 30-hour entitlement, cost increases, and Government funding rates is high, and local authorities' (once the most popular sources of CPD) budget and role is decreasing, as they are now responsible for taking action only for those providers deemed to need "improvements".'

LOW PAY

Working in school-based settings provides more financial incentives to staff to progress up the career ladder. Ms Bonetti was 'quite shocked' to discover Reception class teachers were paid more than managers in PVI settings. 'If a teacher or a provider has QTS they would be better off in the maintained sector. There is no financial incentive to stay in PVIs.'

While the introduction of the National Minimum and Living Wages are a positive development, the report says, planned staff wage increases are likely to drive up overall costs significantly, threatening to put some providers out of business. To compensate, providers may charge higher fees or hire less-qualified staff.

DATA GAPS

The analysis draws together data about early years providers and staff from official Government sources and sector surveys.

The EPI's initial goal was to examine official sources, with the main datasets used in the report being the 'Childcare and early years providers' surveys and the 'Education provision: children under 5 years of age' reports. However, due to 'gaps and inconsistencies' it also includes information from sector organisations.

Ms Bonetti said, 'There's still a lot of things we don't know from the administrative data. We have more questions than answers. It's very incomplete. We need better data to produce better policies. The Government needs to do a better job at collecting data.'

KEY FINDINGS:

- An increasing reliance on unpaid staff. In Reception classes, as many as 16 per cent of staff are unpaid volunteers.
- Turnover for early years staff has been increasing over the past few years, with turnover standing at 14 per cent for group-based providers, 8 per cent for nurseries and 9 per cent for Reception.
- Hourly pay rates vary widely from £8.30 in group-based provision, to £14.40 for nursery staff in school-based providers, and £15.10 for Reception staff.

-reprinted from Nursery World

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