

The early years workforce: a fragmented picture ^[1]

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Introduction

There is mounting evidence that high quality early years provision can have lasting positive effects, not only on the children who participate but on society overall. According to a recent study, children who attended high quality childcare with skilled and caring staff started school, on average, three months ahead in literacy and language, were 20 per cent more likely to do better on their GCSEs and earned more as adults than those from low-quality settings.^[1]

However, the evidence provides only mixed answers to the question “What really counts as high quality?”, when it comes to the early years workforce. Some studies found a clear link between the quality of provision and the presence among the staff of a person with a degree-level qualification,^[2] particularly in deprived areas.^[3] On the other hand, a more recent study showed that the presence of a graduate had a very minor impact on children’s outcomes.^[4]

Despite the difficulty in identifying exactly which specific qualifications and characteristics make for highly-qualified staff, both researchers and practitioners tend to agree that a highly qualified workforce is crucial for high-quality provision. And while further research is needed in order to explain this relationship, we consider it important in the meantime to address the inherent problems of low pay, low qualifications and a poorly valued workforce. Government policies over the past few years have sought to increase access to early years programs for different groups of children, with little acknowledgement of the value of the workforce, as the following suggests:

- New qualifications for early years staff and regulations for childminders were introduced in 2014, deepening the already existing “qualifications divide”, where a majority of childcare workers with low level of training and qualifications are set apart from the small minority of qualified teachers in nursery and reception classes in terms of perceptions, pay and career progression.^[5]
- Free early years entitlements have grown from variable local arrangements to a national universal offer over the past twenty years (the most recent development being a 30 hour entitlement for working families), but subsidies given to early years providers are lower than market value (even under the new proposed prices), placing financial stress on providers and stunting staff wages and benefits – while also driving up childcare costs overall.^[6]
- Funding for the early years is at an all-time high – in 2017/18, 7 billion, or 0.48 per cent of our GDP will be spent on childcare^[7] – but early years teachers’ salaries have experienced a decrease in real-terms. While pre-primary teacher salaries increased on average by 6 per cent in OECD countries between 2005 and 2014, in the UK, the change was a negative 15 per cent (the only other country faring worse was Greece).^[8]

This demonstrates that well-intended provisions for the early years have often been implemented without sufficient regard for its workers. And so, despite recognising the importance of highly-qualified teachers for children, and ultimately to society, the status and working conditions of early years educators have deteriorated as their nominal wages remain stagnant, workload stays high, benefits continue to be subpar to teachers at other levels and even new increased funding proposals towards their programs are seen as insufficient.

Related link: Early years workforce ‘becoming less qualified’ ^[3]

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