

Underpaid and undervalued ^[1]

the reality of childcare work in the UK

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EXCERPTS

Despite the important job they do, wages for people working in childcare tend to be low. These workers earn less than the average wage across all UK employment sectors and barely half that of qualified teachers.

In the latest government provider survey, it was found almost 20% of day nursery workers in England earn less than the national living wage – including 10% of those aged 25 and over.

In contrast, qualified teachers working in state nursery schools, children's centres or state primary nursery classes receive nationally agreed pay and employment conditions.

This is partly because, since 1998 and the introduction of universal entitlement to early education for all three- and four-year-olds, early education is no longer required to be delivered by graduate teachers – except in state nursery schools and nursery classes attached to state primaries.

Instead, working with children in private sector settings – such as day nurseries, preschools and playgroups – are early childhood practitioners with a range of childcare qualifications, or none. Some may be graduates, some may be school leavers.

Low pay, low status

This matters because research into childcare quality shows a direct link between workers' qualification levels, their pay and conditions and service quality. In other words, the more qualified and better paid the workers, the better the educational and care experience children receive.

Research has shown what matters to those working with young children includes competitive wages and benefits. As well as reasonable workloads, competent and supportive managers and opportunities for development. Research has also shown that a supportive environment for nursery workers can have a positive impact on children's development and childcare quality.

All of these factors also increase the likelihood of staff retention and motivation for quality interactions with children. Yet despite this, these aspects of childcare provision are not regulated by the government and are left to be determined by the industry itself.

Woman's work?

One of the reasons for this is the gender imbalance within the workforce. Childcare is still seen as woman's work, and is often undervalued. Men form only 3% of the UK childcare workforce.

Attempts to change this dynamic – by emphasising the educational dimension – have done little so far to raise the status of English childcare practitioners. This is despite the fact that childcare workforce qualification levels have been steadily rising and an independent review recommended that graduate childcare practitioners should have the opportunity to become qualified teachers.

Instead, the government has offered graduates interested in working with young children various training pathways. But these don't offer the same packages that qualified teachers get – such as better pay and conditions, as well as improved career prospects. Unsurprisingly, enthusiasm for such training routes has proved limited and many courses have closed.

International perspectives

Nordic countries, on the other hand, have much smaller pay differentials within their early years workforce and the job is much more respected. Statistics from a 2017 report show that Denmark has achieved the best gender balance within its early years workforce. Here, 13% of staff are male.

Across the age range, well paid early years teachers in Denmark work alongside assistants – whose training differs from schoolteachers. As early childhood is viewed as a distinct life stage, the childcare system is also completely separate from the school system.

Similarly in Germany, the early years workforce is much less of a hierarchy. Most of those working with children under six have a three-year post-secondary qualification – only 4% are qualified to degree level. And in France, even childminders have their basic pay and conditions regulated by government.

Affordable childcare

In other EU countries, parents' fees for nursery are income related, or waived for the poorest. Price capping is also used to keep childcare affordable.

In Finland, the state still provides completely free childcare. And in many countries, governments cover more than 80% of the direct costs. Compare this with early years spending in the UK which is more than 20% lower – and considerably lower than even the OECD average. In fact, the UK and Japan are the only OECD member states where 50% of early years spending comes from private sources – such as parental income.

In the UK, funding for early education is paid directly by the government to state schools, academies and private childcare businesses. Parents then have to pay all additional childcare costs upfront. For a child under two spending 25 hours a week in a day nursery, parents can pay anything from £100 up to £154.

Although some parents can then claim part of these costs back – through the benefits or tax credit systems – this forms a huge barrier. Particularly so for parents in irregular or self-employment. It also deters childcare businesses from raising fees further to invest in their workers.

Baby steps

A recent government report said this was a “fundamental design flaw” and one that was in urgent need of rectification. It was hoped that

the recent roll-out of the 30 hours of free childcare for three- and four-year-olds of working parents would help to change matters – and make childcare more accessible and affordable.

But given that the free childcare initiative requires a significant expansion of the early years workforce, this may be tricky. Without improving training, pay and employment conditions, the chances of creating a high quality, equitable and sustainable childcare system seem remote.

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