

Early years funding should focus on poorest families, Ofsted says

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EXCERPTS:

Although she does not go so far as to say that there should be an end to universal provision, national director of education Sue Gregory will say that funding for early years provision is spread too thinly and needs to be focused on the poorest areas to boost quality.

The first annual early years lecture at the Foundling Museum in London sees Ofsted taking more of a political stance than it has done in the past.

'Universal provision in its current form has not worked for all children and by the time they reach five years of age too many are not well-prepared for the transition to schools. The picture is worse for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the "attainment gap" is not closing quickly enough,' Ms Gregory says.

One suggestion, which has previously been mooted by the Liberal Democrats and which is now being put forward by the education inspectorate, is a pupil premium for the early years.

'Universal provision has spread resources very thinly and it's crucial that lessons are learnt from current schemes in operation,' Ms Gregory says. 'Schools receive additional funding for their most disadvantaged pupils through the pupil premium. A similar scheme could work in the early years to help ensure that high quality staff are employed where the two-year-old offer is really needed.'

The quality of early years provision varies widely across regions and there continues to be a difference between the quality of all types of early years provision in the most and least deprived areas of the country.

Early years providers judged satisfactory in areas of high deprivation are less likely to improve between inspections than those in better off areas.

There is also a quality gap between pre-schools and childminding in all areas.

Take-up of free early education is also lower in deprived areas, with nearly 20 per cent fewer three-and four-year-olds using free early education places.

Qualifications

Ms Gregory will also say that all early years staff should be graduates. She will point out that there are currently no minimum entry requirements for level 2 in childcare and early education, whereas training as a veterinary assistant requires five good GCSEs, including maths and English.

'How can it be acceptable that we allow our early years workforce to be less well-qualified to work with young children than animals?

'If we're serious about investing in the future, I believe the majority of those working with young children should be highly skilled and qualified to degree level. There are other countries where the majority of early years staff holds a degree-level qualification, unlike England where numbers are much lower.'

Ms Gregory also add that the ten-year timescale to implement the Nutbrown review is too long.

She also suggests that paying a better qualified workforce more is not 'unattainable'.

'If we fund better training and higher qualifications - and more quickly than over a period of ten years - maybe we wouldn't need as high an adult/child ratio as we have now.'

Childminders

The lecture will do nothing to allay many childminders' fears about proposals to change regulation and inspection for childminding.

The way that childminders will be inspected will change 'in the longer term,' Ms Gregory says, signalling a move away from individual inspection to a network model.

Referring to proposals suggested in Ofsted's early years report last week, that weaker nurseries and childminders should be linked up through networks with outstanding providers, Ms Gregory says, 'Many more childminders could benefit from working together in

networks and we are committed to exploring the way we might inspect networks of childminders with the Government over the coming months.'

Ms Gregory also suggests that it might be time to look at whether all providers should deliver all aspects of the EYFS and questions whether childminders are up to the job.

'There's a question about whether all those who work with the very youngest children, especially childminders, should be required to deliver more than the prime areas. Do we ask them to do too much?'

-reprinted from Nursery World

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