

Are inspections really the way to improve our nurseries? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

After education minister Elizabeth Truss warns of "chaotic" nursery settings, Imogen Parker of the thinktank IPPR asks whether more inspections and tougher criteria are the best way of getting the quality childcare that we all want for our children. Everyone wants quality childcare for their children, but what's the best way to achieve it?

Monday's Daily Mail quotes children's minister Liz Truss saying there are too many "chaotic" settings, with children "running around with no sense of purpose". This criticism comes swiftly after last week's announcement from Ofsted they wanted to replace 'satisfactory' with 'requires improvement' in the early years.

Childcare needs to be good quality, and early years providers need to be working to continuously reflect on their provision and improve it. But are more inspections and tougher criteria the best way getting it?

Monitoring serves an importance purpose, but quality won't shift without investment in training and professional development. And this change to Ofsted is the context of cutting Local Authority inspections, a proposal that has caused consternation in the sector.

I think there are two problems with this. Firstly Ofsted isn't always a good measurer of quality in the early years. And secondly investing in more monitoring isn't the most effective way of increasing quality. Let's take these one by one.

While Ofsted ratings are a reasonably good predictor for outcomes at school age, Ofsted grades for early years settings are less good at predicting children's developmental outcomes. A recent study looked at the relationship between Ofsted scores and Environmental Rating Scales (ERS), which are widely respected measures to assess quality, and are strongly indicative of children's developmental outcomes.

While the Ofsted scores and ERS scores were broadly aligned for better performing centres for older children (3 upwards), there was less overlap for lower performing centres, and no significant associations between Ofsted grades and ERS for children under 30 months old. While the introduction of the EYFS better aligned Ofsted grades to ERS scores for older children, the same was not the case for younger. In fact, the report points out that often settings graded as Outstanding by Ofsted received the lowest scores on the infant and toddler ERS scale.

In other words, in the past, Ofsted good and poor grades don't always reflect which centres are really providing good quality care - care which will improve children's development and outcomes.

But the real problem with this approach is that Ofsted (and ratio changes which may or may not allow for more quality staff) are becoming the main mechanisms for driving quality, as the government proposes scrapping local authority inspections, and removing the individual inspections for childminders registered with agencies.

Ofsted's job is to monitoring the performance of providers, but Ofsted alone isn't necessarily a good driver of improving quality. In fact it can actually undermine continuous quality improvement.

Some recent research published by the Daycare Trust found that several local authorities found that providers viewed good and outstanding scores, not as a minimum standard, but as indicating they need make no further improvement. In interviews, several local authorities recounted the difficulty of encouraging settings to develop their practice if they had been "sanctioned" by Ofsted as good enough.

The quantitative work in the report found that settings which participated in a Local Authority-led quality assurance schemes scores more highly on Environmental Rating Scales, suggesting settings provided a higher quality learning environment. Ofsted similarly found participants involved in these schemes were better able to assess their own performance (in self evaluation) and had a greater capacity to maintain continuous improvement.

So in the past Ofsted has failed to consistently reflect which settings are best for children's development, particularly for the youngest children. There's also a question as whether it can act as a driver of quality, and some evidence that it can actually inhibit improvement.

If the government is serious about boosting quality in the early years for the sake of child development, it needs to think more broadly than relies on more and more monitoring. Ofsted evaluations and changes to structural regulations without other complementary measures like quality assurance schemes through local authorities and continuing professional development, won't alone go far enough to drive quality provision, particularly with the youngest children.

-reprinted from the Telegraph

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