

# Early childhood education and care: commodity or pedagogy? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Read online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS:

A critical alliance of contemporary professionals and thinkers in early years is being launched at a reception in the House of Commons on 9 October, to highlight the importance of transformative policy for the sector and young children's lives.

This alliance of policy-makers, early years, and other related professionals, early education and care providers and those delivering vocational and professional education is leading a critical debate that aims to articulate and promote transformation of the early years sector.

Pat Tomlinson, former head of early years at the Children's Workforce Development Council and author of *Early Years Policy and Practice - A Critical Alliance*, argues that the early years sector and policy-makers are all in agreement that the health, wellbeing, learning and care of young children is a crucial investment for the nation. However, this is not reflected by the transformation needed to provide the foundation for creating the benefits that accrue for children, parents and society with high quality early education and care. Early years policy and consequent funding remain fragmented and vulnerable to the whims and proclivities of political ideology and economic trends. So initiatives are not, necessarily, child-focused or adherent to the extensive insight, through research, that is available.

Early years care policies tend to grow out of economic expediency and desire, such as reducing childcare costs or increasing the participation of women in the workforce. The early years workforce remains the poor relation of the child education and care sector, being predominantly a low paid and low qualified sector.

Even when children take centre-stage, as with education policy, early years issues are not given the same status as other matters. Indeed, Bostrum's analysis of thousands of survey responses in the USA showed that whilst a majority of participants favoured early years education (52%) it was the lowest priority on the list of tested priorities. (Bostrum, 2002).

This is reflected in UK policy, where compulsory early education in the maintained sector requires graduate professionals but early learning pre-school provision outside the maintained sector does not. Whilst there are changes afoot to address this anomaly, identified in 'More Great Childcare', it still appears to provide a halfway house between a graduate profession and a graduate-led profession (DfE, 2013).

The timeliness of the critical debate is reinforced by recent consultations and reviews by government. The proposals in 'More Great Childcare', launched as future early years policy intentions in 2013, sought to reconcile reductions in staffing ratios across early years services with the promotion of higher quality care. The plans included the introduction of early years teachers, a development on Early Years Professional Status and drawn from the Nutbrown review, whilst, at the same time, rejecting the potential for making a statutory minimum qualification for the sector.

The low status of the early education and care workforce in the UK is reinforced when we consider the differences between senior early years childcare staff salaries and those of early years teachers across a number of European countries.

See table in article online <sup>[2]</sup>

Such inconsistencies and contradictions reinforce the Critical Alliance argument that piecemeal policy fails to transform the sector or raise the status of early education and care to the importance it deserves.

The Critical Alliance proposes a transformative regime where the focus of attention is the welfare and development of young children that actively engages with young children and their parents in supporting well-being and prospects for the future.

Such approaches must leave behind old disputes, eradicating polarisation of perspectives between those who argue that childcare should solely be the responsibility of parents and family and those who lobby for provision via the state. We must leave behind out-moded perspectives that seek to undermine childcare staff in relation to teachers and care as subordinate to learning.

Many societies view childcare as simply the responsibility of the parents and family, therefore something that should not be interfered

with. It is assumed parents instinctively know how to raise their children, that parents can educate their young children and prepare them to succeed in society, and contribute effectively.

Politicians and policy-makers fight shy of intervention and, at times, use it as an argument to avoid public financing. This tends to lead to inadequate resources and leaves many children and their parents without the support that makes a beneficial difference to family life and child well-being. The danger is that by focusing on the responsibility of parents, rather than support for parenting, policies remain narrowly focused and inadequate.

Therefore, when government considers childcare beyond the home, whether it is provided by private companies or public sector, it is evaluated for its relevance to economic policy and social responsibility and not for its value in improving children's lives, their achievements and their long term contribution to society.

Whilst government in the UK tinkers around offering limited hours of childcare to every three- and then some two-year-olds, in Denmark childcare is offered to all children from age one to starting school at age six. The strategy reflects the Danish culture of working parents, supported through child-friendly employment patterns and parental leave.

Policy-making that transforms early education and care would give clarity to a fragmented sector, and bring value to external early education and childcare. A move towards the pedagogical approach that we see in some of the northern European countries such as Denmark and Sweden would be a transformative step.

Here, partnership is sought between parents and the state. The focus is on local superior provision staffed by well qualified pedagogues and experienced professionals. Costs are related to income and take account of changes in family circumstances. There is a cap on the percentage of income required for childcare which reduces depending on personal economic circumstances. The usual formula sets a maximum percentage of unit costs that parents can pay irrespective of income combined with decreasing costs for those on low incomes. Denmark operates such a system with around a 25% maximum unit cost cut-off which equates to around 10-15% of the average family wage, as opposed to some 27% recently identified in the UK.

We are often persuaded that these countries can afford to spend more than the UK on childcare. This is not particularly the case. Public spending on children and families is less complex than in the UK. Beyond a similar level of child benefit, Denmark's primary spending is on direct subsidy of childcare services. Half the total amount spent on families is devoted to childcare and there is no tax credit. Compared to the UK, Denmark offers high quality childcare at lower cost for only slightly more overall expenditure on families (an additional 0.1% of GDP).

The Danish model of supply-led differentiated subsidy is reflected across other European countries too. In France, a family with a taxable income of €3,000 a month pays around €1.80 an hour, while those with an income of €1,500 per month and three children may pay as little as €0.60 an hour for childcare.

In Sweden, the maximum payment is equivalent to £114 per month for children from one to six years (Rock, 2012). Supply-led models allow for a range of childcare provision and devolved regulation. The model offers sustainability for the provider across diverse demographic neighbourhoods, therefore enabling access to good provision for low income families. It caps costs for parents who because of a sliding scale of contribution can be assured that changing circumstances do not impact on affordability of childcare.

What we have now is a childcare policy in disarray. The push for a reduced staff ratio for childminders and settings has been undermined by the sector lobby and evidence from abroad. There is a lack of clarity regarding the advent of the early years teacher and equity with the rest of the qualified teaching profession and reticence to grasp the nettle for a baseline statutory minimum qualification for practice. This is added to fragmented approaches to childcare subsidy across different family profiles and some of the highest childcare costs in Europe. There is diversity in early years services across important areas of the provision and inequality in access, quality and nature of provision.

Such a situation leaves parents and professionals in limbo and our very young children's development, learning and well-being subject to the vagaries of policy-makers. Economic, fiscal and political perspectives and policies have a direct impact. Where universal services are the norm and supply-led policies are in place, we find better distribution and availability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and accessibility for families whatever their incomes.

Supply-led services tend to adopt high level qualifications across the workforce, with pedagogues being routinely engaged in early childhood education and care in Nordic countries. Where eligibility is restricted and subsidy demand-led, distribution and choice is limited, often resulting in already disadvantaged areas suffering from a lack of provision or lower quality as indicated in the Netherlands.

There are two major challenges for policy-makers - the first being whether to transform early years provision into a universal service based on the model of universal education, and the second to raise the quality and status of the workforce. Transformation will meet resistance from many stakeholder groups as well as acclaim from others.

In such a climate, policy-makers have consistently fought shy of making transformational change of this nature, and it will take a bold government to take this on in a period of economic decline. However, if we seriously want to transform the lives of children and adults in the UK then early childhood education and care is a good place to start.

-reprinted from Nursery World

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[4]</sup>

curricula and pedagogy <sup>[5]</sup>

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