

# Damian Fitzgerald: Early years education is no child's play <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

As the school holidays begin and families go on summer breaks, many of those charged with educating our very youngest citizens have quite a challenge on their hands.

Early years' provision has been under the spotlight since the general election, and there can be little doubt it has emerged as one of the key cornerstones of the Conservative government.

First we heard that there was to be an increase in free nursery hours' provision from 15 to 30 per week for three and four-year-olds, with nurseries and early years educators concerned that the system might buckle in the face of increasing demand and staff squeezes. There was a clear focus on early years under the last Labour government. And whilst there were issues, progress was also made. The Early Years Childcare Partnerships, for example, did much to try and ensure relevant supply of provision in localities.

The policy approach has reduced substantially the focus on Early Years and this was evident through the diminishment of the Every Child Matters agenda. The focus on 30 hours is about supply of hours – not quality of provision.

Interestingly the task force established by the Prime Minister, focusing on childcare, will be led by an employment minister. This gives a clear indication that it is about supply to promote parental working, rather than the priority being about quality of education and care led by well qualified practitioners.

Now Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw has urged parents of disadvantaged two-year-olds to take-up free nursery places through a government scheme. He says half of England's parents of two-year-olds entitled to 15 hours of free childcare a week are not using it.

Places are offered to children in care, with disabilities, special educational needs and from families on benefits with research suggesting that such children tend to do worse at school than their more advantaged classmates – a 19-month attainment gap has been opened between the best-achieving and lowest-achieving. On the face of it, getting more two-year-olds to access childcare has to be a good thing. But in addition to the potential problems being caused by more hours per child, the reason this policy is failing to attract people is because it is targeted rather than universal. This can have a stigmatising impact on those that it is aimed at. The scheme began in September 2013, when a free part-time childcare placement was targeted at 130,000 of the most disadvantaged children.

But the scheme opened with a shortage of places and some 38,000 children did not take up the provision. In 2014, the scheme was expanded to cover some 260,000 children, and local authorities struggled to ensure providers could offer enough places in the right areas.

Often, these families don't respond well to being targeted in this way, or labelled if you like, and so don't take up these places. I don't see that changing because of Sir Michael's intervention.

Sir Michael also suggests that, due to a lack of actual nursery provision and skilled staff to take up this increasing demand, our very youngest pupils (two-to-three year olds) could be subject to a classroom environment. Research suggests doing so would be counter-intuitive and lessen the emphasis on play which is so important in an early years setting. Exposing a child to a form of assessment and school environment at such a young age may hinder rather than help.

All this points to a rather confused early years environment at the moment. Increased hours will add up to not-very-much if there isn't the staff, expertise or provision to back it up. There is a risk we may undo the excellent work that means 85 per cent of childcare settings are now rated good or outstanding, compared with 78 per cent the previous year.

So, as our thoughts turn to holidays, the answer for how to solve this mathematical puzzle may be closer than we think. In Wales, plans to develop a highly-skilled workforce to improve early years education are already at an advanced stage. The Welsh government has a draft 10-year plan which will help "raise the status" of early years carers.

Since 2008, children between three and seven have been educated through the play-based Foundation Phase. The Foundation Phase for

children – which involves learning through play – is having a positive impact on how pupils learn and implements a systematic approach to early years learning. I suggest Ministers spend a few days in Cardiff to see what lessons they can learn from their Welsh counterparts this summer recess.

-reprinted from Yorkshire Post

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

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