

Quantity over quality

Using extracts from his new book on the subject, **Damien Fitzgerald** argues that the Government's approach to early years policy has substantially reduced the essential focus on quality



There can be little doubt that early years education has emerged as one of the cornerstones of Conservative government policy. One of the party's first high-profile announcements was the intention to double funded provision, from 15 to 30 hours, for three- to four-year-olds with working parents from 2017.

But it won't come as news to hear that early years settings have said, en masse, that the proposed funding rate is unviable. Last November, the Government responded to these concerns by publishing a review of childcare costs. However, the Department for Education, in analysis of responses to its consultation, was 'unable to understand' the true cost of delivering the free entitlement because responses to its consultation were 'often not supported by figures' (its own words).

The Pre-school Learning Alliance responded that the consultation was an 'exercise in futility', pointing out that the call for evidence did not ask for specific figures, and respondents could only respond to what was asked for. One of the review's key recommendations seems to be for settings to increase their use of flexible staffing patterns – which potentially equates to zero-hours contracts – to meet the 'peaks and troughs' of demand as a way to reduce money spent on staffing. But aside from the lack of concrete figures and the suggestion of a casualised workforce, what is startling in this report is the lack of reference to quality.

So what is the 30 hours policy about? We can go back to the disbanding of the Children's Workforce Development Council, in 2012, for an answer. The CWDC had responsibility for creating an appropriately qualified and trained workforce. It was replaced with the Teaching Agency in 2012. This had two main aims in relation to the early years: the supply and retention of the workforce, and the provision of a quality workforce.

However, in 2013 the TA merged with the National College for School Leadership to form the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL). With this, the focus on the early years sector is clearly not as evident as it was. This, along with pro-

posals such as the use of more casual staff, suggests that the Government sees childcare as an employment issue rather than about children's outcomes. The choice of an employment minister, Priti Patel, to lead the childcare task force, adds further weight to this argument. Their policy approach has actually substantially reduced the focus on the early years – partially evidenced through the diminishment of the Every Child Matters agenda. The focus on 30 hours is about supply of hours – not quality of provision.

There are also concerns about the impact of past policies. For example, there has been an increase in the number of providers employing practitioners with degrees (e.g. Qualified Teacher Status; Early Years Professional Status; Early Years Teacher Status). However, while the number of practitioners employed in settings with these qualifications has increased (from around 10,000 in 2014 to 11,000 in 2015, according to DfE figures), the number of settings with practitioners qualified to this level fell to 41 per cent in 2015 from 45 per cent in 2014. This suggests fewer smaller providers are employing professional graduates or more are securing employment in maintained settings, such as schools.

This highlights the lack of clear ➤

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development pathways and the need to enhance the professional standing of the sector, a point emphasised as necessary by Cathy Nutbrown's 'Foundations for Quality' report.

In fact, the majority of staff with higher qualifications are in the main-
tained sector, according to a report from the House of Lords Select Committee on Affordable Childcare. This is despite the fact that government figures show that private, voluntary and independent settings are where over 90 per cent of two access places.

Recent policies have led to a significant expansion in early years places and this latest policy will require further substantial change to the sector if the government offer is met. If these places are to be good quality, we have to think about the training of practitioners who are delivering them. So far, changes over the past two decades have not led to sustainable increased access to training for all practitioners, a recognition of their skills and experience, as Nutbrown and others have argued for.

Childcare minister Sam Gyimah has said a workforce strategy is to be published this year. When thinking about what this should include, I would say the answers are already evident from work previously done in this area. In 1995, the European Commission Childcare Network set the ambitious aim, for the UK at least, of ensuring that a minimum of 60 per cent of practitioners working with children have completed at least three years of post-18 training, such as at degree level. It also said the remainder of staff should have access to this training either at training institutions or through continuous professional development.

Will Mr Gyimah's plan reach these levels? And would it ever be able to make them a reality, given the already chronic recruitment crisis in the sector? What are the salary levels and career progression routes for these highly trained practitioners? There is currently no career framework that makes this possible.

It is also interesting to look at the history of quality provision in relation to funded hours. The entire funded hours programme began in 1998, when the National Childcare Strategy set out the then Labour government's intention to increase early years provision through funded initiatives such as the New Opportunities Fund to support the expansion of childcare, and the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative to pay for more early years



education places. Aims included a free part-time nursery place for every four-year-old extended to every three-year-old, and a childcare place in the most disadvantaged areas for every lone parent entering employment.

While there were issues, progress was also made. The Early Years Childcare Partnerships, for example, did much to try to ensure relevant supply of provision locally. The focus on early years continued during the coalition government. However, during this time, policy altered to look more at effective use of reduced funding: moving towards targeted rather than universal services, removing ring-fencing for various early years grants and increasing the ability of the PVI sector to compete for tenders, according to Kathy Sylva et al's 2012 report.

The coalition did not follow a dramatically different policy direction, although it commissioned a number of reviews, which led to the removal of many funding streams (i.e. the Graduate Leader Fund; reduced funding to Sure Start Children's Centres) and structural changes (i.e. closure of the CWDC; merging two bodies to form the NCTL; stopping the EYP training programme). Reviews included Nutbrown's review of the early years workforce, status and qualifications.

FURTHER READING

- Sylva, K et al (2012) *Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education 3-14 Project (EPPSE 3-14). Final Report from the Key Stage 3 Phase – Influences on Students' Development From Age 11-14*, DfE.
- House of Lords (2015) *Select Committee on Affordable Childcare – First Report. Affordable Childcare*. Available at: www.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldselect/ldaffchild/117/11702.htm.

To achieve the ambitious plans outlined back in 1998, future policy will require far more than simply putting graduates into the workplace – particularly given the withdrawal of funds to specifically support this. Casualisation of the workforce isn't the answer: it might work for commodities such as biscuits, but not for the holistic development and socialisation of children.

Doubling the funded provision for eligible children to 30 hours confirms investment in the sector and offers potential to support working parents. On its own, however, it does nothing to enhance the quality of childcare for their children. Neither does it offer clear career development for practitioners.

Ultimately, the quality of the sector will be determined by the quality of practitioners. In the absence of a clear strategic direction from government policy, it is up to the sector to work together to attract appropriately qualified graduates and provide clearer career development pathways to retain practitioners. ■

*Damien Fitzgerald is a principal lecturer in early years at Sheffield Hallam University. A fourth edition of his book, **Understanding Early Years Policy** (co-authored with Janet Kay), is out on 9 April, published by Sage.*