

More Great Childcare Research Evidence

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We write as researchers at the University of Oxford and the Institute of Education, London about recent proposals from the Department for Education. 'More Great Childcare' (MGC) makes bold proposals to improve quality, reform regulation, enhance the status and qualifications of the workforce and make childcare more affordable for parents.

We applaud the seriousness of these plans because children deserve high quality education and care, working families need confidence in the pre-school sector and the country will profit from children entering school with a zest for learning. We support the overall aims of 'More Great Childcare', particularly the willingness to face the challenge of making childcare more affordable whilst raising quality.

However, we are concerned that some of the specific proposals to achieve these aims will lead to an unintended reduction in quality. We set out some of our concerns in light of the research evidence.

Ratios, qualifications and affordability

MGC argues that over-stringent regulation restricts nursery providers from being able to reduce costs for parents, leading to some of the highest childcare costs for parents in Europe. It proposes allowing early years providers to increase the number of children each staff member can legally care for (ratios). The resulting additional income could allow a reduction in fees along with the employment of more highly qualified and better paid staff to raise quality. In essence, MGC is balancing ratios against qualifications. Staff would be more highly qualified, but may be expected to care for more children. Per adult, nurseries will be allowed to provide for four children under 2 years (the current limit is 3); six children aged 2 (up from 4) and thirteen children aged 3 years or more (up from 8). Childminders will not be allowed to increase their numbers overall, but will be able to care for greater numbers of very young children; for example, up to four two year olds.

Balancing ratios and qualifications: research evidence

For over 3s: The 'Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund' (GLF) (Mathers et al., 2011) explored the relationships between quality and the characteristics of early years settings, including staff qualifications and adult-child ratios. It showed that, for pre-school aged children (aged 3 to 5) *both* qualifications and ratios were related to quality. This means that raising qualifications whilst also increasing ratios may not lead to quality improvement; but overall quality will not go down. What we will see is a shift in the quality 'profile', because qualifications and ratios are associated with different aspects of quality: qualifications are more strongly associated with support for children's language and learning, while ratios are more strongly associated with care routines and meeting children's individual needs (Mathers et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2007; Mathers & Sylva, 2007). Therefore, if we increase *both* qualifications and ratios, children's language and learning will be better supported but we will see an accompanying reduction in the quality of care and individualised provision. If we are happy to accept this shift in the quality profile, then it seems reasonable to maintain the current arrangements allowing settings to operate at 1:13 for pre-school children where they employ a qualified teacher (QTS) or Early Years Professional

(EYP). However, to have maximum impact on quality, the graduate should be working directly with the children rather than simply employed within the setting: the GLF evaluation showed that EYPs were most influential on quality in the rooms in which they worked. These proposals must also be viewed in the light of Cathy Nutbrown's full recommendations for improvements to the qualifications framework.

For under 3s: The GLF evaluation showed a different picture for younger children. For babies and toddlers, ratios were much more important for quality than were staff qualifications. Therefore, relaxing ratios for this age group will lead to a reduction in quality; and improving qualifications would not lessen the impact. Quality is likely to go down; with the evidence pointing to reductions in the quality of care routines, health and safety, and the extent to which settings are able to provide for children's individual needs. It is not difficult to imagine why: being well qualified does not necessarily help staff to cope with the demands for feeding, changing and caring for very young children. Given that quality may drop, even if qualifications are improved, it seems sensible to leave the current ratios as they stand for children under three. This is supported by Dalli's (2011) international research and policy review, which concluded that 1:3 is the ideal adult-to-child ratio for children under two.

There is little hard evidence on ratios with childminders, however the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) Project (Sylva et al., 2010) has shown that a rich early years home learning environment, known to have long term educational benefits for children includes: reading to children, playing with numbers and letters, walks to the library and so on. These will not be such rich experiences with larger numbers of children. Indeed, safety concerns will make informal outings virtually impossible. It is difficult to imagine a working day with no chance for breaks if a lone carer has up to five children under four. The EPPSE research also indicates children in larger families have poorer outcomes (Sammons et al., 2011) and therefore children in home setting with more children are likely to be doubly disadvantaged.

What is the evidence on qualifications?

In keeping with sentiments expressed by Professor Cathy Nutbrown in her recent independent review of early education and childcare qualifications (2012), MGC states that *'nothing is more important in early education than the quality of the staff who are delivering it'*. It also notes that our workforce is much less qualified than in many other European countries. The introduction of tougher entry requirements, continued emphasis on a graduate workforce and simplification of the current tangle of early years qualifications are commendable, and have the potential to enhance both the status and quality of those working with young children. MGC rightly cites evidence from large-scale UK studies such as the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project and the GLF evaluation, showing that quality is higher when practice is led by graduates and teachers.

However, we also have concerns. There is much still to learn regarding the relationships between quality and qualifications for our youngest children. The GLF evaluation found no evidence that nurseries employing a graduate Early Years Professional provided higher quality for babies and toddlers. We are not suggesting that qualifications are unimportant for this age range; but that early years qualifications as they currently stand do not guarantee high quality for under twos.

This should sound a warning bell for the training of our workforce if we are to ensure quality for our very youngest.

The introduction of a new qualification - the 'Early Years Teacher' - to replace existing Early Years Professionals (EYPs) will not necessarily enhance the status of those working with young children because they will not have comparable training, or Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), and will not be eligible for teacher pay and conditions. They will simply be second class 'teachers'. Susan Gregory, Ofsted's Director of Early Childhood and an HMI, recently noted that EYPs are paid on average *half* the wage of teachers. Even if settings save money by taking on more children per staff member, they are unlikely to be able to close this gap; particularly if they also want to pass savings on to parents with lower fees. Ironically we may see a reduction in the status of the early years workforce. Qualifications and pay in private nurseries may rise slightly, but Children's Centres, nursery schools and reception classes may well see their Qualified Teachers replaced by cheaper Early Years Teachers working at lower pay and status than teachers of older children. The current move to close many excellent nursery schools across the country marks the beginning of this trend. This is in stark contrast to countries such as Finland, who perform exceptionally well in international educational comparisons and who have a fully qualified teacher workforce in their early years sector.

Balancing the books

We believe that MGC is unduly optimistic about 'balancing the books'. Additional income from more children is being double-counted. Pre-schools can *either* use income to make childcare more affordable for parents *or* to employ more highly qualified and better paid staff; they will not be able to do both. The funds released through relaxation of ratios will be inadequate to raise the qualifications, pay and status of practitioners to the level needed in order to achieve the aims set out in MGC. In addition, given that the settings which pass savings on to parents rather than investing in quality will be most attractive to poorer families, we risk children who are in *most* need of high quality provision being *less* likely to receive it.

Regulation of childcare

Some of the least discussed proposals in MGC concern the removal of the responsibility of local authorities to assess and improve the quality of the pre-school sector. The Minister cites a duplication of responsibility between Ofsted and local authorities as the reason for these proposals, and wants to see Ofsted become the sole 'arbiter' of quality in the early years.

Let us look firstly at quality *assessment*. Recent research (Mathers et al., 2012) showed that Ofsted inspections did not fully capture quality – particularly quality for children aged 2 and under - as measured by research-validated quality rating scales. The inspection framework has been revised since this research was published; and further proposals within MGC to strengthen the regulatory framework and sharpen the focus on quality are welcome. However, removing the local authority 'safety net' is high risk before we know whether Ofsted inspections are robust enough to capture quality and safeguard the health and development of our children.

Also very worrying are proposals to reduce the quality improvement role currently offered by local authorities (LAs). This may lead to a direct reduction in quality as currently local authorities do far more than simply 'inspect' quality. LAs provide a co-ordinated team of support, offering targeted training and quality improvement support

based on in-depth knowledge of each nursery, as well as support for children with additional needs (e.g. Mathers et al, 2012). In the future, settings will be tasked with improving themselves. This is a laudable aim which respects the knowledge and abilities of providers and, in time, could produce a sector-led approach to quality improvement. However, we are not there yet; and at a time when more children are entering early education provision, especially disadvantaged two year olds, removing local authority support is a huge risk. Moreover, local authority led support provides economies of scale at local level that is unlikely to be achieved when each provider is organising its own training. The Government's policy document, Supporting Families in the Foundation Years (DfE, 2011), suggested a major role for local authorities in early years provision. This excellent document suggests that local authorities should '*secure a range of high-quality provision for children and families, enable families to make informed choices and exercise greater control over services, and strategically plan services to meet local needs*'. It is difficult to see how local authorities can fulfil these current responsibilities without having a role in ensuring quality.

Finally, whilst we agree with the weight which MGC gives to 'how well adults are interacting with children', we do not agree that regulation of aspects such as floor space are 'relatively trivial' and reduce the focus on children's development. These requirements are designed to safeguard children, and deregulation coupled with increased ratios could see less space being available to very young children. Research evidence (Legendre, 2003; Olds, 2001) indicates that floor space is essential to children's physical development and wellbeing. Legendre's research, undertaken in France, found that 54 square feet (5 m²) of accessible play space per child is required to minimize children's stress levels. Previous research by Legendre (1995) also showed that access to adequate space reduces the occurrence of competition and conflicts, and promotes the development of positive interactions between children.

So where does this leave us? The Government has made bold proposals, which are in many ways very forward thinking. More Great Childcare aims for a highly qualified, professionally led workforce that can take responsibility for improving and maintaining their own quality of provision, without the need for stringent and detailed regulation. These are excellent aims; however we have grave concerns that the detailed proposals are unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes in the immediate future.

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