

Highly qualified staff at state preschools overcome private sector staffing advantage

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Better-qualified staff maintain the quality of state-funded preschools, making up for the larger number of children per staff member in comparison to private and voluntary settings, finds a new study by researchers at the University of Oxford. They also show that the quality of private early years settings can be predicted by staff qualifications, and for voluntary settings, an in-house training plan and a better staff to child ratio.

Published in *Frontiers in Education*, the researchers also compare data before and after substantial [policy](#) change in the UK between 1999 and 2014, which was aimed at increasing the uptake and improving the [quality](#) of early years [education](#) and care. It indicated that such policy changes could have powerful effects in improving preschool and nursery settings for 3 to 4 year olds, with implications for long-term child and potentially adult, well-being.

"A better staff to child ratio leads to improvements in quality, but staff qualifications and training is the most important factor," says Edward Melhuish, a Professor of Human Development at the University of Oxford. "While there is still a long way to go, the evidence suggests that the policy changes in the UK have led to higher-quality early childhood education and care."

Staff training and qualifications matter

Substantial policy changes, influenced by research highlighting the benefits of quality education and care for preschool children, have been implemented in the UK since 1999. These changes aimed to increase uptake through state-funded provision and improve the quality of teaching, the curriculum and the experiences of the child by enhancing the training and qualifications of staff.

"We wanted to understand how policy changes might affect the everyday experiences of children in ways that might benefit their long-term development," explains Prof. Melhuish. "We used observations of nearly 600 early childhood education and care settings in England and collected information on training, qualifications, ratios and other factors through staff interviews."

The researchers found that factors predicting the quality of a setting differed, depending on how they were funded and managed. Staff qualifications predicted quality at private (for profit) settings, whereas at voluntary settings, where staff qualifications were similar, a staff-training plan and lower numbers of children per staff member were linked to higher quality. State-funded settings tended to have higher quality ratings and it is thought the presence of highly qualified staff maintained this quality despite less-favorable child to staff ratios.

"Our study shows that having well-trained and qualified staff increases the quality of education and care in a child's early years. Also, better staff to child ratios mean staff can spend more time in one-to-one interaction with children and this is very beneficial," explains Prof. Melhuish.

Government policy could make a real difference

The comparison of data sets from 1998-1999 and 2014-2015, which were before and after a period of substantial policy change in the UK,

revealed that the quality of early years education and care has risen significantly over this time. It is hoped the findings from this study can provide important indications about ways that [child](#) development may be enhanced through policy change.

"The research and evidence-based policy approach in the UK has lessons for other countries, as acknowledged by international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Existing evidence would lead us to expect that these changes will have long-term benefits for the population and future economic development of the country, as economic development in the modern world is increasingly dependent on the education of the workforce."

Future work should focus on enhancing staff training, suggests Melhuish.

"There is a need to enhance [staff](#) qualifications and in-service professional development, because training on the job is so effective. So much existing [training](#) is inadequate and based on ideology rather than evidence of what actually helps children's [development](#)."

More information: Edward Melhuish et al, Structural Factors and Policy Change as Related to the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care for 3–4 Year Olds in the UK, *Frontiers in Education* (2019). [DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2019.00035](https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00035)

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