

The case for teachers in nurseries

Issue

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Headline position

Despite a commitment by the Scottish Government to 'access to a nursery teacher for every nursery age child' and considerable evidence demonstrating the long term impact of trained teachers in pre-primary settings, many local authorities are diluting or dismantling this aspect of their nursery provision.

In the interests of our pupils, and of Scotland's finances, this trend must be reversed.

Full position

If politicians are serious about early intervention to give Scotland's children the best start in life then they need to pay attention to the considerable and growing body of evidence which tells them that:

- High quality pre-primary settings have long-lasting positive effects on cognitive and behavioural outcomes for children.
- High quality establishments are defined as being, in the main, ones staffed with trained teachers and head teachers.
- The unique training and role of teachers means that they can have a specific impact for pupils which is greater than that of other groups of staff. The evidence also shows that other groups of staff improve their practice when working with teachers.
- Expenditure on high quality pre-primary experience is an evidenced spend to save policy.
- The current approach – removing or diluting the role of teachers in nurseries – is a save now, spend later policy.

We ask you to support the role of full time teachers in nursery education. The attached paper gives a fuller examination of these important issues.

Give Scotland's children the best start: invest in Nursery Education

1. Introduction

Against a backdrop of unprecedented budget cuts many local authorities are removing GTC registered teachers from nurseries or are interpreting Government commitments to provide 'access to a nursery teacher' so broadly that they will see little impact of that action.

AHDS firmly believes that the best start is an early start with education at its core. There is emphatic evidence that good quality nursery education makes a considerable difference to the life chances of our children. The evidence clearly defines good quality nursery education as involving and being led by registered teachers. We believe that this was the intention of the architects of Curriculum for Excellence – a 3-18 curriculum.

If local authorities and political parties are serious about tackling the inequalities in our society; supporting our children to be all they can be; and, delivering on long

term goals for strong economic growth and pro-social behaviour then ways must be found to invest in growing the number of qualified teachers in pre-school education.

2. Background

Scotland's pre-school sector is disparate. It comprises a range of private providers (which often have a much greater focus on care than on education), local authority pre-school provision (normally staffed and/or led by teachers), local authority extended day provision (normally staffed and led by Early years workers) and voluntary sector provision (which tends to fall somewhere between the two).

It is important to note as a starting point that there is a range of quality in all four broad categories of provision and a wide range of staffing models. This paper does not set out to argue that only teachers are capable of giving children a good early years experience (as there are a huge number of other committed and professional staff around Scotland) but that, in general, teachers forming part of the staff in a setting will tend to result in better experience for children, with improved cognitive and behavioural outcomes which are long lasting and significant.

The level of qualification, training, depth of understanding about learning and the standards expected of teachers is considerably higher than that of other staff in the pre-school sector. For teachers, training in curriculum design and implementation, child development and literacy and numeracy goes far beyond the training of other staff. This leaves nursery teachers uniquely placed to make a difference to the learning of pupils in their care and much better placed to ensure a proper transition from nursery to primary education. This is supported by substantial primary research and inspection experience.

3. The unique contribution of teachers

It can be said without doubt that qualified teachers in nurseries make for the best possible outcomes for pupils. **If Scotland wants to close the gap between its lowest and highest performing students and to improve its standing in international comparisons then it cannot afford to ignore this evidence.**

This paper could set out the thoughts and evidence put forward by considerable numbers of academics, international and domestic, who highlight the link between a high quality early years education and improved life chances/educational outcomes. It could also go into depth about the range of studies which have demonstrated that investment in high quality early years education is a spend to save policy which relieves rather than creates pressure on the public purse. However, we would like to focus on two sources of primary research which present a relevant and compelling description of the value added by teachers in nurseries – both as classroom teachers and head teachers.

4. EPPE – <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/index.htm>

The 'Effective Provision of Pre-school Education' project started work in 2007. It is the first large scale, longitudinal study into the effectiveness and impact of various types of pre-school education. The study looked at the characteristics of different kinds of early year's provision; it examined children's development in pre-school education and the influences on their later adjustment and progress. The study initially followed 3000 children from their early years, has been extended a number of

times and is now examining outcomes for those same children as they pass their sixteenth birthdays. There are various international studies which look at the same issues but are often criticised as lacking in relevance for Scotland due to cultural or system differences. We have chosen to focus on this research as it has taken place in England – a country with a very similar culture and approach to pre-school education.

We do not propose to rehearse the detail of the research in this paper but urge you to read the full report on the EPPE website. Here, we wish to highlight key findings from the research so far.

- There is a significant, positive, long-lasting effect of attending high quality pre-primary school provision.
- Children who have been involved in high quality pre-school provision demonstrate better cognitive and behavioural outcomes than those who experienced lower quality settings – these effects are long-lasting.
- A high quality setting is defined as one which has a high proportion of teachers on its staff and is preferably led by a specialist teacher.

Some supporting quotes from the EPPE reports which we feel are representative of the findings overall:

“While the research found that the most highly qualified staff also provided the most direct teaching, they were also the most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most sustained shared thinking. Further, the research found that less qualified staff were significantly better as pedagogues when they worked with qualified teachers.”

“Whilst not eliminating disadvantage, pre-school can help ameliorate the effects of social disadvantage and can provide children with a better start to school. Therefore, investing in good quality pre-school provision can be seen as an effective means of achieving targets concerning social exclusion and breaking cycles of disadvantage.”

“There is evidence of a continuing positive effect of attending higher quality or more effective pre-school settings on children’s subsequent outcomes in Mathematics and Reading at the end of Year 5, once the influence of background factors has been taken into account.

Those children who attended low quality pre-school no longer show cognitive benefits by Year 5; their results are not significantly different from the children who did not attend pre-school. This is a change in comparison to earlier findings at age 5 (the start of primary school) when all pre-school experience was found to be beneficial.”

“Overall it appears that ‘just’ attending a pre-school is not sufficient to ensure better social/behavioural development in the longer term, except for ‘Pro-social’ behaviour. However, children who attend higher quality pre-schools show the most benefits in all aspects of social development. This supports earlier findings at both entry to

primary school and in Year 1 that consistently indicate that higher pre-school quality has a positive impact on both cognitive and social/behavioural development.”

We believe that this research has been misinterpreted as saying that the higher the qualification, irrespective of what that qualification is, the better the provision for children. It is the AHDS view that appropriately/highly qualified teachers are the group who have the depth of expertise and experience to add most to a child's learning.

Further we believe that the EPPE research points towards sustained rather than peripatetic models of teacher engagement with pupils as the providing best results. We are not convinced by the argument that since the research does not say what duration of teacher input is required to make a difference that any level of engagement will do. Rather, we believe that nursery teachers need full engagement with pupils to get to know them individually if they are to properly support and develop their learning.

5. HMIE –

<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/Key%20Role%20of%20Staff.pdf>

The 2007 HMIE report “The Key Role of Staff in Providing Quality Pre-School Education” examined the impact of different types of staff following the Government's decision to remove the obligation for nursery schools to be staffed by teachers. The conclusions of the report, drawn from inspection findings in Scottish pre-school provision, were entirely in line with the EPPE findings and clearly set out the important and distinctive role and contribution of nursery teachers.

Again, we do not propose to present all aspects of the HMIE report but urge you to visit their website and read the full report. Here are some of the key findings set out in the HMIE report:

- Pre-school experience is crucial in influencing future outcomes for pupils.
- Pre-schools which employ nursery teachers tend to produce better outcomes for children.
- Local authorities should not dilute current use of nursery teachers.
- Staff in pre-school settings need to be highly qualified to properly implement CfE.

Here are some supporting quotes which we feel are representative of the full report:

“HMIE evidence found that, overall, the quality of children's experiences was of a higher standard in nursery schools and nursery classes where, traditionally, teachers were employed. Teachers, using their acquired knowledge of learners, learning, teaching and assessment, were most able to apply this expertise to ensure effective early education practice.”

“Where services are being reorganised, care should be taken not to weaken existing, effective provision, such as that found most often in nursery schools with teacher involvement, which are providing high-quality nursery education.”

“Local authorities need to ensure that, when they review the role and remit of teachers in early education, they make appropriate and effective use of the particular skills and expertise of teachers to ensure that they maintain the consistently high standard of provision and support for pre-school children’s development and progress.”

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6. Conclusions

Despite political intentions to enhance the early year’s sector in Scotland, there has been little progress in recent years. Indeed, the immediate budget pressures faced by local authorities seem to be bringing the sector back to the fore as a target for cuts rather than investment. AHDS firmly believes that investment in high quality early years education is crucial to tackle emerging social problems and to improve the life chances/educational outcomes/economic productivity of our future working population. In a tough budget climate it is easy to lose sight of the need for this long-view.

We urge you to support the role of full-time teachers in nursery education. Specifically, we would like to see the requirement for nursery teachers in nursery schools and classes to be fully reinstated. We would also like to see an increase in the number of nursery schools and classes around Scotland. We understand the Government’s commitment to a mix of different types of early years provision and would want to see nursery teachers in all these settings.

The research and inspection evidence is clear:

- Good quality pre-school provision results in better cognitive and behavioural outcomes for children.
- The effects of a good quality pre-school education are significant and long lasting.
- Benefits gained from a lower quality pre-school experience are **not** long lasting.
- The key component of a good quality pre-school education is a high proportion of trained teachers on the staff.

Teachers in nurseries provide a unique positive effect as a result of their approach and training.