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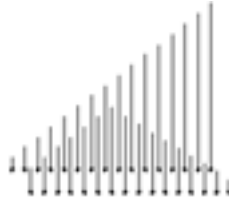
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QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION: INTRODUCTION

David Wilkinson

The National Childcare Strategy (DfEE, 1998) set out the Government's commitment to ensuring 'good quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0 to 14 in every neighbourhood'. The Government was committed to a mixed economy of childcare, and has used a mixture of demand side and supply side subsidies to stimulate and shape the childcare market. Subsidies have come in the form of the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, whilst the main supply side measure is the universal provision of free part-time early years education for 3 and 4 year-olds.

La Valle and Smith consider what the strategy has achieved in relation to early years education and what remains to be done to meet its key aim. The free entitlement has resulted in high levels of participation and a considerable increase in participation rates among groups traditionally under-represented in early years education, although children from disadvantaged backgrounds remain over-represented among those who do not attend early years education.

The part-time nature of the free entitlement has meant that it has not contributed significantly to increased maternal employment. Schemes and subsidies to support parents with younger children and to 'wrap around' the free early education also do not seem to have increased maternal employment. Many parents, particularly those from a disadvantaged background, still report difficulties, including lack of suitable and affordable places, in accessing the childcare they would need to go out to work.

Penn puts the UK position in an international context. She focuses on the quality of services in the context of a mixed economy of childcare. The standard rationale for using the private sector to deliver services is that it is more innovative, flexible and more efficient and that competition drives up quality. However, when it comes to childcare, there are concerns about for-profit providers especially in the poorest areas. Across a

number of countries, including the UK, for-profit childcare has been found to be, on average, of poorer quality than non-profit care.

The high degree of regulation in the industry limits the opportunity to make profits through efficiency gains. Often, for-profit providers do not offer increased flexibility, but restrict services and hours in order to minimise staffing requirements and maximise profits.

Quality and value for money issues are also the focus of the paper by Campbell-Barr. The paper reports on interviews with staff in local authorities and charity representatives who were involved in campaigning for or supporting early years education. Local authorities have a key role in the childcare market in terms of ensuring the adequate provision of services of sufficient quality and through supporting providers to help ensure the sustainability of a rapidly expanding market.

Some local authorities reflected that when commissioning new places the quality of services was unknown, particularly for new providers, and their focus was more on the establishment of these new places. It was not possible to discern the quality of a setting until after they had been operational for a while. More recently, when the size of the market is more stable, commissioning of new places has become more sophisticated.

The use of OFSTED grades was the principal means of assessing the quality of settings in all local authorities considered in the study. There was recognition of the need for external monitoring of the quality of the industry, but some criticisms of the system with regard to time spent inspecting settings, time between inspections and the consistency of inspections.

None of the local authorities used OFSTED data in isolation to monitor quality. Staffing and qualifications were often seen as a fundamental factor for assessing

quality, citing evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study. However, some questioned the importance of staff qualifications, citing high performance settings that were not managed by highly qualified staff. Foundation Stage Profile Assessments were also considered and many interviewees hoped that the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage would address many of their concerns.

Value for money assessments are complicated by masked and hidden costs faced by different providers. There was a feeling that funding levels were so low that early years education could not fail to offer value for money. Value assessments are also complex in terms of for whom early years education represents value: government, taxpayers, parents or providers; and in terms of what constitutes value. Much of the evidence and rationale for investment in early years education has focused on improving child outcomes, but these impacts can be long-term and are often not fully accounted for. Further outcomes, such as maternal employment and wider societal benefits from reducing inequalities are also often not fully considered.

The final paper by Hopkin, Stokes and Wilkinson considers the impact of attendance at early years education on child outcomes measured by the results of the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) assessments. Their econometric analysis uses data from the latest birth cohort study in the UK, the Millennium Cohort Study. For children in England the FSP assessments have been merged into this rich data set that allows the impact of early years education to reflect differences in child and family characteristics. Their main finding is that, despite simple data comparisons showing that children who attended early years education performed much better in their FSP assessments, most of this difference is accounted for by differences in the characteristics of the children and their families. A significant positive impact was found for children who started in early years education before age three, but little difference was found between different types of provider.

REFERENCE

Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (1998), *Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Framework and Consultation Document*, London, The Stationery Office.