

OCCASIONAL PAPER 15 - The re/constructed role of nursery schools as local community hubs in the current context of austerity

Dr Kate Hoskins, Dr Alice Bradbury and Mr Lewis Fogarty: Brunel University London

Introduction

This Occasional Paper examines the re/constructed role of nursery schools' in their local communities over the past decade. Our research explored the unique, social justice contribution that Nursery Schools make to the early years sector, in terms of educating children and supporting families from disadvantaged backgrounds. We define socio-economically disadvantaged families in our work as those whose parents are in receipt of state-provided benefits, and referred to hereafter as disadvantaged. The project focuses on Nursery Schools' roles in reducing the disadvantage gap, through an examination of how staff in these schools see their own practice as improving disadvantaged children's outcomes. The research highlights some of the policy related context for this work, which may hinder practitioners in this aim.

Our research confirmed that the role of the nursery school in supporting all children, but particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged families has expanded considerably in the past decade as a direct consequence of austerity policies.

Nursery Schools in a hostile policy context

The early years sector has been a key focus of government policy attempts to reduce the effects of socio-economic disadvantage and improve social mobility, especially during the last two decades (Social Mobility Foundation (SMF), 2017; Department for Education (DfE), 2018). The current government has made extending high quality pre-school education and childcare a priority (Hinds, 2018), with the aim of reducing gaps in attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers.

In England the early years sector is made up of both private providers (day nurseries, childminders) and state provision (nursery schools and nursery classes in primary schools). Major change came to the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector under the Labour governments of the 1990s and 2000s. The 2003 Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' moved to create Sure Start children's centres, offering a range of services in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods. Over one hundred Children's Centres, built upon McMillan's original vision of nursery schools, were providing a form of education offering nurture, physical and emotional care and, ultimately, social salvation (Palmer, 2011). Succeeding Conservative-led governments allowed the continuation of children's centres, although the removal of the ring-fence around their budget left them vulnerable to closure, along with nursery schools (Melhuish, 2016).

Within this complex sector, state-maintained Nursery Schools occupy a unique position; these are state-funded schools for children aged 2-4 years, which are disproportionately located in areas of deprivation (64% of them are in the 30% most deprived areas in England) (Early Education (EE), 2015). In recent times these schools are in decline: a third have closed since 1980 and just over 400 remain open; 'many face continual uncertainty as to their future' (EE, 2015: 1).

Nursery schools provide 4% of the free provision for 2- and 3-year-olds (DfE, 2018), and they support higher than average proportions of children with additional needs (EE, 2015), leading them to be described as a 'hidden asset' (EE, 2015). Nursery Schools are the highest rated part of the early years sector, according to The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) judgements (Ofsted, 2018), and play a 'leading role in developing the early years workforce' (EE, 2015: 1).

Due to their reputation as excellent education providers to children and staff, maintained nursery schools are described as the 'jewel in the crown of social mobility' (House of Commons Backbench Business (HSCC), January 2019). Lucy Powell MP and her colleagues claim that it is a false economy to save on funding nursery schools as it increases costs in other areas. Support for their claims come from the Yorkshire Local Authority (LA) report which set out to raise awareness of the immeasurable, or hidden value, of the maintained nursery school sector. The motivation for this report, amongst other things, was to make the case for further funding to ensure the future of nursery schools. Supplementary government funding previously worth around £60 million for nursery schools has, at the time of writing, still not been confirmed past 2019/20. Without this, the funding available for nursery schools will be significantly reduced.

The Yorkshire LA report suggests this uncertainty could lead to staff and quality reductions and potentially closure. The report is based on real-life case studies and showed that in Yorkshire alone, without its seven maintained nursery schools, the annual cost to public sector services from social care to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) could be over £1.2million. Additionally, it would mean the displacement of 924 children with a range of socio-disadvantaging factors ranging from Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) to looked after children. However, it is pertinent to keep in mind that this report reflects figures from just 1 of the 418 Local Authorities.

These warnings are supported by the work of the Health and Social Care Committee (HSCC) (2019) year when exploring

'The First 1000 days of life.' This report indicates that in real terms funding will drop by 12% between 2010 to 2021 for education and health and spending per child on benefits and on children's services will fall even further. The HSCC had called the Government to action to use the 2019 Spending Review as an opportunity to initiate the next early years revolution with long-term investment to support young families and the sector dedicated to supporting them. However, this call is as yet unanswered.

The Yorkshire LA report quotes Powell as saying 'The maintained nursery sector is increasingly accommodating children with complex, life affecting conditions, who would usually have their needs met in a specialist setting with specialist resources. The private sector cannot meet these types of needs' (HSCC, 2019: 1). The belief in the sector is clear that nursery schools can support the children most in need with high quality staff. They can also deliver bespoke, high quality teaching and learning experiences to early years practitioners from all types of settings and with differing levels of existing qualifications. This only adds to the value and uniqueness of the provisions that nursery schools currently offer.

In a 2014 survey of nursery schools, 74% of respondents were concerned about the future viability of Nursery Schools, particularly because of the unpredictability of funding (EE, 2014). Powell stated that the perfect storm now is a made up of the early years (EY) national funding formula removing a local authority's discretion to subsidise high quality nursery schools. Moreover, the 30 hours funding formula adding extra pressure on them as they have higher costs for providing to the most deprived children (HSCC, 2019).

At present, the majority of the funding for free hours for disadvantaged children is allocated to the private voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (DfE, 2018) due to the growth in the sector. However, it is important to note the overall lower quality of these settings and regional inconsistencies (Melhuish 2016; Gambaro et al, 2015; SMF, 2017). As Penn (2009) argues, social class continues to be a key influence in the early years sector. Nursery Schools are recognised for their high-quality provision and work with families in less wealthy areas. They have a vital function in alleviating disparities in educational outcomes for disadvantaged children (a key policy area for the present government), and yet their future is uncertain.

Academics and the media alike contest the current government early years funding decisions. Campbell et al (2018) suggest that subsidies for early education are concentrated disproportionately on children who least need a head start. Coupling this with new 15/30 hours funding concerns there is a fear it may be in fact widening inequalities, in direct contrast to the stated aims of the policy. Murray (2017) suggests that childcare providers were warning parents that the government's flagship 30-hour free childcare scheme was 'doomed to failure' just days before the scheme opened. These provides made it clear that the current funding arrangement was not enough. Indeed, parents' costs are

being increased as they are being charged for meals, nappies and trips just so nurseries can stay afloat.

The hostile policy context looks set to continue in England. In the current COVID-19 crisis it is as yet unclear what the government intends to do regarding the future funding available to nursery schools. The crisis has confirmed how important the ECEC sector is to working parents.

Nursery Schools' role in reducing disadvantage

Yet despite these policy challenges, nursery schools are continuing to provide disadvantaged children with a better start in life. Over time, nursery schools have been shown to have larger role in supporting children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. This is because deprived 3- and 4-year olds are more likely to have access to a teacher, an Early Years Teacher or an Early Years Professional, as a greater proportion of them are in nursery schools rather than other settings (Gambaro et al 2015).

Qualitative evidence, from Bell et al, (2005) and Roberts (2007) also suggest that nursery schools and classes are more trusted by low-income parents than other providers. This trust allows parents to go back to work and thus improve the life chances of their children. Consequently, nursery school provision can be viewed as providing opportunities that could lead to social mobility for disadvantaged children and their families.

Maintained nursery schools are more common in inner city areas, which suggests that disadvantaged children may be more likely than average to be attending these settings. It stands to reason that it may be genuinely more difficult to deliver outstanding provision in a setting where a higher percentage of children come from lower income homes. It may be unwise to expect the scant resources of playgroups and the like, especially those in working-class areas, to provide the same opportunities (Jowett & Sylva, 1986).

Research also confirms the importance of the holistic approach taken by nursery schools that encompasses the broader circumstances of children's lives (EE, 2015). This approach is endorsed by EE (2015: 3) and they make the following policy recommendations:

When commissioning children's centres, local authorities should be required to take into account the holistic needs of young children, and to prioritise the involvement of nursery schools in providing integrated services. They should explicitly take into account the social value of nursery schools with their local relationships, knowledge and embeddedness in the community.

Nursery schools are well placed to direct funding to children and families where it is most needed and to receive that support from well qualified practitioners.

The research project

To understand if and how nursery schools have significantly expanded their role in supporting children and families during

the recent period of austerity, we conducted case study research in four nursery schools located in urban and suburban areas in Greater London. In each of the four nursery schools (Buttercups, Daffodils, Hillside, The Meadows), we carried out one-to-one semi-structured interviews, which lasted up to an hour, with up to five members of staff comprised of practitioners and managers. We interviewed 17 staff in total. In the interviews we invited staff to discuss and reflect on their experiences, perceptions and understandings of the role of the nursery schools in the local community. In constructing our sample we selected four best case study examples of nursery schools. Our selection criteria included settings that have been graded as Ofsted good or outstanding nurseries in their most recent inspection. All the nursery schools are located in areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

Table one provides an overview of the staff pseudonyms and roles and the name of the nursery school they work in.

Insert table 1 here:

Supporting children

Our overall finding was that practitioner perceptions of the education and care provided by nursery schools is excellent. Every interviewee commented on the high standards the children in their care experienced on a daily basis. The level of staff qualifications coupled with low staff turnover and quality resources was frequently noted.

They've got access to such fabulous resources, not just ... the actual physical resources but the staff, you know that we are all trained ... whether they be teachers or highly qualified early years professionals. The turnover of staff isn't very high here, so of course we're developing as a team (Sasha, class teacher, pupil premium co-ordinator).

Each class has got a qualified teacher and then support staff, and we meet up as a whole staff every day, we talk about what's gone on, we talk about what the children's interests are, how we can develop... everybody sticks to that ethos, that's the way that children learn best (Karen, assistant head).

The value of experienced staff could not be underestimated. The managers spoke of their experiences in leading educated, passionate and committed teams working together in the best interests of the child:

And I always say that the practitioners are your biggest resource really, and because everyone's so knowledgeable, it enables us to work together very effectively as a team, so that the child gets the best outcome possible (Victoria, assistant head).

A sense of team spirit and collegiality permeated interviews and staff were overwhelmingly positive about working together with their colleagues. Set against this context, it is easy to see how nursery schools are the 'jewel in the crown'

of early years education. They deliver high quality holistic care to the most disadvantaged children. We found this excellent support was not only available to the children but it extended outwards to families and carers.

Supporting parents and carers

An important finding related to the support nursery schools provide to parents and carers. This support ranged from providing clothing and food to helping parents understand how to attain developmental milestones for their child.

As well as being educational, it's supporting parents... We're like their first port of call really, apart from a health visitor... or a doctor... We do have a lot of parents that come to us to say, 'how can I get them out of nappies?' or 'They don't eat, they won't sleep, how can I do this?' So we do courses. We've just done a sleep course to help, so we can go back to those parents and support them (Kim, nursery nurse).

Staff perceive that they are providing this level of support because interactions with nursery schools are the first forms of support available to many families in receipt of some form of welfare benefits. They had encountered families struggling to cope with a wide range of medical, behavioural and socio-economic issues. From speech development delays to a spectrum of special education needs (SEN), parents are using nursery schools as a first opportunity to access state support.

We are very much sort of the starting point for a lot of families. For a lot of them, this is their first point of call with any outside agencies or having to leave their children for the first time. So a lot of the parents, you know, it's their first experience of meeting professionals and having that point of contact... We have lots of links to lots of agencies, and particularly in my role as SEN co-ordinator, redirecting children and families to where they might get additional support for any additional needs that they may have, anything like that really (Naomi, class teacher & SEN co-ordinator).

We can signpost parents to EPs (educational psychologists) or to what groups are running, and we know the Children's Centre run some groups specifically for childminders... and parents who we might feel need a parenting course, we've got Family Friends on site, so there's lots of things that we can call on here (Betty, practitioner).

Particularly for some of our parents, it's the parents who need just as much as the children do. For some of them of course, this is their first time of leaving their children, having somebody just to talk to about, whether it be toilet training, about whether it's behaviour, whether ... just little things that they just need you for, not just ... providing the care and education for the children, that we are very much here for our parents, for our families, for everyone (Sasha, practitioner).

Staff cited funding tensions as a reason for changes to their role in providing increasing support to disadvantaged children and their families. Several practitioners commented on the reduction in welfare support, particularly benefit, as a driver to the expansion of nursery schools' role.

Despite these challenges facing families, in all of the nursery schools we visited we encountered extremely committed, professional and passionate staff who are making a marked difference to the children, families and communities they support. As James (head teacher) pointed out:

Sometimes being in an environment like this you know is really powerful and life-changing for parents. And their kid is doing well, despite all of the difficulties they're facing.

Supporting staff

Staff training and development was in abundance in all four settings. The nursery schools visited were providers and leaders in staff education and development. An array of additional courses were accessible to practitioners. These courses were focused and relevant to their particular areas of responsibility and personal interest. These included co-ordinators responsible for special educational needs (SEN), speech and language therapy, English as an additional language (EAL) and pupil premium, to name a few. Managers encouraged staff to regularly access training to keep up with ever changing early years policy demands and to meet the varied and growing needs of the children.

All the case study nursery schools regularly provided training to enhance practice. Continuing to invest in already experienced staff was viewed as important; 'the staff have got a lot of skills because we've got a lot of experienced staff, but you can always develop them' (Linda, Daffodils). The training typically followed the interests of staff themselves.

In terms of professional development, if there's something that one of us hears about and we would like more information about it, we always are able to ask if we can do any particular type of training. I'm currently doing the Forest School training at the moment because I've noticed what an impact it has on the children here who were currently doing it, and I really wanted to be part of that. And also to have the ability to share our own passions with the children as well (Andrew, practitioner).

Allowing staff input and influence over their training goals and broader career development provided staff with a sense of professional autonomy. We also encountered loyal staff, several of whom had spent many years working in their nursery school, partly because of the staff development they could access.

Nursery schools in England tend to operate as training hubs to other local early years staff working in the private sector and other parts of the state sector. This function of nursery schools contributes to their position as the 'jewel in the crown'. In the case of Daffodils, training programmes had been provided to local and international staff:

We also do training ourselves... one of them is the outstanding teaching course, which staff from all over London have signed up for and booked in for. And we offer one of those days here. And we lead it ourselves alongside one member of staff from the teaching school. And we get lots of people coming from outside of London. We get international visitors as well, so we had visitors from China, we had visitors from Sweden, you know all over really.

Our data highlighted the important contribution made by nursery schools to the training and development of their own staff and those in other local, national and international early years settings. This value-added dimension of nursery school's remit only strengthens the justification for further funding to be made available to secure the future of the provision.

Conclusion

A key aspect of the current hostile policy context is due to the exponential rise in austerity policies over the past decade. Nursery Schools have been impacted by the shrinking welfare state in England. The reduction in funding for all areas of the welfare state has led to significant contraction, especially in housing and benefits for families out of work or struggling to make ends meet. The role of nursery schools in their local communities has expanded in the past decade to fill gaps in welfare provision in England. They now provide substantial assistance to children and families including medical, behavioural and socio-economic support.

Nursery schools have an important role to play to enable all children to have a chance to be ready for school when they enter Reception. The role of the nursery school in supporting all children, but particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged families, has expanded in the past decade as a direct consequence of austerity policies. It is inexcusable that the most vulnerable children in British society are most at risk at being disadvantaged by a hostile policy landscape. The current funding uncertainty facing nursery schools in England is counterproductive and socially unjust for a 'frontline service' that can fundamentally reduce the effects of disadvantage, particularly for children living in poverty and those with SEN.

The sector in England is very mixed, and this combination of state and private funding and provision creates a specific context for policy aimed at helping disadvantaged children. We need research to ask similar questions about the early years sector more broadly, related to how it functions as a driver for greater equality, or otherwise.

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