

The Editors,
The Sunday Times

'Playtime is over for Britain's nurseries' (27.1.13)

We were very disheartened to read the article 'Playtime is over for Britain's nurseries' (27.1.13) for a number of reasons. In reporting Elizabeth Truss's planned changes, it failed to put them into the context of recent workforce development. Since 2006, there has been an increase in graduate leadership in early years and increasing proportions of staff with level 3 (A level equivalent) qualifications. Although further development is still required, progress has already been made in improving quality in children's early years' experiences^{1 2}. However, it appears that these improvements to quality are now threatened by reducing adult to child ratios.

Reductions in ratios of staff to babies and toddlers are ill-advised. Research has shown that within the same types of early years provision, quality falls as ratios rise^{3 4}. This is particularly important with regard to the care and education (which are intrinsically linked) of babies and toddlers. Years of research and practice development have shown that babies' and toddlers' development is best fostered by closely responsive interaction and warm relationships with adults. Clearly, this will be more difficult to maintain if staff are responsible for more children. Keeping up contingently responsive conversations with six two-year-olds while taking care of their toileting needs and settling them as they separate from their parents will inevitably mean less individual attention per child. We cannot afford to jeopardise young children's development and wellbeing.

The table showing comparative ratios for Britain and other countries was misleading with only the smallest print revealing that comparisons were between ratios for babies under 2 (Britain) with children under 6 (Portugal) or under 7 (Sweden), by which age British children have been in formal schooling for up to two years with far higher ratios, unlike their peers in most other countries.

Elizabeth Truss emphasises that nursery staff educate as well as care for children, a view that has long been shared by the sector. However, the association between early years' education and, as phrased in the article, 'being taught reading and maths at a younger age' is completely erroneous, indicating a worrying lack of understanding of early years' pedagogy and early childhood development. Research has convincingly established that earlier and more formal is not better⁵. Britain already has one of the earliest ages of entry to formal schooling in the world, with some of the early learning goals for five-year-olds suggested to be unreasonable⁶.

When looking to other countries for inspiration, we urge Elizabeth Truss to look more closely at those with a reputation for excellent early years care and education: Sweden, Norway and Denmark. We support change that is in the best interests of young children. Ultimately that will be in the best interests of the country. The changes outlined in the article are not.

Dr Jane Payler

Chair, TACTYC: Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators

Senior Lecturer in Early Years Education,
Faculty of Education, Health and Social Care,

University of Winchester,
West Hill, Winchester,
Hants, SO22 4NR
Tel: 01962 827220

¹ Mathers, S. *et al.* (2011) *Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund Final Report*. DfE Research Report DFE-RR144.

² Hadfield *et al.* (2012) *Longitudinal Study of Early Years Professional Status*. Available online at <http://www.cedare-reports.co.uk/eyps/index.php>.

³ Mathers, S., Sylva, K. & Joshi, H. (2007) *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millenium Cohort Study*. DfES Research Report SSU/2007/FR/ 025.

⁴ Munton, T., Barclay, L., Mallardo, M. R. & Barreau, S. (2002) *Research on Ratios, Group Size and Staff Qualifications and Training in Early Years and Childcare Settings*. DfES Research Report RR320.

⁵ Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool study through age 40*. (Monographs of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 14). Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press. Available online at <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>.

⁶ TES (2009) *Early years foundation stage: 1 in 3 staff says literacy goals too high*. . Available online at <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6020392>.