

OCCASIONAL PAPER 6 – Staff perspectives on working with two-year-olds: preparation, support and working together

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Introduction

From September 2013 free early education was provided in England for the 20% most disadvantaged two-year-olds, extended to around 40% of two-year-olds in September 2014. This initiative reflects Government interest in early intervention both to compensate for disadvantage, and to identify and intervene to address possible special educational needs. The places are offered by a mixed economy of providers across the non-maintained and maintained sector.

We carried out a study, commissioned by TACTYC, to find out how the early years workforce was responding to this funding initiative (Georgeson et al., 2014a, 2014b) and this paper is based on some of our findings. The study included a review of the literature, interviews with 13 key informants, a national survey of 509 managers and practitioners and 11 case studies of a range of early years settings to find out about what was happening on the ground. Full details of our methods and samples can be found in the two reports, but it should be stressed that our participants tended to be better qualified and more experienced than would have been expected from a representative sample of early years practitioners. In sharing here the responses of survey respondents and experiences of staff observed and interviewed in settings, we are therefore offering snapshots of provision for funded two-year-olds from people likely to be among the most proactive, confident and motivated of practitioners.

Perspectives on quality for two-year-olds in early childhood settings

Recent reviews of literature on work with children under three (Dalli et al., 2011; Dalli, 2014; Mathers et al., 2014) have indicated the importance of stable relationships and interactions with sensitive and responsive adults, play-based activities and routines, support for communication and language and opportunities to move and be physically active. These reviews also highlight the importance of structural considerations like adult-child ratios and level of staff qualification in relation to quality of provision for younger children, while also considering how these factors combine with contextual characteristics such as setting ethos (Alvestad, 2014).

Our respondents certainly echoed these themes in their discussion of work with two-year-olds, while also reflecting the broader interpretation of relational pedagogy adopted by Dalli in her review (Dalli, 2014:3). Respondents commented that not only is it important that practitioners establish warm and trusting relationships with the children in their care, but many also emphasized the importance of relationships with

parents and a genuine understanding of the needs of the local community.

The people we spoke to in our study confirmed the strong message from the literature that understandings about 'quality' in provision for two-year-olds are complex; while there was widespread agreement about the central importance of the workforce in determining quality, discussions about what makes practitioners 'good with two-year-olds' revealed a complex interplay between dispositions, qualifications and experience. In this paper we would like to raise some of the factors that contribute to this complexity.

Preparation

Initial qualifications.

Just over three quarters (76%) of survey respondents reported that their initial qualifications had prepared them very well for working with children from birth to five. There was evidence, however, of some shortcomings in terms of acquiring more specialist knowledge and skills; less than half of survey respondents felt very well-prepared by their initial training specifically for working with two-year-olds, for working with children with additional needs, for engaging and supporting families or for multi-agency working. Our findings suggest that more could be done to provide the foundations of knowledge and understanding in these essential areas.

Turning to the level of qualifications needed for work with two-year-olds, we found a general consensus among the managers and staff we contacted in settings that a 'good level 3 practitioner' was needed for day-to-day work with two-year-olds. Survey respondents did not consider graduate-led provision as a priority for this age group either, selecting instead experience of working with two-year-olds, adult-child ratios of 1:4 or better and an overall well-qualified staff (more than 75% qualified to level 3) as the most helpful features of settings to meet the needs of two-year-olds. Leaders and managers of group settings responding to the survey reported that 82% of their staff working with two-year-olds were indeed qualified to Level 3.

However, comments from managers in settings and key informant interviews revealed that there are no straightforward answers to questions about the appropriate level of qualification for work with two-year-olds. Among these respondents there was clear recognition of the value of degree-level study to deepen understanding and develop reflective practice; a relevant degree also offered opportunities to build up knowledge in areas such as child development, something that both survey respondents and staff in settings identified as

necessary for working with two-year-olds. Many participants also gave strong messages about ensuring that vocational qualifications and assessment procedures are robust and fit for purpose; managers were particularly concerned about the adequacy of procedures for the Level 3 qualifications that were current at the time of the study.

Dispositions

In spite of widespread endorsement of the importance of 'overall well-qualified staff', it became clear that possession of a recognized qualification was not enough by itself; our respondents indicated that more was needed if practitioners were going to be working with the children and families accessing funded places for two-year-olds. Key informants talked about a set of skills extending beyond formal qualifications, and that work with young children requires particular dispositions most of which are concerned with emotions. Similarly, the first thing mentioned in managers' responses to our questions about what was needed to work with two-year-olds was patience: this meant waiting for children's responses, allowing plenty of time for children to carry out tasks and not getting irritated at having to repeat actions and activities. Although most practitioners could perhaps learn such skills in time, there was also the suggestion that some practitioners naturally possessed a calmness – "being generally laid-back", as one practitioner put it – which helped them cope with working with two-year-olds. Other dispositional characteristics identified as valuable for working with two-year-olds included sensitivity and the capacity to empathize, both with children and with their parents.

Experience

The frequency with which 'experience of working with two-year-olds' was selected by survey respondents, together with high ratings for 'good quality practical placements when training' indicated that practical experience was considered as important preparation for work with two-year-olds. Managers also talked about practitioners' experience when they were making decisions about appointing staff to work with funded two-year-olds, underlining the importance attributed to having already worked with this age group.

Managers indicated that experience working with families encountering difficulties offered good preparation for work with funded two-year-olds. Survey respondents also acknowledged the importance of working with families, selecting 'partnership with parents' as the second most critical component overall in quality for two-year-olds. They also rated highly the importance of staff who are skilled in engaging and supporting families, in enabling settings to meet the needs of two-year-olds. This was not, however, something that had always been covered well during initial qualifications; out of the 195 survey respondents who reported working with funded two-year-olds, just over a fifth felt their initial qualification had only prepared them 'somewhat' or 'not at all' to engage and support families. It is perhaps not always easy for students on placement to work with parents, but our findings suggest that more opportunities should be created within initial qualifications to offer preparation in this area.

Support in practice

Despite reservations about how well they had been prepared during initial qualifications, survey respondents working with funded two-year-olds were on the whole confident in their abilities to meet the general needs of two-year-olds and their families, with 90% or more reporting that they felt confident or very confident. This increase in confidence shows that, once in post, there are ways for practitioners to build on what they have learned on their courses to develop their knowledge and skills.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

The settings that we contacted all had a strong ethos of ongoing professional development for their staff. Practitioners we spoke to during the study generally expressed great enthusiasm for training; this was practitioners' most frequently mentioned wish for the future. As well as informal in-house training, some managers arranged on-site training delivered by training providers, but most settings made use of training offered by their local authorities. Budgetary constraints, coupled with the desire to support local practitioners into work, meant that settings were developing the practitioners already in post or 'growing their own', rather than employing more highly qualified staff.

Online survey respondents reported high levels of recent attendance at continuing professional development relevant to meeting the needs of two-year-olds, with the majority (89%) having experienced some relevant training within the last five years. However a sizeable minority had accessed either no, or minimal, recent CPD in key areas, including developing language and communication, supporting and engaging families, supporting specific needs (e.g. autism) and the two-year progress check. This is significant when we remember that our respondents are likely to be the most pro-active and motivated of practitioners, working within the highest quality settings. CPD participation rates were often much lower among practitioners from the (relatively small) sample of settings in the survey graded as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'. Although the number of such settings within the survey sample was small, this nonetheless indicates a need to ensure that settings with low Ofsted grades have access to – and are accessing – CPD opportunities.

Informal strategies

Many respondents felt that less experienced staff working directly with two-year-olds would need access to expert support, for example from a graduate or a SENCo, or from working alongside more experienced practitioners who explicitly recognised the importance of modelling good practice. Observations during case studies showed experienced staff supporting children through skilled and sensitive anticipation and response, maintaining a balance between offering two-year-olds support and independence. In settings with a strong ethos of lifelong learning, offering places for funded two-year-olds was viewed as another opportunity for staff development:

The two-year-olds offer has been a good thing; it has

brought out the best in the practitioners as they've had to look a little bit further. It has brought out better qualities in the staff.

Working together

Our conversations with managers and practitioners revealed that it is important to look carefully at the whole team to understand how two-year-old children are being supported, both within and beyond the setting.

Within the setting

Managers used their knowledge of the way staff worked with different age groups to place practitioners and ensure a balance of age and experience among staff working with two-year-olds. Settings employed different mixtures of graduate, level 2, 3 and 4 staff, with some unqualified staff, to work with two-year-olds, often drawing in less well-qualified practitioners from the local community to build connections with families in the neighbourhood. One manager explained how the different staff worked as a team:

So we have NNEB trained staff, we have NVQ 3 trained staff, we have a teacher, we have TAs who are not trained but have got experience. So that is our team. We work hopefully as a team and you build on people's strengths. So the people who are more theory based you can bounce off with the people who are more practical based so we learn from each other. I think that's the key.

Working through challenging experiences as a staff team helped settings to come up with solutions – and to put in place clear recommendations, for example, that future admission of two-year-olds should be staggered to ease their transition into the nursery.

A school-based setting assembled their team to support work with two-year-olds in a different way: an experienced level 3 practitioner from a children's centre was to be room leader for the two-year-olds, with two other level 3 practitioners and two apprentices from the local college, one of whom would be working towards level two and one towards level 3. The nursery teacher had planned her timetable so that she had time out of the nursery each week to support the new room leader.

Elsewhere managers pointed to the importance of their key person system to ensure that there was someone on the staff who really knew the individual child and the family and could plan for that child.

Further evidence of a team approach could be found in the way in which staff other than managers took responsibility for aspects of practice, displaying 'leadership from within'; for example, a junior practitioner made sure she reminded other members of staff that two-year-olds cannot necessarily manage to sit through story time.

Beyond the setting

The settings that we visited were generally 'outward-facing'; this was evident in their enthusiasm for training, which was usually provided off-site and offered

opportunities for networking, particularly if other agencies were involved in training or being trained. Settings also took advantage of other opportunities for networking such as local support networks for Early Years Professionals (EYPs) and SENCOs.

For settings with previous experience of work with disadvantaged families, the complexity and skillfulness involved in engaging and supporting families of funded two-year-olds, many of whom were experiencing disadvantage, was not unexpected; nonetheless the scale of support and the extra time needed to work together did come as a surprise. Managers certainly felt their settings should be doing this kind of work, but that they needed more resources to do so. Interagency working was not yet fully embedded and several settings had met with a number of practical difficulties in establishing and maintaining connections with professionals from other agencies. Among respondents to the online survey, interagency working was not as highly valued as other dimensions of practice. Further support is needed in this area to build on the creative beginnings being trialled in a number of local authority areas, and ensure that inter-professional working becomes an everyday reality rather than an ideal.

Problems with procedures

The relative newness of the funded two-year-old offer meant that in some instances practitioners were experiencing difficulties with the current system. As well as problems arising in some areas because of a shortfall in places, there were other concerns such as the ways in which families were being identified, how funding was being allocated and the quality criteria used to allocate funding. One school-based setting identified particular difficulties in how the funding was being administered. The manager reported that the setting had been allocated funding and told that it was for ten children, but was not told which ten, when the setting had submitted funding applications for more than ten children.

Provision of places has been focused on settings that received a 'good' or 'outstanding' judgment in their last Ofsted inspection, and this can create difficulties because of the delay between inspections. Settings, which might have responded fully to the points which brought their judgment down to 'satisfactory' and which might therefore be able to offer good quality provision for two-year-olds, have in some cases not been included in local procedures for administering the two-years-olds offer while they await their next inspection. One such setting had been advised to ask each parent who applies for a place to write a letter to the local authority and the local authority would then decide whether to approve the provider before offering a place. Writing letters to local authorities does not, however, come easily to every parent, and so procedures put in place to ensure that placements are of sufficient quality could therefore potentially be deterring the very parents who might particularly benefit from a funded place.

Some practitioners also reported finding themselves in awkward situations with parents as a result of additional benefits made available to the children who were

accessing funded places. Two settings reported that children who had been able to access the funded entitlement were also offered additional benefits, one of which was a book bag. The bag contained resources and the family could collect it from a local children's centre and take it home. Settings were asked to pass on letters regarding the book bags to families receiving funded places. This put the practitioners in a difficult position when parents who were not receiving funding enquired about the letters that were being handed out. Given how hard practitioners work to form relationships with all families, small local inequalities such as restrictions on distribution of 'goody bags' can jeopardise these relationships.

Concluding thoughts

Key informants and managers and practitioners in settings emphasized the importance of high quality and relevant opportunities for CPD and on-the-job learning to develop knowledge and skills. Their responses highlight the need for continued efforts to provide:

- high quality placements and supervised practice during initial training;
- effective on-the-job supervision and mentoring;
- targeted CPD and financial support for practitioners to take part in it.

Through talking to staff in settings, we have learnt about the successes, challenges, demands on time, skill, commitment and experience inherent in engaging and supporting families and young children experiencing disadvantage and/or with specific needs; practitioners responding to our online survey, however, reported feeling least confident in this area. Adequate and appropriate training specifically designed for early years practitioners working with families with complex needs is therefore essential.

Successful workforce development will require top-down input from central and local government, including effective policy and funding to develop supportive frameworks, and strategies to ensure the availability and affordability of good quality CPD in the areas identified here. However, it will also require a firm commitment from across the whole sector to an ethos of professional development and lifelong learning.

Responses to the online survey and our observations and conversations with managers, practitioners and strategists involved in provision for funded two-year-olds have encouraged us to think beyond the simple structural issues of ratios and qualifications that can dominate discussions of quality. Practitioners follow different career pathways into work with two-year-olds; some just seem to be 'naturals', others build up extensive experience of working with young children and their families, while others have opportunities to study child development or the sociology of childhood. Some practitioners might even fall into all three categories. These characteristics - dispositions, experience and education/training - all contribute in different ways to being able to offer sensitive support for learning - what Sajaniemi et al. (2014) call 'pedagogic sensitivity' - for

children in the early stages of verbal communication, and for families who might be experiencing complex difficulties. Along with Sajaniemi, we have looked beyond the qualities of individual practitioners, to the ways in which staff in settings work together to meet the needs of children experiencing disadvantage - the 'systematic sensitivity' which Sajaniemi et al. propose is needed to regulate stress levels both for staff and children in preschool settings (Sajaniemi et al., 2014). Such all-pervading sensitivity was evident in settings with an ethos of care based on everyone developing awareness of everyone else's needs, including the needs of all staff and parents and carers and including the transmission of these values to children so that they develop an understanding of the needs of other children, including those who are younger than themselves or who might be experiencing difficulties.

The two-year-old offer asks a lot of from early years practitioners, but settings and practitioners are working hard to provide for them, including those taking two-year-olds for the first time. Settings are working very quickly and effectively to adapt their practice and provision to meet this new challenge; the consequent demands on time and resources, however, need to be recognised.

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