

Educating the early years



The interim report into the state of our sector's training and qualifications is out, but there are still questions left to answer, reflects **June O'Sullivan...**

findoutmore

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Children only get their early years once and this is the age and stage we have the greatest influence over and will make the greatest difference to their future lives and wellbeing

PROFESSOR CATHY NUTBROWN

This is a theme that runs throughout Professor Cathy Nutbrown's interim report as she struggles to bring coherence to a range of issues regarding status, professionalism, qualifications and relevant training across the early years sector. She reflects the feedback she received throughout her report, which demands that in order to give young children the care and education they deserve, we need staff with the right skills, knowledge, and an understanding of child development and how children learn.

Despite the complexity of the issue, Professor Nutbrown manages to keep a positive tone as she attempts to understand the confusion arising from the 445 different qualifications, including higher education qualifications, of which 223 are regarded as "full and relevant", still operating across the early years sector. This situation reflects the spectacular growth of the industry since the 1990s, which initially responded to Government demands to create more childcare to help parents return to work and has since recognised the benefits of good quality care and education for all through the growing collection of developmental and neuro-scientific research.

Policy which supports the early years sector continues apace (for good or ill) in the form of the free offer of education for three- and four-year-olds, as well as the current plan to give free childcare, education and family support to those 40 per cent of two-year-olds, or 260,000 children, who live in disadvantaged and poor neighbourhoods. Such changes reinforce the need to have a workforce fit for purpose with the ability to train and develop staff to cope with change.

The report was focused around three questions:

- What are people studying, is it what's needed, and what needs to change?
- Can we ensure the quality of teaching and learning for those on early education and childcare courses?
- How do we attract and recruit the right people into the sector?

Some of the comments and findings were unsurprising: the nostalgia for the old NNEB as the gold standard in qualification with its longer completion time and demand on observations; the lack of child development and theories of learning in the current diploma; the general concern about lack of rigour, variation in quality in some training establishments; and the limited literacy and numeracy skills of staff which hampers their abilities – all, leading to poor calibre staff and resulting in employers having to re-train many staff at work. Professor Nutbrown talks about the hair or care pathway for students, which reinforces the 'nice but dim' stereotype and leads to our low status, a point highlighted in a small but telling survey conducted by Netmums (right), which asked parents to rank the status of nursery staff relative to other professions.

In terms of what people wanted in qualifications, there were areas of broad agreement: 83 per cent wanted child development, while 39 per cent wanted a focus on communication skills. Significant support was also given for a thorough knowledge of the EYFS and other legislation (29 per cent); child protection and safeguarding (27 per cent); stimulation and learning

development skills (26 per cent); engaging parents in their child's early learning (22 per cent); and observation skills (21 per cent). No surprises there.

Professor Nutbrown's conclusion takes the form of the next set of questions:

- What progression routes do all members of the sector need?
- Is there a strong case for introducing an early years initial teacher education route, and how might the practical obstacles be addressed?
- Is there a case for a licensing system, and what model might be best?

I suspect the call for evidence has gone out and we have until June to reply. So, make democracy work and engage and respond and influence. Whatever comes, we will be doing it. It might as well be something you want!

Survey into job status

- 1 CASUALTY NURSE
- 2 SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER
- 3 PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER
- 4 VET
- 5 HEALTH VISITOR
- 6 NURSERY SCHOOL WORKER
- 7 WEB DESIGNER
- 8 CHILDMINDER
- 9 NANNY OR AU PAIR
- 10 CLEANER