

# What matters in education? Briefing note #4

## Investing in the early years: Priorities and challenges

### Introduction

The fourth seminar in the **What Matters in Education?** panel discussion series focused on the important topic of the early years. The UK government's latest policy on childcare will see more parents offered free access to provision from April 2024 with the intention of helping them stay in work (HM Treasury 2023). However, the increasing demand for affordable childcare services is happening in a socio-economic landscape marked by a cost of living crisis and rising levels of child poverty.

### Key questions for the debate

How to ensure that sustainable and high-quality early years provision is accessible to all.

How to build early years provision that puts children's flourishing at its heart.

How to value, support and appropriately reward those working in the sector.

### A summary of the panel discussion

Opening topics	Speakers
For a democratic, integrated and public early childhood education: the case for systemic transformation	<b>Peter Moss</b> , Professor Emeritus at Thomas Corman Research Unit, UCL
Investing in the parents and caregivers of young children: a global priority.	<b>Sarah Klaus</b> , Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development
Protecting children and their childhoods	<b>Christine Parker</b> , Researcher and Writer in Early Childhood
Valuing the early years workforce	<b>Neil Leitch</b> , CEO, Early Years Alliance

Panel discussion chairs : **Dr Becky Taylor**, Head of Impact and Engagement at IOE; **Professor Lynn Ang**, IOE Pro-Director and Vice-Dean Research and **Professor Gemma Moss**, Director of the ESRC Education Research Programme.



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# What we heard: key challenges for early years provision

## Provision is fragmentary and lacks crucial investment:

- Globally, 40% of children under 5 lack access to childcare.
- Nationally there is no coherent vision for early childhood, education, and care.
- Privatisation and marketisation have exacerbated the divide between those who can pay and those who cannot.

## Quality early years provision depends upon:

- Maintaining the distinctive quality of early years by respecting children's rights to play, to be seen and to belong.
- Making central caring relations and an ethic of care.
- Involving educators, parents and the community in shaping the lives of young children.
- Recognising the value of both universal and specialised provision.

## Valuing the early years workforce:

- The lack of status given to the early years workforce is reflected in low pay and few opportunities for professional development.
- Educators with substantial responsibilities for children at the most important point of their lives feel underpaid, undervalued and exhausted.
- That impacts on staff retention and recruitment.
- A high-quality service cannot be provided on the cheap.
- Graduate level qualifications and good prospects of professional development should be part of a properly paid sector.

These issues are particularly urgent in the global south.

## Questions the audience raised

- How can universities help raise the status of an early years workforce?
- What does the lack of respect for care and care workers tell us about our culture and our society?
- What should the priorities be for research in the early years?
- How can we harness parent and carer power to make meaningful change happen?

*Note: Selected questions have been edited for brevity.*

## Ways forward

The panellists agreed that a wholesale review of early years provision is required if things are to be put right. Policy, research and practitioners can gain from working with each other on the following issues,

## Policy

**Make the value of high-quality early years provision central to the investment decisions made.**

- Put children at the centre of early years policy.
- Develop funding models that support coherent provision for children and families including children with additional needs.
- Borrow from the best – Sweden has a universal, integrated public system of early chartered education that helps both parents and children to thrive.
- Settle on a long-term strategy for early years provision that won't be subject to political change.
- Support the shift in global policy from helping children survive to ensuring children thrive.



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## Research

### Work with others to change the policy agenda:

- Research on the return on human capital investment in the early years makes clear its value yet politicians do not act on this evidence. Join with others to make a louder noise.
- Conduct research into neglected questions:
  - What are the impacts of a privatised and marketized nursery system on child development and social inequalities?
  - Is it desirable to create a much more gender- mixed workforce?
  - What are the benefits of intergenerational care settings that mix the elderly and young children?
  - Are there different ways of involving parents in early care settings?
- Keep universities involved in the professional development of the sector.

## Practice and provision

### Build the sector's knowledge base and its distinctive values

- Acknowledge the difficult time the sector faces and campaign with others to change this.
- Keep a strong emphasis on CPD, including working to release staff for professional development.
- Celebrate the distinctive contribution early years provision makes to child development and to the wider society.

## In brief

The early years sector is in urgent need of a wholesale review. To enable the contribution early years provision brings to child development, to families and to the wider society to be realised, it needs a coordinated funding system that will put it onto a more sustainable basis.

## References

To find out more about the issues discussed, follow these links:

[UN Committee on the Rights of the Child](#)  
[Nuffield Foundation, \*Changing Face of Early Childhood in Britain\*](#)  
[Peter Moss, \*Early childhood in England: time for a real transformation\*](#)  
[Royal Foundation Business Task Force for Early Childhood](#)

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Author: Elizabeth Hudson

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