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Continuing Professional Development of Early Years Managers and Practitioners working with Children under 3 years of age

Executive Summary

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Disclaimer

The findings and recommendations of this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Learning and Teaching Scotland.

This document represents a summary of the findings and the full report can be obtained from Learning and Teaching Scotland on request.

Members of the research team

The research was carried out by staff from the Faculty of Education in the University of Strathclyde. The principal investigator was Professor Rae Condie of the Department of Educational and Professional Studies. The key researchers were Jacqu e Fee, Assistant Director within the Childhood and Families Research and Development Centre; Jackie Henry, lecturer and member of the Early Years team in the Department of Childhood and Primary Studies; and Liz Seagraves, Senior Researcher in the Department of Educational and Professional Studies.

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The Faculty of Education at the University of Strathclyde was commissioned by Learning and Teaching Scotland to undertake research into the continuing professional development provision (CPD) for early years practitioners and managers across Scotland, specifically focusing on provision for those working with children under 3 years of age. The aim of the research was to identify ways in which those working in early years centres might be better supported through effective CPD opportunities, designed to meet the needs of children and their families. The research was carried out between April and September 2008.

2. Context

This research into CPD provision for those working with children under 3 years of age was undertaken in the context of the National Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce (Scottish Executive, 2006) and the Scottish Parliamentary response (2006) which emphasised that:

'the area which requires most urgent investment is improving the skills level of the workforce, and that although further investment is required in the 3-5 sector, the under 3 sector is the most immediate priority' (SPEC, 2006, para 16).

The findings of the research are interpreted in the light of the Standard for Childcare Practice (QAA, 2007) and the more recently published Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2008). The Early Years Framework defines early years as pre-birth to 8 years, though it highlights the need for 'a renewed focus on 0-3' (p5).

3. Research aims and objectives

This research was commissioned to determine developments in the provision of CPD for those working in early years centres and, more specifically, to:

1. undertake a review of the relevant existing information on the CPD needs of staff working with very young children (birth to 3), including reports from the Care Commission and other sources, and to include a discussion on definitions of CPD;

2. compare and contrast the perspectives of early years practitioners, centre managers and appropriate local authority officers, in the following areas:
 - definitions of CPD and their perceptions of effective CPD
 - areas of birth to 3 years work where CPD is undertaken and is considered to be effective for early years practitioners and managers
 - gaps that exist in current provision for CPD for early years practitioners and managers
 - priorities for CPD for early years practitioners and managers
 - effective and preferred types of CPD for early years practitioners and managers
 - effective and preferred systems of the delivery of CPD for early years practitioners and managers
 - access and barriers to participation in CPD for early years practitioners and managers
 - qualifications obtained and perceived usefulness in preparation for their roles;
3. measure the extent to which the national birth to 3 guidance document and the staff support pack are used and to explore the ways in which these documents are used by each of the three stakeholder groups (practitioners, managers and local authority officials);
4. identify examples of good practice.

4. Research Methods

The research was undertaken using documentary analysis and literature review, followed by two phases of evidence gathering from local authority officers, practitioners and their managers.

The first phase consisted of a survey of local authority officers with responsibility for children under 3 years of age, centre managers and practitioners from local authority centres and local authority partner providers from the private and voluntary/not-for-profit sectors.¹ Surveys were sent to all centres that made provision for children under 3 years of age in 20 local authorities, selected to represent a range of rural, urban and city contexts, and size, determined in terms of the number of centres within the authority. Twenty-seven local authority (LA) officers returned completed questionnaires, as did 340 practitioners and 122 centre managers. A total of 171 centres were represented in the survey (39% of the centres targeted).

The second phase of data gathering involved interviews in 3 local authorities including local authority officers, centre managers, practitioners and, in some cases, parents. A total of 9 centres were visited: 5 local authority centres, 2

¹ The focus of the study was on local authority run and partner provider run centres: namely, private and voluntary childcare centres that have partnership agreements with local authorities for provision for children between the ages of 3 and 5. No partnership agreements exist for provision for children under 3 years of age.

private partner centres and 2 voluntary partner centres. Additionally, interviews were undertaken with local authority officers where there were substantial remote and rural communities.

5. Key findings and recommendations

The findings of this research indicate the need for particular attention to be given to those working with children under 3 years of age.

1. The Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce and wider literature identify that historically the status of early years workers has been low compared with those working in the other education sectors. This study shows that while managers and practitioners were, on the whole, positive about the CPD they had experienced, opportunities that directly addressed the needs of those working with children under 3 were limited and support for many topics directly addressing working with this age group was not adequate. While the current emphasis on up-skilling of early years workers has been accepted by many practitioners, concerns were expressed regarding the implementation of the new Standards and Framework. Some authorities have given priority to the needs of those working with children under 3, but in many cases, both at authority and centre level, there was no clear focus on the needs of this group as distinct from older children.

- *It is recommended that an Early Years (birth to 3) 'Champion' be appointed at national level, with the remit to promote the profile of those working with the youngest children and to lead in the ongoing development of a coherent and co-ordinated programme of pre-service and continuing development in line with the Scottish Standard for Childcare Practice and the Early Years Framework. (The strategies used in the 'Assessment is for Learning' programme could serve as a model (Condie, Livingstone and Seagraves, 2005)).*

2. The findings of the research indicate that wide use was made of the national guidance documents (Birth to Three, LTS) and to a lesser extent Birth to Three Matters (DfES/DCFS). Around half of the local authorities reported having developed their own frameworks for birth to 3 year olds and, where these were available, they were used frequently and considered more practical in their support than the Birth to Three (LTS) materials. However, there was evidence that the existence of such a range of guidance documentation was confusing for many practitioners. It was also unclear whether these were intended to be policy documents or support materials and practitioners were unclear as to their origins or authority.

- *It is recommended that, as part of developing a coherent framework for qualification and professional development, the national guidance documents (Birth to Three, LTS) be reviewed with a particular focus given to practical applications that support the guidelines and which complement local authority developed frameworks.*

3. While the focus of the research was on continuing professional development it also addressed the issue of qualifications and the adequacy of those qualifications in relation to preparation for working with children under 3 years of age. A concern highlighted in the research was that pre-service provision did not require practitioners in preparation to study the development needs of children under 3 as a discrete element and that there was a lack of placement opportunities working with this age group. The content of pre-service programmes does not therefore currently meet the national priorities and expectations for the workforce as expressed in the Standard for Childhood Practice (2007) and the Early Years Framework (2008).
 - *It is recommended that, when present qualifications are being revised, they take full account of national priorities and expectations for the workforce. In particular, a specific focus on working with very young children under 3 years should be a required element including placement experience. A post-qualifying stage, such as the probationary year for newly qualified teachers, which requires experience across all age ranges for the purposes of registration, should be considered.*
4. The research showed that CPD provision was dominated by short-term provision such as day, twilight and evening in-service courses. These were the types of provision most supported by local authorities, the most frequently experienced by managers and practitioners and were highly ranked in terms of preferred types of CPD. However, practitioners also expressed the view that one-off sessions were insufficient to change practice. The research also indicated that well-supported, in-house development opportunities with peers, more experienced colleagues, practitioners from other centres and specialist support were valued and seen to be effective. Such approaches can generate locally relevant professional development and are supported in the literature as both engaging and empowering practitioners in the development process. It is, however, important to ensure that locally developed and supported opportunities are underpinned by sound knowledge of relevant pedagogy and child development.
 - *It is recommended that particular focus be given to developing sustainable learning communities for the early years workforce, supported by expert mentoring as appropriate within the local context. Individual and local development should be aligned to the national Early Years Framework.*
5. Professional development led by professionals from other agencies, such as health and social work were valued as were opportunities to take part in shared training events. Some local authorities had developed multi-agency training, though it was not clear to what extent this focused specifically on the needs of children under 3. Inter-professional and inter-agency working is a key element in the provision of children's services; it

is emphasised in both the Early Years Framework (2008) and in the skills required in the Standard for Childhood Practice (2007).

- *It is recommended that CPD initiatives, with a specific focus on the birth to 3 age range, should be developed on a multi-agency basis, including key stakeholders such as education, health and social work; such initiatives should be cross-sectoral involving managers and practitioners from private, voluntary and local authority sectors. Initial training programmes and ongoing CPD should emphasise the rationale and value of integrated services as well as providing opportunities to develop integrated practices.*
6. Distance/online learning, staff exchanges and job shadowing were less experienced forms of staff development but were seen as accessible and valued by those who had experienced them. Distance and online learning approaches are valuable for those living in rural areas; the distance and time required to travel to courses and to meet with others was seen as a barrier by those living in rural communities.
- *It is recommended that currently less-used approaches such as distance and online learning, staff exchanges and job shadowing be encouraged and supported. Glow², the Scottish national intranet for education, provides the infrastructure to enable online learning and the exchange of ideas and practices to support virtual learning communities.*
7. Areas of CPD where managers and practitioners reported gaps in provision included staff needs analysis for managers, and working with parents and developing home links, which was highlighted as a priority for development by both managers and practitioners. The Standard for Childhood Practice identifies the ability to support and develop the workforce as key for lead practitioners and emphasises the importance of supporting and working with parents for all practitioners. Working with and supporting families is a crucial element of the Early Years Framework.
- *It is recommended that pre-service programmes and ongoing CPD at authority and centre level be aligned to national priorities and, in particular, that priority be given to working with families and supporting parents.*
8. The research identified that the majority of provision for children under 3 years of age is within the private sector. While some authorities sought to work closely with their partner³ providers in respect to provision for children under 3, others did not; indeed some did not hold information about the partners' provision for this age group. The research revealed

² For information on Glow see: <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/glowscotland/index.asp>

³ Partner providers are private and voluntary childcare centres that have partnership agreements with local authorities for provision for children between the ages of 3 and 5. No partnership agreements exist for provision for children under 3 years of age.

that those working in the private sector were less likely to participate in CPD, to have access to local authority resources and information about CPD opportunities. Managers from private centres were more likely than those in local authority centres to say that current support for areas of CPD was not adequate. Interviews at local authority level and in centres confirmed the view that participation in CPD events was more difficult for the private sector. There are few centres in the voluntary sector that make provision for children from birth to 3 years but they likewise found it difficult to access CPD.

- *It is recommended that a review be undertaken of the relationship between authorities and partner provider centres, in respect of their provision for children under 3 years of age. This should include consideration of the role of different bodies, such as the Care Commission, HMIE and Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), in relation to standards and ensuring partner centres can provide quality CPD for their staff.*
9. The present study focused on CPD for those working in local authority centres and centres in partnership with the local authority. Provision is also made for children under 3 years of age in non-partner provider centres and by childminders. In rural areas in particular, if there are centres, they tend to be found in more populated areas and not in the dispersed communities. The current opportunities for CPD for these groups are not known.
- *It is recommended that research be undertaken to investigate the CPD needs and opportunities of non-partner provider centres and childminders and to identify ways of ensuring that national priorities and standards are being addressed. The needs of rural and remote areas in particular should be addressed.*
10. Small numbers of managers and practitioners reported already holding degree level awards in early education and childcare although this was more common amongst those working in local authority centres. The numbers who reported that they were working towards degrees at the time of the survey were also low, though unsurprisingly more managers than practitioners reported this. While HNC was the most common qualification, many reported holding SVQs, most commonly at level 3. At the time of the research, some participants perceived that the commitment to undertake degree level study was a personal choice and financial support was serendipitous.

However, from 2011 registration with the Social Services Council as a manager/lead practitioner will require a qualification that is recognised at level 9 on the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. This has implications for policy, relating to the need to support existing staff progress towards SCQF level 9 awards.

6. Conclusion

The findings from the study highlight the need for a framework within which pre-service training and programmes of continuing professional development for early years practitioners and their managers can be developed. Such a framework should reflect priorities at national and authority levels as well as address the needs of individuals working in the range of centres providing for children between birth and 3 years of age. While opportunities currently available are very well received by the majority of participants, there is no evidence of a long term strategy that links the opportunities available at cluster, authority and national levels. Such a strategy would seem to be necessary in the move towards a graduate-led profession. In addition, this strategy should take into account the need to ensure that those entering the profession have opportunities to learn about and work with the youngest children in our society – and that all routes into the profession provide a similar level of skill and understanding. Greater consistency in the outcomes of pre-service or workplace programmes would assist greatly in developing a framework that has relevance for all those working in the early years sector.

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