WORKING WITH TWO-YEAR-OLDS IN ENGLAND: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Jan Georgeson1, Verity Campbell-Barr1, Rod Parker-Rees1, Sandra Mathers2

1PLymouth University, Plymouth, UK, 2University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

From September 2013 free early education has been provided to the 20% most disadvantaged two-year-olds, to be extended to 40% of two-year-olds in 2014. This unprecedented expansion of funding for two-year-olds has implications across the sector, including child-minders, nurseries, preschools and schools, concerning sufficiency and quality of places, how these are assessed and appropriateness of practitioners’ experience and qualifications (Evans, 2012; Gibb et al., 2011). There is a new consensus that pedagogy for children under three is specialised, different from teaching and learning in the three to five age range (see Dalli et al., 2011). The two-year-olds policy intervention therefore asks a lot both of schools taking two-year-olds for the first time and in the private/voluntary/independent sector where staff working with the youngest children tend to have fewer opportunities for professional development (Goouch and Powell, 2012). In addition, the number of two-year-olds entitled to a place who have additional needs is likely to be higher than average and, as shown by previous evaluations of the two-year-olds offer (Gibb et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009), this will require considerable resources. The skills and understanding of those working with two-year-olds are particularly important because the two-year-old check introduced in the revised EYFS will require many practitioners to contribute information on children’s (dis)abilities.

Our research project investigated what key stakeholders consider to be the key components of quality for two-year-olds and what this looks like in practice in a range of settings providing funded early education places for two-year-olds. We have focused on levels of qualification, what constitutes ‘high quality’ two-year-old practice and how practitioners know how to provide this. This has involved carrying out a review of relevant literature, interviews with 10 key informants (in local and national government and the voluntary sector), 3 case studies in a range of local authorities and an online questionnaire for managers and practitioners (N>200) to provide breadth. We framed our analysis using Eraut’s model of workplace learning and the kinds of knowledge that practitioners use when carrying out their work, and then synthesised the four strands of our investigation to highlight implications for policy, practice, staffing and resourcing the two-year-old programme. While it is not possible to report detailed findings at this stage, expected outcomes will include mapping of ‘codified’ knowledge (such as preservice qualifications) and ‘uncodified cultural knowledge’ acquired informally through participation in working practices within current and previous settings and placement learning.