

State Maintained Nursery Schools in England: their role in reducing disadvantage

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Policy Context Early years has been a source of interest for governments as part of the implemented 'early intervention' agenda of the Coalition and Conservative governments. UK Conservative governments have introduced policies to reduce the 'disadvantage gap', including:

- Funding for children aged two who are classed as 'disadvantaged' to attend an early years setting for 15 hours a week;
- Funding for all three-year-olds to attend an early years setting for 15 hours a week;
- Funding for three and four-year-olds whose parents are both in work to attend an early years setting for 30 hours a week.

However, the majority of nursery school staff are concerned about their future viability because of the unpredictability of future funding.

Key research findings

- f* Government policy in relation to the preschool sector has been counter-productive to boosting attendance, especially for children aged two classed as disadvantaged, leading to the closure and reduction in places at the very settings which cater for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and have been shown by Ofsted to be high quality.
- f* Nursery school staff enact policy in complex and situated ways, adapting to suit the needs of their local communities.
- f* This enactment of high quality nursery care is made difficult by the recent policy environment that has reduced the funding for nursery school places.
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Policy recommendations:

- > Nursery schools need long term, cross political party consensus on funding to allow them to expand and have a positive impact on more children from disadvantaged families.
- > Nursery school provision needs to expand by 200 schools (the amount that has closed down over the past three decades) so that children from disadvantaged families have an opportunity to attend a high quality early years provision, thus boosting the take up of the existing 15/30 free hours policy.
- > The free provision for disadvantaged two years old should be extended to all two years to ensure that all children receive the best start possible. This move would also reduce the sense of