

Deregulating ratios without improving qualifications first is a recipe for a more chaotic and less nurturing environment for young children

by Blog Admin

Ludovica Gambaro and **Kitty Stewart** argue that plans for permitting childcare staff to mind more children than currently allowed have merit, although there are significant problems. Their work suggests that there may indeed be potential gains in allowing ratios to rise if this allows for a more highly qualified workforce. However, the proposed qualification level is too low and relaxing ratios will not automatically be passed on to staff in the form of higher wages. Improving qualifications should come before deregulating ratios.



Last month, Elizabeth Truss announced her plans for delivering “more great childcare”. One of the central ideas, and the one that has captured public attention, is a relaxation of child:staff ratios for under-threes. Instead of one adult to every four two-year-olds in a nursery, Truss proposes to allow each adult to take charge of six children. Meanwhile childminders will be able to look after four under-fives rather than three, as at present. Truss’ argument is that this will cut the cost of childminder care while allowing nurseries to hire better paid, more highly qualified staff.



The proposal has been met with a mixture of horror and ridicule. Journalists have challenged the Minister to try looking after six two year olds, or have tried it themselves and reported on the resulting chaos. But is it really such a crazy plan?

Our recent collaborative international work suggests that there may indeed be potential gains in allowing ratios to rise if this allows for a more highly qualified workforce. Research consistently points to the benefits of having highly qualified staff – and in particular graduates – delivering childcare and early education. France and Norway, for example, provide widely respected delivery models in which highly trained professionals take charge of more children each than is allowed under current regulations in this country. Staff qualifications have been found to be strong predictors of care which is warm, sensitive and



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responsive, and which promotes children’s cognitive, social and behavioural development. Changing a nappy may not be rocket science, and no-one needs a degree in order to love small children, but better qualified staff are more likely to interact with children in a way which challenges their thinking, and graduates are also more self-reflective about what is happening in the room. Added to this is that staff who are better paid and have higher morale are more likely to stick around, providing a continuity of care which is important to a child’s experience.

So is the Minister right? Along the right general lines, perhaps, but not at all in the detail where there are some marked problems and difficulties in her approach.

The first problem is that the proposed qualification levels are much too low, and may in fact entail no real changes from the current situation. The Government's recent report, *More Great Childcare (MGC)*, accurately points to evidence that children make most progress where trained teachers are present, and to the success of the Early Years Professionals (EYP, the new graduate status introduced in 2007) in raising quality. But the need for graduates is completely forgotten when it comes to putting forward proposals about the conditions for relaxing ratios. For example, the document suggests that a staff member with a Level 3 vocational qualification and/or English and Maths GCSE would be able to take charge of six children. This is far less stringent than the requirement in countries such as France or Norway, where staff have higher education qualifications or degrees. A much better idea would be to use EYPs – the category of staff which have been proven to improve quality – as the enabler of higher ratios. Both Germany and the Netherlands combine high ratios with non-graduate staff (though required qualifications are higher than an English Level 3) – and both countries score badly on measures of process quality.

The use of Level 3 as the threshold is particularly worrying given that the current system of training and the related qualifications at Levels 2 and 3 are very weak; this was pointed out in the Nutbrown Review of the childcare workforce to which MGC is a reply. MGC proposes to introduce a new Level 3 diploma, but it fails to provide any detail on this. Ensuring that a new qualification and its related training are delivered effectively is much more difficult than simply relaxing ratios – and the current record is not encouraging. So we could in fact end up with higher ratios without any improvements in qualifications at all, and this would be a bad result.

A second and crucial point is that it is hard to imagine that, in England, the gains from relaxing ratios will automatically be passed on to staff in higher wages. Employers' ability to pay their staff more does not necessarily translate into *willingness* to pay more. Other countries with better paid staff tend to have national pay bargaining systems (more similar to teachers in compulsory schooling in England). Working conditions in the English childcare sector are pretty bad at present, where services for children under three are dominated by private providers, with a large share of for-profit commercial chains. Practitioners are generally paid the very minimum, with no pensions, minimum holiday entitlement and very little staff non-contact time to plan activities, report children's progress or take part in training. Turnover rates are high. Relaxing ratios in this context, without addressing these issues or pay directly, does not sound a particularly good idea.

This illustrates a third more general point, which is that international evidence needs to be used with care and placed in context if it is to be useful. Some of the information in MGC is simply misleading, and suggests that England is more of an outlier on child:staff ratios than is really the case. Germany and Sweden are listed as countries where there is no national regulation about ratios, whereas in fact all three countries do have rules about ratios, but set at a local level in Germany (by *Länder*) and in Sweden (by *Kommuns*). In addition, while the report points to changes in France which have (controversially) increased the number of children childminders can look after, other countries which are not cited are moving in the opposite direction. In both Sweden and Norway, where quality is at the forefront of the policy agenda, the tendency has been to *reduce* the number of children per staff member. In 2004, Sweden granted a large increase of state funding to local authorities to employ additional preschool teachers and child assistants in order to reduce staff-child ratios to 1:5 on average for zero-to six-year-olds. In Norway, the actual practice is one employee for 3.4 children, so fairly similar to England, but the Norwegian government is proposing a change to one member of staff for every 3 children under three and one specialised graduate for every 6 children. Finally, it is worth reiterating the point that not all other countries are appropriate models to look to: the quality of provision in Germany and the Netherlands (both countries cited by MGC) has been found to be fairly mediocre, so we would not want to look to these countries for examples of how to deliver the best possible childcare.

We still think there may be room for sensible trade-offs between better qualifications and higher ratios. But we think these trade-offs should be built around graduate staff (the EYPs) and that any change in ratios should be conditional on having these staff in place first. The right way to start is not with the ratios themselves, but with funding to support settings which want to raise qualifications, and in particular to hire

graduates (which is what the Graduate Leader Fund was successfully doing, albeit on a small scale, until it was rolled up in 2011). Deregulating ratios without improving qualifications first is a recipe for a more chaotic and less nurturing environment for young children.

Further details on our research, which is funded by the Nuffield Foundation, can be found [here](#). See [here](#) for details of an upcoming seminar on some of our findings at CASE on March 6 2013.

This article first appeared at the [LSE British Politics and Policy blog](#).

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