

Work abroad

We know that pay and prestige are a problem for early years staff in the UK, but how does the workforce fare in other countries? *Meredith Jones Russell* investigates

In the UK, conditions faced by the early years workforce can often seem dire. Long days, heavy responsibilities and low pay and recognition leave practitioners often feeling undervalued. No surprise when hourly pay rates are just £8.30 on average in group-based provision. The national average wage is nearly double this at £15.98. Even

nursery staff at school-based providers don't reach that, paid on average just £14.40 an hour, with Reception staff earning slightly more at £15.10. With cost pressures rising, the sector is placing an increasing reliance on unpaid staff.

Fewer staff are working towards higher qualifications, while at the same time, staff turnover has been increasing, with churn standing at

“ It might be easy to think that these problems are unique to the UK ”

14 per cent for group-based providers, eight per cent for nurseries and nine per cent for Reception, according to the Education Policy Institute.

It might be easy to think that these problems with pay, funding and qualifications are unique to the UK. But how is the workforce in other countries viewed and treated, and what can we learn from them?



Settings: Ninety-seven per cent of children aged three to five, and 92 per cent aged one to two, attend early education. Around 55 per cent attend public centres, while the rest are looked after by registered childminders in private homes, which costs parents a similar amount. Ninety per cent of early years staff (around 54,000) are members of the BUPL union of pedagogues.

Pay: Pedagogues: the equivalent of £3,400 a month; £4,000 including pension. Pedagogical assistants: £3,000 including pension.

Ratios: Vary between the 98 Danish municipalities. On average, 1:6 for ages three to five, and 1:4 for ages birth to two.

Qualifications: Danish daycare professionals (pedagogues) have three and a half years of training to bachelor degree level. Private daycare providers are not required to have professional training or a specific education and can provide daycare services for up to five children in their own homes.

As early childhood is viewed as a distinct life stage in Denmark, the childcare system is entirely separate from school. The focus in most early childhood education and care centres is on child-led play. Children spend three to four hours a day outside, take part in adult-led activities for around 30 minutes per day, but otherwise are free to choose for themselves. However, this can lead to a lack of understanding of the job early educators do.

Annegrethe Ahrenkiel, head of the Danish Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education and Care, says, 'Our curriculum is actually very learning-based, with six learning themes more similar to school subjects than theoretical foundations of childhood education. However, there is certainly a view that educators are just watching children play and keeping an ear out, rather than supporting and facilitating learning.

'We still suffer from low prestige. Early educators have always been lagging behind school teachers in prioritisation; school teachers have a four-year degree compared



DENMARK PHOTOS COLOURBOX

with three and a half years for early years pedagogues, and universities invest much more in their training programmes and research.'

Approximately 59 per cent of early years practitioners have a degree in pedagogy, while the remaining 41 per cent are assistants with vocational training only. A pedagogical assistant training programme is aimed at those with no prior education. Training to work with children with special needs is compulsory for all early years staff.

There is tension between definitions of early years provision as either education or care. Before 2015, responsibility for childcare in Denmark was shared between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education. Now, early years learning is the sole responsibility of the latter, losing some focus on the 'care' aspect of the sector. In 2016, a new political initiative set out to strengthen the curriculum framework, make learning more structured and focus on school-readiness, although a reform in summer this year returned to an emphasis on play as an educational foundation.

Most Danish ECEC centres are public. With one of the highest income tax rates



in the world, only around one fifth of settings' costs are met by fees. No parent pays more than 25 per cent of the cost of childcare. This perhaps accounts for 98 per cent of Danish children between one and six attending an ECEC centre. Thirty-eight per cent of these children spend eight hours or more a day there – Denmark is ranked fifth for female employment among the 34 countries in the OECD.

Denmark's childcare workforce also has one of the best gender balances, with 13 per cent of staff male. However, Ms Ahrenkiel points out that this is still not enough. 'We have initiatives to encourage men into childcare, but Denmark is actually one of the most gender-divided labour forces in the world. There are many divisions within the early education field, so men are more likely to be leaders, or work in special education.'

USA vital statistics

of the total birth-to-five population. This includes care by non-parent relatives, childcare centres, pre-school programmes and home-based childcare. Between 11 and 12 million children aged between birth and five are in 'early childhood education' programmes, a more formal childcare centre or with family (as opposed to being at home with a non-parent relative).

Settings: The Center for American Progress estimates around 14 million children are in some form of regular non-parental care, about 60 per cent

Pay: The national median wage in USA is about \$31,000 (£24,000) and childcare workers earn less than two-thirds of this. Nearly half rely on benefits, compared with 21 per cent of the wider workforce. Fifty-two per cent of African Americans in the workforce work only with birth to two-year-olds, compared with 43 per cent of all centre-based staff, so are disproportionately affected by wage disparity. Forty per cent of the centre- and home-based workforce are people of colour, while more than 80 per cent of teachers from kindergarten to 12th grade are white.

Ratios: Differ according to state.

Qualifications: Differ according to state. Only 12 states have a minimum education requirement beyond a high-school diploma for educators, with just two states requiring childcare centre teachers to have a bachelor's degree or above. Of the 43 states that offer public pre-kindergarten programmes, 23 require a minimum of a bachelor's degree for lead teachers.

Approximately two million adults look after around 14 million children up to the age of six across the United States.

However, according to *Early Childhood Workforce Index 2018* co-author Dr Caitlin McLean, the 'system of preparing, supporting and rewarding early educators remains largely ineffective, inefficient, and inequitable'.

Qualification requirements are set by individual states, and while nearly all establish core competencies, they rarely set minimum education requirements. States often require different

qualifications for staff in centre-based childcare, in home-based programmes and in public pre-schools.

Blanca Munoz, director of private setting Little Blessings Childcare and Preschool in Louisiana (see photos) says, 'Everything is very much on a state-by-state basis. In Louisiana, when you open a setting you get a copy of the state handbook with all the rules and regulations you must abide by. But you have to fund a lot of training out of your own pocket. To work my way up to director I did courses on weekends. The nursery owner has to pay to make sure

you meet basic first-aid and CPR requirements, but the rest you most often have to pay yourself.'

Several efforts have been made to establish blanket requirements, including a report by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council, which concluded childcare workers need more CPD opportunities and called for a minimum degree level requirement for all lead educators.

Ratios are also set by the state. During President Trump's election campaign, he recommended state policy-makers increase ratios, citing a report that

claimed 'daycare regulations, particularly related to child-to-staff ratios, are costly and fail to improve the quality of care'.

Meanwhile, the average wage for a childcare teacher is \$10 (£7.80) per hour. Childcare workers with two children or more would have to pay over half their salaries to cover the cost of their own childcare, according to sector organisation Child Care Aware.

Tamara Halle, a senior scholar with Child Trends, a non-profit children's research organisation, says the three biggest issues facing the workforce in the US are pay, professional status and staff retention.

She says, 'Our workforce is currently so poorly compensated they often struggle to make ends meet. At the same time, there is a strong national focus on transforming the early childhood workforce by improving the qualifications of and support for those caring for our youngest citizens. As the early care and education workforce attains higher qualifications, however,



many move to higher-paying positions in kindergarten to 12th grade education.

'Some states are working to increase the minimum wage. While this will improve the financial circumstances of many in the workforce, it still does not adequately compensate them for the important work they are doing.

'States can also offer scholarships and

tuition reimbursement to make training and education more affordable. By focusing on both higher wages and more accessible opportunities for professional advancement, states can improve both the quality of early care and education and the chances that these teachers will stay in the early care childhood field.'

AUSTRALIA vital statistics

Settings: There are more than 15,000 early learning services (including before- and after-school care and family daycare), of which 3,101 are standalone pre-schools and 7,455 are daycare centres.

Pay: AU\$21.54 (£12.04) per hour on average. Wages can range from AU\$18 (£10) per hour for an assistant educator to AU\$32 (£17.88) per hour for

the most senior director of a centre.

Ratios: Birth to age two – 1:4; two- to three-year-olds – 1:4 or 1:5 (dependent on area); three-year-olds and older – 1:10 or 1:11 (dependent on area).

Qualifications: To work in daycare, practitioners need a vocational qualification (Certificate III or diploma). Teachers in pre-schools require an education degree.

Around 70 per cent of early childhood educators in Australia earn the minimum wage, compared with just 20 per cent in the wider workforce. Childcare professionals earn around half the national average salary.

This is leading one in five early years

teachers in the country to quit. Teachers who have recently taken up further training or upgraded to a degree are currently the most likely to leave, so the sector is losing some of its most qualified workers.

With 94 per cent of the workforce female, practitioners recently appealed

for a 35 per cent pay rise with workplace tribunal the Fair Work Commission on the ground of equal pay. In February the case was rejected, leading the workforce to strike for the third time in 12 months, with further action promised later this year.

Helen Gibbons,

assistant national secretary of United Voice, Australia's early childhood union, says there is a 'wages crisis' in the sector.

She says, 'Australia is a wealthy country, we can and should do much better. Educators are just so angry and fed up. They, and the children they educate every day, have once again been left behind by this Government.'

'The Government clearly just does not get it. Making sure every child gets the best start in life comes down to making sure their educators aren't living on poverty wages. Educators can no longer subsidise the early childhood education system.'

Meanwhile, the sector is divided according to whether teaching takes place in standalone pre-schools, where it is defined as 'education', or in daycare centres, where it is called 'care'.

Pre-school-based early childhood teachers hold university degrees, while in daycare they can hold vocational qualifications. However, teachers with ▶



degrees working in daycare centres still earn AU\$13,000 less per year than those doing the same job in pre-schools.

The discrepancy is caused by two different funding models. Pre-schools receive 'supply-side' funding, largely from the Government, which covers operational costs including staff wages. In daycare, however, funding is 'demand-side', so it goes to parents for childcare costs and therefore links wages more directly to fees, keeping salaries lower.

The National Quality Framework (NQF), introduced in 2012, called for more degree-qualified teachers and a minimum of a Certificate III-level

qualification for all educators. However, according to the Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA), the sector has struggled to fulfil these recruitment requirements as there are not enough qualified staff in the pipeline, and the training they receive is insufficient to prepare them for work.

A spokesperson for ACA says, 'ACA is engaged in ongoing discussions with Government and training suppliers to address this issue. We encourage further funding to ensure potential employees can receive subsidised training, along with "on the job" training to ensure that they are adequately qualified to fulfil every part of their diverse role.'

A spokesperson for the Australian

Department of Education and Training says, 'The Australian Government recognises the critical role a qualified and committed early childhood workforce plays in improving outcomes for children. States and territories regulate the qualifications of educators and child-to-staff ratios through the nationally agreed NQF and they also deliver the learning standards outlined in the Early Years Learning Framework.'

'The Australian Government's primary focus in early childhood education and care is to make services affordable and accessible for families and children, as well as strong oversight of how taxpayers' investment is used.'

KAZAKHSTAN vital statistics

Pay: Available figures suggest an average of KZT62,359 (£131.60) a month in 2014.

Ratios: No specific child-staff ratios, but there are requirements regarding the number of children per group, with a maximum of 20 two-year-olds or 25 children aged three years and older.

Qualifications: Sixty-one per cent of staff are trained to degree level (not necessarily early years specific).

GDP spent on pre-school education/training: 0.1 per cent.

As part of a programme to modernise the country, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev announced in 2010 that 100 per cent of children aged between three and six should be enrolled in pre-school education by 2020. The Government has proposed to open more settings, increasing places from 373,000 to 662,000 and develop 30 new sets of teaching and methodology materials.

Enrolment for pre-school care (from birth to six years old) is low. OECD PISA data on 15-year-olds shows Kazakhstan has one of the highest percentages of children who have not attended pre-primary education (65 per cent).

Private childcare often costs at least two to three times more than state care, and with rising birth rates there is a large deficit of places in cities, where public nurseries have long waiting lists, while there are no settings at all in many rural areas. Government figures estimate there are 111 children per 100 kindergarten places throughout Kazakhstan, with only five in 100 children in rural areas attending any pre-school provision.

As mothers tend to return to work after having children, a large informal childcare sector has developed, helped by the fact that employers are obligated to grant childcare leave to grandparents in the first three years of a child's life if requested.

The programme of reform will not necessarily entirely formalise early education. The plan includes introducing settings of different types based on region, including new 'cottage kindergartens', or 'family-type' nurseries in the south, catering for between five and six children in residential houses, helped by family members.

Meanwhile, the formal workforce is low-paid and often underqualified, and is 99.9 per cent female.

The wages of early years staff remain below the Kazakh average annual salary, and are the lowest of all OECD countries – between 10 and 12 times lower than the OECD average.

Nor is work in the early years sector well-regarded. According to research by the Information Analytic Center in the capital, Astana, only one in ten students have an interest in starting a teacher training programme. Of these, none have a particular interest in the early years.

To attract more teachers, Kazakhstan allows those without a specialised degree in early childhood studies to work in nursery settings. Currently, just a fifth of early years teachers with a degree have a specialisation in the early years. Of those who are trained at vocational level, only 36 per cent are trained to work specifically in the early years. Initial training for staff in Kazakhstan is often focused solely on the education of children aged three and older, according to OECD reporting.

However, UNICEF has reported that Kazakhstan is making both national and local efforts to increase the number of qualified teachers, introducing training programmes including seminars, workshops and formal training courses, financed by both the Government and employers. ■

