

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 16: How the third national lockdown is affecting Early Years childcare

Speakers: Dr Xanthe Whittaker and Dr Kate Hardy

Xanthe: Hello, I'm Xanthe Whittaker, I'm a postdoctoral researcher in the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change at Leeds University Business School.

Kate: Hi, I'm Kate Hardy, and I'm also from CERIC at Leeds University Business School, and I'm an associate professor in work and employment relations.

Xanthe: And today, on Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast, we're going to be talking about childcare during COVID-19, which is the rapid response research project, looking at the impact of the pandemic on early years settings. And I guess that's quite topical this week, given that we've gone into our third national lockdown, whereby schools have closed and early years settings haven't. So, maybe it would be useful to begin the podcast by talking a bit about what early years is.

Kate: Yes, thanks very much Xanthe. So, early years, as we've defined it in the project is a very... includes a lot of people. So, when we talk about early years, most people think about nurseries, and we are talking about nurseries, and that includes nurseries based in schools, nurseries that are maintained by the state and then private sector nurseries. But on top of that, there are a host of other people who are involved in early years childcare and education, and that includes nannies, childminders, but also, quite importantly, parents and grandparents.

And so, this is who we've included, haven't we, in the study, because we want to look at the kind of ecology of care that goes on to take care and educate and children between... before they go to school. So, yes, as you said, it's been quite a big week in relation to early years because early years haven't been included as part of the school closures, as they were the first time round, in the first national lockdown. So, why, Xanthe... do you want to say a bit about why it's the case that early years have been excluded from these school closures which have affected primary and secondary schools?



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Xanthe: Yes. Well I mean I the first thing to say is that on Monday the Prime Minister addressed the nation about the national lockdown, and talked very specifically about the fact that there was increasing scientific evidence of the fact that schools and children were vectors of transmission. So, we've gone from a situation where there has been a widespread assumption, I think, that children don't get sick with the illness and don't particularly pass it on, to a recognition that, actually, what the evidence is saying is that, yes, children are vectors of transmission. And as a result of that, schools have been closed.

And I guess the situation, and the risk of children passing on the coronavirus is actually exactly the same in early years, and so it was quite unclear why early years is remaining open. And actually, if you think about what goes on in early years care, where people... workers are looking after small children, it's quite hard to contain them, they are quite often not wearing PPE, don't have adequate or accessible PPE. The situation is even a lot worse than it might be in a primary school, for example.

Kate: Yes, completely. A lot of the staff that we've been interviewing have referenced, haven't they, how they spend all day in very close, intimate contact with small children, and one thing they talk about a lot is how children will just sneeze in their face, and they're not able to wear masks or visors or any PPE really in that context, other than, for example, with changing nappies. And that is something they have spoken about quite a lot, and it's quite hard to think, isn't it, of another sector in which staff are being expected to go to work with no PPE whatsoever, not just that it is hard to access but that it's basically impossible to use in that context. So, in terms of the way that people have been reacting to it this week, have you picked up on how... have you been speaking to people about... in early years about how they feel about these exclusions from these closures?

Xanthe: I mean, I think we've... in the research that we've done, we've had early years practitioners, people working in the early years settings talking about themselves as lambs to the slaughter, talking about the fact that they feel thrown under the bus by the lack of recognition of the risk that they are under, talking about themselves as collateral damage.

Kate: Yes, those are all really powerful statements, aren't they? And they are ones that people have said to me as well. And I think



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one thing that has really struck me is how this is, in some ways, an intensification of what workers were saying to us in the interviews in terms of being, at best, side lined in the pandemic response, at worst completely devalued and given, kind of, no recognition.

And that's partly because whenever there have been announcements and policies about education, early years is very often an afterthought, and that is what a lot of early years staff across... whether they are childminders, whether they are nursery manager, whether they are room leaders, childcare practitioners, have just frequently said, "You know, we've been an afterthought, no one recognises the fact that, you know, throughout the entire first lockdown, actually nurseries and childminding settings generally weren't closed. They were open, but they were open for vulnerable children and key worker children."

And in lots of ways, this is really tied up with a kind of endemic feature of the early years sector, isn't it, in terms of the fact that they have really low pay, and that pay in the sector in general is just over £7 an hour, which is less than minimum wage, and a lot less than the real living wage, which is partly explained, isn't it, by the presence of apprentices in the sector, there are quite a few apprentices, which does bring down that average. But, in general, it is pretty marked by very low pay, and lots of women doing this low paid work.

Xanthe:

Yes, that what I was going to say. I mean, a key part of this kind of work is the very gendered nature of it, and you mentioned that the average pay is £7 an hour, which is below the national minimum wage, that is the... wages have, sort of, decreased over time, this is a long term issue within the sector. In fact, there was research done a couple of years ago that talked about the fact that an increasing number of people working in early years settings were reliant on government benefits because their wages were so low. And I think that has been combined with the fact, during lockdown, that actually the responsibilities that those early years workers have taken on have increased, and actually they are doing really essential work and maybe, Kate, you want to talk a little bit about some of the things that we found, picked up during our research, about the way that early years responsibilities have extended during this time.

Kate: Yes, sure. So, one of the things that I think has struck all of the researchers on the team is that during the lockdown, actually, nursery staff were the only contact that a lot of families had with any sort of agency or any sort of services. So, a lot of other services shut down, social services who might usually have been in contact with people weren't around as much or weren't doing home visits and so I think it has really struck us that alongside this, these very low rates of pay, many... particularly nursery staff have been talking about the rapidly increasing responsibilities they have got around things like safeguarding, for example.

So, many of them talked about how they haven't been fully trained in safeguarding, they are having to try and pick up on what is happening in families. Now, rather than being inside the room, or being able to go into the building, they are having to stand outside, do it in front of other parents. It is harder to pick up on those prompts, and yet they are increasingly responsible for doing those sorts of safeguarding. And the other thing they talked about quite a lot, haven't they, is about how, actually, because they are in contact with very young children and they are the only, kind of, connection to services, they are having to do a lot of diagnosis and identification of additional learning needs and special educational needs. And then the thing they have really talked about a lot is the way that they have then got to communicate these to parents for the first time, you have to try and deal with them in a context where there isn't a lot of support.

Xanthe: Just to, sort of, clarify, when we're talking about safeguarding, that's things like recognising or identifying where children might have been exposed, for example, to domestic violence. And of course, we know that situations of domestic violence have also intensified over the period where people have been spending extended times in their homes and not connected to their communities.

Kate: Yes. Another element of it that is really important is, kind of, neglect, which... so, while nurseries were open to vulnerable children and keyworker children during the lockdown, they have also basically been fully open since the first of June, and during that time as well, they have also had to, kind of, respond to growing needs around neglect from children who have been... who were inside houses for months and months at a time and

having to respond to that when they came into the early years setting.

Xanthe: So, again, it's pretty clear that early years workers have been doing all this really essential work during the pandemic, and basically not really having that acknowledged or recognised in the way that they have been treated by government through policy, through funding of the sector. It is also traditionally a sector that doesn't have... where workers don't particularly have a strong voice. Maybe that's something that is starting to shift.

Kate: Yes. I think that is, kind of, one of the better news stories out of this, is that obviously earlier in the week the NEU, the teachers and education workers union for schools were able to argue that schools should be closed in the interests of staff and pupils and the wider community, and I think this has really set a precedent and given an example to staff in early years settings who, as you say, are traditionally less unionised.

There is slightly more unionisation in state maintained early years settings, with Unison, but very much less so in private nurseries. And then, obviously, childminders are often own account workers, they are self-employed, it's a slightly different situation. So, yes, lots of workers have pointed to organisations such as Early Years Alliance and PACEY, who represent nursery workers and managers, and also childminders and nannies as having given them a lot of information and trying to represent them. But I think just this week, as a result of early years not being included in those closures and seeing the example that the NEU have set in the sector, that has meant, I think, that there are... they are beginning to develop a voice through which they can speak about their working conditions and how they feel about the fact that they are being asked to go into work in these conditions.

So, Xanthe, do you have a sense of the kind of demands that these voices and these organisations are putting forward to improve the sector?

Xanthe: Yes, well certainly the... apart from Unison coming out and arguing that centres should be closed, there is the argument that they should be funded and supported by government in order to close, so that they are not thrown into financial difficulty as a result of that. And certainly, much of the sector now is arguing for priority access to vaccines, much as with care workers. And some are arguing for closure for everyone other than keyworkers



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and vulnerable children. And there is a big call for relief funding, for the government to, sort of, see early years settings out through these closures and through this period.

Kate: Yes. And I think that's a really important point to end on, because one thing that has really impacted on the sector over the last decade is chronic underfunding and it does leave a lot of the sector very vulnerable, that if the doors are closed that that is a lot of people's jobs and that's some settings that would close. So, yes, I think you're right that there is both a need for temporary relief funding, like has been announced for the hospitality sector, but also a much longer term look at a sustainable funding model for the sector.

Xanthe: Such important workers carrying out such important work.

Kate: Yes, completely. Great, thanks for listening to today's episode. If you want to find out more information about this research, all of our contact details, if you want to get in touch or you want to participate in the research, all the information is available in the episode description.