

Occasional Paper 13 - What role do maintained nursery schools play in Early Years sector improvements?

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Occasional Paper 13 - *What role do maintained nursery schools play in Early Years sector improvements?*

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Introduction

The thing that really concerns me is that once MNSs have gone, that level of expertise and social service will also. It seems that there's a sort of double quality to the MNS, which is constantly evolving, high level pedagogy and providing areas of expertise, like special needs, and so on. But also support for the family. There's very specific expertise that's going to go to waste... (Leader of a Maintained Nursery School)

This study, funded by TACTYC, is located within the context of a body of knowledge concerning the past, present and future of the maintained nursery school (MNS) in England. Although there are some existing reports which focus on particular regions of England (for example: No Author, 2018; Bertram and Pascal, 2019) and some which identify issues that are relevant across the whole country (for example: Early Education 2014, 2015, 2018; Paull and Popov, 2019), they *all* identify themes pertinent to the transformative effects of the MNS both historically and contemporaneously, within and beyond the parameters of the Early Years sector. However, these reports also alert the reader to significant challenges that may mitigate against MNSs' ability to continue, due to structural pressures that are beyond their control.

Despite the steady decline in numbers of MNSs over the last thirty years (600 to 392), reports such as those mentioned above provide evidence that the MNS is integral to high quality provision within the wider landscape of early childhood, education and care (ECEC). More specifically, these reports show that MNSs provide support in predominantly urban areas, particularly for children and families experiencing disadvantage and those with identified special educational, disability and inclusion needs (SENDi). Reports also show that MNSs provide exceptionally high quality educational experiences, which impacts upon all the children between the ages of two-five-years.

It is possible that a number of readers will be unfamiliar with the MNS; this is because the 'added value' (Bertram and Pascal, 2019) they offer as a public service is often 'hidden' and goes unnoticed by the general public. These authors present MNSs as centres that attend unremittingly to the needs of children within the contexts of their families and communities, providing links to wider support services where they exist. Unfortunately all reports also point to a service in financial crisis. Without sufficient funding to support current child and family requirements, and with continuing uncertainties about future government fiscal settlements beyond 2020, the future of the remaining 392 MNSs cannot be guaranteed. Our study provides new MNS leader and practitioner perspectives that compliment and augment these existing reports, to make the case for our own recommendations as set out in the final section.

The MNS is distinctive: it currently sits alongside a wide range of different types of ECEC provision in what has become an increasingly mixed-economy sector that includes private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings. Between 1997 and 2010, MNSs sat alongside children's centres, marrying the function of the state with that of the free-market, addressing a national political commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020 (Simpson et al., 2017). They were part of a government strategy to bring 'market solutions to welfare problems' (Simpson et al., 2017:87) within the context of a sector that was required to expand in order to accommodate increasing numbers of parents, especially women, entering the workforce before their children reached statutory school age (Lewis and West, 2016). Since 2010, the numbers of MNSs has fallen, despite demand for ECEC places more generally (Rutter, 2016) and despite pervading concerns about child welfare and longer-term social mobility. These concerns can be expressed in terms of links between deprivation (including those of low-income poverty of families both out of work, and in zero hours employment) and long-term educational outcomes (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010; Lewis and West, 2016).

Currently legally constituted in the same way as a statutory primary school in England, the MNS is required to have a headteacher (with Early Years educational specialism); at least one other teacher with qualified teacher status (QTS); a devolved budget; and a constituted board of governors (Paull and Popov, 2019). The MNS is assessed and evaluated by OfSTED according to criteria that pertain to statutory schools. These differ from those applied by OfSTED to PVI settings. Indeed, a few MNSs which operate as both a state nursery (as part of broader Children's Centres offering places for under-threes) and as a private childcare provider can find themselves subject to a regime of several different external inspection types (Early Education, 2015).

Against this challenging backdrop, Early Education's Chief Executive has stated that:

Maintained Nursery Schools are the highest performing part of our education system. With the majority of nursery schools serving some of the most deprived communities, they achieve outstanding results. 98% of nursery schools are judged outstanding or good by Ofsted. Indeed, Ofsted rates 63% nursery schools outstanding and 35% are good. 65% of nursery school places are located in the 30% most deprived parts of England (No Author, 2018:12).

Scope and aims

The scope of this study was to provide evidence for the purposeful and educative role of the MNS within the wider field of ECEC. Drawing on data from two regions of England, it aimed to define ways that the MNS drives improvements within the EY sector and beyond. It also identified barriers that are currently causing difficulties, or

that may in the future jeopardise the delivery of high quality education and care.

We gauged the views of a random sample of participants from 200 MSNs through an online survey to leaders in The Midlands and the South including London across to Oxford, and followed this up with six visits, 14 individual interviews and one focus group session. Three questions were paramount:

- Perspectives: What has been the experience of ECEC practitioners re: sector improvements?
- Needs: What are the needs of settings?
- Drivers and Barriers: What are the drivers of sector development and what challenges are experienced?

The aim was not only to better understand the role and responsibilities of the MNS in evolving sector improvements (as these impact on the care and education of pre-school children) but also, crucially, to give voice to professionals in the sector (Hargreaves, 1996). This was achieved through asking practitioners and leaders about their experiences, values and issues. 'Sector improvement' is used here in the widest sense, to embrace ideas of ECEC professionalism and quality; our approach takes seriously a range of practitioners' values and perspectives regarding their own day-to-day practice and their priorities for the MNS within the ECEC sector. This report explores the MNSs' impact upon other ECEC settings within their local area, but also identifies current and potential future issues which impede, or may impede, impact.

When the data collection was completed, the researchers independently immersed themselves (Norton, 2009) in survey data, field notes and interview transcripts. A snapshot of our data is presented below.

Summary of Findings

The data collected from our respondents suggested that there are serious concerns on the part of both MNS practitioners and leaders requiring urgent attention. Our overarching findings confirm those of Paull and Popov (2019) that the MNS is an ECEC and community resource currently at high risk and potential reasons for this are presented below.

First, it should be noted the anxiety that our respondents felt that, amid other pressing current political concerns, the ECEC agenda had slipped off the radar of national government concerns. This has had especially dire consequences for the MNS, acknowledged in recent reports as 'hidden' and expressed by many of our respondents as being misunderstood:

[We are] caught between definition as schools and general EY provision. We are beaten with the demands and regulation of schools while being funded as general provision

A number of other respondents lamented that, in general, the public, including local authorities, simply did not 'get' how MNSs differed from other early years (EY) provision.

Despite overwhelming research evidence demonstrating the vital role that high quality ECEC plays in long term life chances, many respondents shared their own experiences within the sector of being under-valued, working long hours combined with low pay and coping with a wage culture that does not remunerate the hours of unpaid work undertaken by many practitioners and leaders. Comments made by leaders and practitioners included:

I feel, as I'm sure everybody feels, that because of our non-statutory nature, we [as an MNS] are dismissed. We have the same running costs and overheads as a school... yet we're funded in line with a childminder.

Nursery practitioners are regarded as low-level staff with low qualifications. Plenty have degrees and have invested years into [Continuing Professional Development] but are still met with low paid and even degrading positions. Early years is so important to continued learning in a child's life ... this is not recognised in the insufficient funding and status it receives.

While I have always worked beyond my contracted hours, this has now become an expectation. Within my setting staff frequently work one-and-a-half to two-hours over their contracted hours most days

Despite MNSs being poorly funded, our data pointed to the invaluable role that they play, particularly within areas of disadvantage. Pointedly, the data demonstrated how MNSs were positioned to impact on their communities as a 'preventative service' with the potential to mitigate the involvement and associated costs of other services further down the line. The findings indicated an urgent requirement for young children's care and educational needs (particularly within these disadvantaged areas) to be re-evaluated strategically at central and local government level, in light of the challenges of inadequate funding.

Practitioners in MNSs saw their role as so much more than providing for the here and now; instead they considered the child's longer term future, as this leader explained:

So for me, it's really important that children from areas like this, high areas of deprivation, get the best chance they can, both in terms of their academic career, and their career when they leave school. Giving those most disadvantaged children the best early life experiences that we possibly can, is why we're here. That's why we do what we do

Much of the data spoke to what Silverman calls (2001:32) 'capacities that statistics cannot measure' which we have captured extensively in our wider report. This research opportunity has given light to the considerable value of the everyday, human encounters that are regarded as 'ordinary' within the fabric of the MNS:

We see some families go through some really terrible times ... but we were there along the way. And it might have just been a smile in the morning or a hug in the afternoon. A "Come on, let's go and get a cup of tea".

Parents need to know that if they come here to ask for support, actually, they will be listened to. And it doesn't matter if it's a busy day or not a busy day: you never don't respond, you never don't hear.

Probably all the maintained nursery heads will say the same. I'm the SENCO, I'm the family support worker, and I'm the one in a car on the Sunday night delivering a cot.

We are essentially doing the family support now. We are leading on early help plans; we are supporting parents ... The stuff that I would have [once] passed over to a family support worker ... we are now having to learn about housing, anything. I've just printed off a load of documents for court for a parent who's trying to get sole legal custody

They [families] may be bringing a grandchild back, but for them to come in and see that we're still here ... gives them the security and the trust in us to be able to bond.

[We have a] commitment and dedication to providing an inspirational, life-changing start to the children and families in our communities.

These taken-for-granted impacts that our respondents discussed included: a knowledge of children and families

built up over time to provide tailored support and guidance; an open and listening culture for parents and families over a 'cup of tea'; a sign-posting and provision of support in engaging with wider services beyond the MNS for the benefit of families within the community; a belief in the capacities of all children to achieve educationally and throughout life as a consequence of high quality ECEC provision. These were presented as responsibilities that MNS practitioners were passionate about and were committed to, but which were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as funds dried up. Instead they found that their energies were being directed towards "finding ways to survive" and raise sufficient funds to stay afloat.

This wider impact of the MNS on families and within communities should not, by any means, cloud the impact of their fundamental role in supporting the learning and development of pre-school children. This is where they excel, especially within the challenging contexts of SENDi and English as an Additional Language (EAL). The impact that they have upon children's achievement is almost taken as 'a given' whilst they share the wider social problems that they encountered and adeptly deal with. Nonetheless, comments relating to the child's learning and development suggested exceptional expertise, and included:

... there is that gap when they come; they come in significantly behind where they should be for their age, or they are behind by different proportions, and then a vast majority of our children go out where they should be. And so it converts from being 13% on track on entry to being 70% on track on exit. And our SENDi children make... at least good progress, if not better.

They do come in predominantly below age related expectation. 42% have EYPP funding, so [EY] pupil premium funding ... which is on the increase. So obviously, when they come in, they are coming from quite challenging backgrounds ... But when they leave us, they make significant progress ... 90% are at age related expectation or above when they leave ... including children with disabilities, 90% of them are where they should be; excluding children with disabilities, 96% are where they should be or above.

This success in evaluating and providing for the needs of the most deprived children, and giving those children an opportunity to thrive, runs parallel to the broader remit that MNSs maintain and extend: to mitigate the effects of disadvantage and poverty. After sharing the excellent assessment results that children had achieved, this leader added "but the most important thing is we have children who leave us and they're very confident, tolerant, curious and keen to learn".

MNSs deploy practitioners and leaders who are experts and specialist pedagogues, who push and challenge themselves to review and refresh their knowledge viewing this as part of their remit and identity:

It's the quality and the expertise that we've got here and being led by a specialist headteacher [that makes the difference]. So because of that, we can raise the standards.

Throughout the responses both practitioners and leaders referred to and were proud of the specialist knowledge and expertise that they held as a team. And despite the daily demands of their roles, all were eager to share this knowledge for the enrichment of other ECEC practitioners. All of the leaders in our research and 95% of the practitioners reported playing an active role in professional development activities. Two examples include:

We have led training regarding SENDi, Maths and Enabling Environments to the private and voluntary sector and the feedback has been very positive, which in turn will help staff and children throughout the EY sector.

We have an Autistic resource and our SENDi support has been valued far and wide in a wide range of settings.

But passion and enthusiasm is no longer proving sufficient to keep MNSs functioning. As this practitioner explained:

Early years are so important. It's like building a house, if you don't get the foundations right the rest will topple down. If we don't get children's early education right, then their future learning can be damaged. We need funds to train staff and keep good staff, money to buy specialist early years resources, to maintain buildings, etc.

The overarching barrier to the on-going and future success of the MNS lies in the financially challenged public service terrain within which it resides. As almost all our research respondents made clear, the loss of the resource of the MNS from the fabric of many urban communities would be reprehensible and short-sighted and virtually impossible to replicate once gone. Below a leader shares her fears for the families that they work with should the MNS need to close:

MNSs had efficiencies to make and some amazing partnerships and innovative and creative working relationships have developed from the current financial constraints, but there is literally no more slack left Not understanding how MNSs provide social insurance, not understanding the schism between the maintained sector and the PVI sector, not defining our real goals and opening up to the most promising avenues to realise these goals and not understanding the impact of the continued loss of Nursery schools from a strategic national, local and then funnelling down to community level, will be detrimental environmentally, structurally, politically, culturally, pedagogically and definitely from an economic perspective.

In light of this we make our recommendations below.

Recommendations

1. To address the urgency of the fiscal crisis in current and future funding of the MNS

It is crucial that the acute funding crisis with the MNS is addressed as an urgent priority before more of the MNS sector closes due to lack of funding. The range of services and levels of skill and expertise associated with the MNS is such that many reports have indicated the fiscal value added by the MNS in supporting the learning of children of disadvantage, children experiencing SENDi issues and families with pre-school children in need or crisis. This must be acknowledged within any future financial settlement.

2. To shift public conceptions at local, regional and national level concerning the importance and significance of ECEC in general and the MNS in particular.

The funding crisis combined with the lack of certainty about the future of their provision is causing MNS professionals, their families and communities anxiety, stress and angst. Central government must empower those within local government to work with leaders within the MNS to engage in dialogue with other ECEC providers and children/family services to identify their specialist, distinctive and particular contributory role. Providers and services must be enabled, through dialogue, to work within networks of support and co-operation rather than suspicion and competition. The role and remit of the MNS within ECEC must be made clear and transparent as a dynamic of local democracy for the

potential benefit of all families and children, in particular within contexts of need.

3. To recognise and champion the histories, accumulated knowledge and expertise contained within the MNS especially within the context of:

Knowledge, expertise and experience in pedagogies and practices to promote individual learning and achievement for all pre-school children. This is necessary in order to ensure children experience holistic learning, effective social development, and a sense of learning as intrinsically playful. This is integral to children having the confidence and resilience to see themselves as achievers and democratic citizens entitled to participate and have a voice, regardless of their range of abilities and societal differences as they move on through the 5-18 school system.

Knowledge, expertise and experience of regarding the child within the context of the wider family. MNSs should be further enabled to work with the wider family in matters that impact on the learning, education and well-being of the child and which enables vulnerable families to feel listened to, respected and supported in ways that are flexible enough to cope with the wide range of circumstances in which they find themselves.

Experience of a wider community remit in which the child and the child's family is promoted as being located within a wider community fabric of belonging. This will ensure that the MNS is enabled to continue work to link children and families with:

- *Professionals and services that are empowered to support the needs of the child and family;*
- *Other children and families in the area with whom they may be able to form supportive bonds that will sustain them beyond the opening hours of the MNS;*
- *Voluntary and charitable organisations whose remit and purpose is to offer support, encouragement and expertise to the child and the family within a fabric of a supportive community ethos;*
- *Opportunities and events that champion the capabilities and aptitudes of children and families and that do not always place them in deficit in order to presume to teach them more or differently;*
- *Primary and secondary schools to demystify statutory schooling and to promote the needs of children and families regardless of their SENDi status.*

Knowledge, expertise and experience in areas of SENDi and EAL. The particular professional make-up of the MNS means that they house specialist knowledge and expertise of the multi-faceted policy and practice characteristics of SENDi. The inclusive focus of the MNS means that it sees its role as preparing *all* children effectively for an appropriate educational future within 5-18 provision. MNSs should be provided further opportunity to share their knowledge of constructive and innovative ways to function in these specialist areas.

4. Acknowledging the levels of entrepreneurial and innovative experiences and capabilities of practitioners and leaders within the MNS.

Our research demonstrated that as a result of the period of crisis over the last few years, many leaders and practitioners have acquired new entrepreneurial skills in order to ensure the day-to-day running of their MNS. In alliance with local government and other specialist

statutory children/family/education services (including PVI settings), MNS leaders should be given opportunity to advise on how to deploy skills and capabilities most effectively. This could be of considerable benefit in supporting the field of ECEC to move forward within networks of local democracy.

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