

Rise and fall of childcare ambitions ^[1]

Despite certain social advancements over the past 50 years, the story of childcare in recent decades is blighted by a theme of decline

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Can we learn lessons from the past? My memoir 'Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible': 50 years of work in childcare and education takes an overview of what has been lost and what has been gained.

Fifty years ago, there were three big issues. First, there was a view, reinforced by government policy, that a woman's place was in the home; mothers should not be working. There was hardly any childcare, apart from childminding. There has been a sea change in attitudes towards women, partly because of feminist agitation all through the 1970s and 1980s.

Various campaigns set up community nurseries, funded by local authorities, which offered radical, visionary collective views of how children and their mothers and fathers might live and work, and how childcare workers could have solid careers. Now it is perfectly respectable for mothers to work and to seek childcare, and services have increased exponentially to meet the demand, although the vision of what might be possible in the way of good childcare has mostly faded, reduced to an Ofsted checklist.

INEQUALITY

Secondly, levels of inequality and poverty were shocking – especially in inner cities. Poverty and inequality have not changed very much, or have got worse over time. Housing tenure for the poorest is shockingly insecure, and drug misuse is widespread. It is disheartening to teach hungry and disturbed young children, and witness their suffering, and more disheartening still to realise those in power do not see, or worse, do not care about, what they have created through their policies. These are the children who, current research indicates, are missing out on childcare and early education. Their parents do not or cannot use it.

Thirdly, education, health and social services were unco-ordinated at national and local level. Documents of the time frequently referred to the muddle and fragmentation of provision. Co-ordination of services got better, then got worse again. In the late 1990s, the DfE took over responsibility for many of the early years services that were previously located in the Department of Health. At a local level, children's services departments were set up, and co-ordination was made much easier. But now local authorities have lost many of their functions.

Instead of deciding where and how nurseries could meet the needs of local people, LAs have no role in agreeing where nurseries should be sited or who should have priority. Similarly, they have no role, as they once did, over closures. If a nursery owner sells up or moves on, no-one is responsible for picking up the pieces. Local authorities no longer oversee any kind of expenditure.

IN CRISIS

For many years, the beacon of provision for young children was the freestanding nursery school or Children's Centre. These were havens for children, with trained teachers and spacious gardens. But they were expensive to run. Their numbers grew in the 1990s, with the Labour government. But many have since closed, and their expertise has been lost. Instead, Labour as well as Conservative administrations have promoted the private sector. Private nurseries now account for 84 per cent of provision for children three and under, and nearly 40 per cent of provision for children three to five.

The standards required for the private sector are far less rigorous than those for nursery schools. For instance, there is no absolute requirement for outside space. In poorer urban areas, private nurseries are often in cheap, cramped accommodation – converted shops or ex-industrial premises. Nor is there a requirement to employ full-time qualified teachers.

Nursery World has reported that staffing for private nurseries is in crisis, since teachers, and other qualified staff, are unwilling to work for small private companies whose pay and conditions cannot match those of the public sector. Nursery teachers used to be very well trained, to postgraduate level. The famous psychologist and nursery school head teacher, Susan Isaacs, who set up the department of child development at the Institute of Education, and Dorothy Gardner, her successor, used to argue that 'we cannot educate a very unhappy child...emotional satisfactions lie at the root of all intellectual interests and...feelings are the drivers of intellectual effort'. Their rigorous insights into child development, their ambitious intellectual aims for the staff who work with young children, have largely been lost.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Much more money has been spent on childcare and early education since the 1980s, and much more is needed. But the question is how it should be spent. Nursery schools and community nurseries had to be accountable to parents who used the service. There were annual reports, and parental representation on governing bodies. These notions of accountability and democracy seem to be lost, although they are very much alive in some other countries. Private nursery owners are not required to account publicly for their decisions, or their spending, and it is very unusual to find any kind of representative governing body.

The Tories seem to have forgotten about childcare in their anxieties about Brexit, and the Labour Party claims that it will provide 'childcare for the many'. But there is very little that is new in their proposals, and so much they could have drawn on if they had tried. There are indeed lessons from the past.

'Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible' is published by Routledge. A conference to explore these issues, Looking Back, Looking Forward, will be held at the UCL Institute of Education in London on 6 November 2018.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: advocacy ^[4]

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