The expansion of free childcare has been a Tory-fied mess of a bright Labour idea [1]

On a visit to a combined nursery and primary school, I saw how early years provision can really be transformed

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Source: The Guardian
Format: Article
Publication Date: 23 Apr 2024

AVAILABILITY

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Excerpts

Panic and a screeching U-turn. The prime minister dismissed claims there were too few nursery places for every two-year-old in England (with working parents) on 1 April, the day that entitlement to 15 hours a week began. He even said: "Staffing levels have increased and more people are at work in the sector and the number of places has also increased over the past year." Outside the Commons, you might call that an untruth. Ofsted's registers show a fall in early years places every year since 2016: 17,800 places were lost in the year to November 2023 alone.

As usual with the Conservatives' un-evidenced policies, blunt truth eventually hits them on the head. The Department for Education just confessed that it needs 85,000 more nursery places and 40,000 more staff to be able to meet its target of expanding 30 free hours to children aged nine months by September 2025. In an acute recruitment crisis, nursery work is on the Sun's list of the UK's most unpopular jobs. Neil Leitch, head of the Early Years Alliance, told me: "Pretending things are resolved is at best unhelpful and at worst shameful." The Alliance represents 14,000 nursery providers, and runs 41 not-for-profit nurseries, often in deprived areas. "All of them could accommodate more children if we could find appropriately skilled staff," he says, but so many leave due to exhaustion and low pay.

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The government calls it "childcare" as its stated aim is "to support increased parental engagement in the labour market": the OBR estimates 60,000 more parents will enter work. More GDP growth and less need for universal credit are good motives, but only up to a point. Listen to the language: the Tory "childcare" policy is about warehousing children, while a more forward-thinking policy would land on nursery education, which transforms a child's whole life.

This "childcare" also means only two-year-olds with working parents qualify, widening the social gulf: children most in need of a good nursery are the poorest, and most likely to have addicted, mentally ill or out-of-work parents. Add in the tens of thousands of migrant children, whose parents have "no recourse to public funds", who are denied equal nursery provision.

The shadow education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, has made early years a Labour priority. She plans "seamless support from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school" – and now the Tories are trying to cut in on Labour's idea.

Free breakfast clubs for all primaries in England is a first step in her vision of wraparound support for children, with a mental health counsellor in every secondary school. She plans nurseries embedded inside the education system, within primary schools with spare space as their numbers are falling.

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