

Quality universal childcare for 9bn pounds a year? A bargain ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The government looks set to revise its plan to abolish tax relief on childcare vouchers: it is "listening", as it should. Naturally the hostile press shouts "u-turn" and "embarrassing climbdown", but it need be no such thing. Bubbling under, however, are bigger problems about the quality and cost of childcare. Before Labour, the "cradle to grave" welfare state had no cradle. Sure Start, nursery schools and childcare are Labour's proudest boast -- but 12 years on a cat's cradle of complexity and threadbare quality demands a total rethink.

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Some history: there were always contradictory criss-crossing policy objectives -- all of them good. First, Labour came to power promising nursery schooling for all four-year-olds, a straightforward extension of universal education -- nothing to do with care. Labour came later to the very different idea of childcare: Harriet Harman, as incoming social security secretary in 1997, persuaded a sceptical Gordon Brown that his New Deal would never get single parents off benefits and into work without good care for their children. So tax credits were brought in to pay for up to 80% of the cost of childcare for the lowest paid working parents. That was a welfare-to-work policy, not education.

Next came the good feminist idea that all women should have the right to work: paid 19% less than men, many women were excluded from the world of work, unable to pay for childcare. So childcare vouchers were added to childcare tax credits -- a tax relief to encourage employers to offer help to parents: nearly 300,000 families get them. There was a good utilitarian reason for the state to encourage all women to work, not just those on benefits. One in three mothers will find themselves sole breadwinner for their children, so it's in the state's best interest to keep them working and off social security if their marriages fail.

A whole new set of objectives came with Sure Start, Labour's best monument. Its prime purpose is to rescue precarious families, set them on their feet and see their children get a good start in life. Social mobility was the goal, so that the most deprived have the same chance as the rest to develop and thrive. By primary school age, help is far too late.

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So, what's the problem? An archetypal New Labour error was built into the whole under-fives programme. A combination of market ideology and penny-pinching stopped this being the "world-class" system Labour keeps promising. The first error was to channel much of the money through private and voluntary childcare and nursery schools, for fear of being called "statist". Many of these are not high quality, only making a bare profit by employing less qualified staff. Children don't benefit from care by low-paid 16-year-olds who themselves failed at school. A cursory glance at Ofsted results shows that it is the state-run nurseries that in the main are "good" and "outstanding" with better staff, and are designated as beacon schools for training nursery teachers. Had Labour simply built more of these without the fiddly market in credits and vouchers, then it might have approached that world-class quality.

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These brutal facts are laid out in today's report from the Daycare Trust, in conjunction with the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Social Market Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation. In a scrupulous survey of all the research, Quality Costs shows how and why early-years help is not nearly good enough.

Quality staff are what matters. Small children have only a few years that will make or break them. All research shows good nurseries make all the difference: bad ones can be destructive or make no change. Ofsted visits are rare -- every three years -- and parents are easily misled by bright nurseries where staff do little for the children. Labour promises one graduate in every setting by 2015, but that is too little and too far away.

The Daycare Trust is half apologetic about its findings: before Labour there was virtually nothing. Now Sure Start is so self-evidently valuable that David Cameron promises to keep it -- though not to ringfence its cash. The report says that having all childcare as good as the best would cost 9bn pounds a year. Universities (not including research) cost 23.4bn pounds to deliver a less life-changing three years for only 40% of young people. Even in these stricken times, mainly free quality childcare should be Labour's big manifesto item, a reminder of what Labour did, promising much more.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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