

Must do better! Professor says Government wrong on childcare policy ^[1]

Childcare Professor gives a damning report on Government childcare policy and practice

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EXCERPTS:

Speaking at a conference at which I also was a speaker, Elizabeth Truss stressed that childcare costs and quality and the relationship between them was an important area for Government. In particular she spoke about getting deprived two year olds into nurseries for a free flexible 15 hour a week package - despite the fact that there are not many places in nurseries in deprived areas, and the government has little or no idea about how they can be created - maybe baby academies, or incentives to big childcare chains to open nurseries in run-down inner city areas, or making more use of childminders. Regulations could be relaxed if this would enable more places to be created. At the same time she wanted better qualified staff to work with children even though there was little or no incentive for them to do so.

The official theme of her speech was better and cheaper childcare, especially for deprived children. But the fine, earnestly expressed sentiments bore little or no relationship to reality.

She showed the kind of blandness and refusal to face the facts that we have come to expect under this government. Truss played the familiar tune of the Cameron led government - too much red tape, less regulation. It is better to get big business and entrepreneurs to come in and do commercially what -in their view- the state has previously done badly and at great expense to the taxpayer.

I was a fellow speaker at the conference table, invited because I have recently completed a comparative research project about the very topic raised by Elizabeth Truss - childcare costs and the quality of childcare.

My findings - taken mainly from the OECD family database which gives statistical information on childcare and early education provision - led me to an opposite conclusion to that of the Minister. Parents in England do indeed appear to pay an extremely high cost for childcare, but the reason is a simple one.

Almost every other country gives nurseries or providers the money directly to subsidize parents, so the cost at the point of use for parents is much lower. No parent then need pay more than 15-20% of family income on childcare. In England we give parents subsidies through the tax and benefit system, so that they have to claim the money back afterwards. Many people have acknowledged this is a very inefficient and wasteful system. So step one in lowering the cost would be to transfer the money given to support parents through the tax and benefit system directly to nurseries.

But step two, judging by the experience of many countries, is make sure financial regulations are in place to control how private operators spend the money they are given to provide childcare. Some kind of transparent system of financial accountability needs to be in place - like Norway, for example, where nurseries have to provide annual accounts which have to be agreed by parents. This system of funding and accountability favours the growth of community or non-profit nurseries rather than risk-taking high end childcare businesses in posher areas.

We do not have special financial regulations for nurseries but we do already have regulations controlling staff-child ratios and qualifications of staff in UK nurseries. These are about average for OECD countries, and there is no indication that deregulation of these aspects would lower costs, although there is every indication, according to international research, that deregulation would reduce the quality of nursery care.

The problem is not really money. We are a high spender on early education and care. But we spend very badly. We have a very muddled system of provision, some public, some private, some focused on care, some on education, with overlapping or competitive forms of early education and childcare in wealthier areas, and very little provision in poor areas. We don't have a clear idea of what we spend or where we spend it but we do know very clearly that deprived children are least likely to attend any kind of private provision.

As one of the other speakers at the conference pointed out, we don't have clear goals. Do we want children, especially poor children to benefit from education and have a good start to school, in which case why are we trying to develop so called "education" places at private daycare nurseries in wealthier areas which do not even have teachers on their staff?

Even if they can get there, the children will have to leave the private nursery after a year or two and go onto school - yet we know that parents don't like moving their children around from one place to another, and we also know young children need continuity of learning experiences.

Why do we think operating a business and making money looking after children is a good idea for young and vulnerable children? Or does the government think that childminders - even when they are untrained, live in high rise flats and have their own families to look after - can do the job of preparing poor children for school?

Do we want women to work in which case why are the costs of childcare so prohibitive? Why don't we encourage more flexible working and have better parental leave arrangements for babies whose cost is highest of all in nurseries?

This is a very British problem. Very few other countries in Europe operate in such a muddle. Private for-profit provision is rare, regulation is tighter all round, childcare and education are regarded as one and the same service, staffed by the same kinds of well-trained people, not mainly by ill-educated young girls straight from school.

Parental leave is fairer. Take-up of services is higher, and results for children are better. It could be a win-win situation. But instead the current policies of the government more or less ensure that it is a lose-lose situation, and the children who are losing most are the very ones they say they want to help.

-reprinted from the Information Daily

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