

The real problem with UK childcare? Lack of educated staff ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Childcare in England is of such poor quality that the Government has been wasting our money - £5.2 billion, annually, set to rise to £6.4 billion in the next parliament- by subsidising it, according to a report from the House of Lords.

Nearly a third of two-year-olds taking up the offer of free early education (which is extended only to the most deprived children) are doing so at places rated "requires improvement" or "inadequate".

The report makes for depressing reading in many ways: the stated goal of the tax-free childcare credit and the free hours of nursery care for children is to promote development for all children, to narrow the attainment gap between rich and poor, and to enable parents to work. But the dismal quality of care means that families face impossible decisions in which they must prioritise either their child's development or their bank account.

It calls for the Government to prioritise disadvantaged children, as it should. The attainment gap between the most and the least privileged children is at 13 per cent by just before they reach the age of two, and it continues to widen throughout childhood. Pre-school education improves children's development and behaviour, preparing them for school and life beyond. For the self-focused among us, it also leads to lower crime rates: with better education, everyone wins.

Moreover, the Lords have called for intervention at home which, while it may draw cries of paternalism, is also sensible. Among other problems, the poorer parents are, the less they talk to their children. This, in turn, slows development. One way to try to close the language gap is by coaching parents in talking to their children. The city of Providence, Rhode Island, has worked to close the gap by coaching parents on the importance of talking to their children - and how to do it - with interesting and positive results. Lord Sutherland, the chairman of the committee behind the report, suggested that this sort of intervention could be carried out by health visitors, who already have contact with at-risk families.

The report also calls for a radical improvement in the quality of nursery care in England, which has to be on the agenda of every party ahead of May.

The easiest way to improve nursery provision is to require that nursery workers have degrees in early childhood education and development.

Lord Sutherland, chairman of the committee behind the report, explains: "One key indicator of quality is the level of qualification of the staff. The presence of staff with a relevant degree involved in the planning and delivery of early education and care makes a significant difference to the quality and to the outcomes that can be achieved."

Note that the importance is in the planning and the delivery of the care; it won't work to have well-educated administrators dictating to underprepared people what they should teach. Education cannot be standardised to that degree. We need to teach our teachers how to think about and question the needs of young children.

When I visited a state-funded nursery in Stockholm last year, I was overwhelmed by the superiority of the Swedish system. I know that it gets tiresome hearing about how perfect Sweden is.

But this was a different world. Children were engaged in thoughtful play, led (as required by the school) by at least one person with a degree in early childhood education in each classroom.

There was a clear curriculum encouraging thoughtful play (note: not sitting in a circle reciting phonics or practicing handwriting). One corner of the classroom for four and five-year-olds had a human body, made of chicken wire, that the children had made together with their teachers, with red yarn running throughout the body to represent blood vessels coming from and returning to a crimson heart, made of papier mâché.

The children were engaged in age-appropriate projects: four-year-olds were studying different types of homes, gathering natural materials from a nearby park to build nests. Anny Bergstrom, the 32-year-old curriculum director at the Banerporten nursery, has a degree in early childhood education - one teacher in each age group is required to have this degree, so they can carry out the pedagogy they learnt at

university. Compare this to yet another project sticking glitter onto a piece of coloured paper for no apparent reason.

As I left the nursery, where all instruction was in Swedish, it struck me that Ms Bergstrom and her colleagues also had better English than many nursery workers I've met in London.

Early years education is often dismissed, or seen as something that anyone could do: certainly the rates at which we pay nursery workers shows how little we value their contributions; waiters are better paid.

We wouldn't want an English teacher who hadn't been educated beyond A-level to teach GCSEs, or reading in primary school. So why do we think of the early years as time to just watch children?

While our peers across Europe realised long ago that their governments had to invest in early years education to create inexpensive and well-staffed nurseries, Britain's children face intellectual and developmental neglect in a sadly unambitious system with poorly qualified staff.

We need pre-school teachers who are paid on par with other teachers, as they are entrusted with the development of our children.

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