
Like an ‘Uncontrolled Toddler’ Elizabeth Truss Risks Causing Chaos in England’s Nursery Education and Child Care Sector

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ABSTRACT This article looks at the impact of the Education and Childcare Minister on the provision of early childhood education and care in England. Policies being developed and promoted by Elizabeth Truss predate her appointment as a minister and are consistent with the radical neo-liberal agenda pursued by Secretary of State Michael Gove. The author draws on news articles and policy announcements and calls into question the misuse and abuse of international comparisons to justify changes to early years policy in England.

In September 2012 a cabinet reshuffle saw Elizabeth Truss replace LibDem Sarah Teather as Parliamentary Under Secretary for Education and Childcare. Given Truss’s credentials as one of the more virulent members of the Conservative Parliamentary Party (she is a founder member of the Free Enterprise Group of Conservative MPs and co-author of ‘Britannia Unchained’ [1]), it seems likely that she was Gove’s choice for the ministerial post. Like Gove, Elizabeth Truss is a believer in the unfettered market and is committed to the removal of red tape that gets in the way of the private sector being able to maximise its profits. She also shares his ability to seek out evidence from other countries to justify policy and then either misunderstand or completely misinterpret it. Like Gove, Liz Truss has adopted a ‘scorched earth’ policy, moving rapidly to alter the face of educare in England and making sure that it will be almost impossible for any future government to have a significant role in this particular area of social policy.

When it comes to the early years of education and childcare provision, Truss has a less than glowing record. In May 2012 she set out her vision for childcare in England in 'Affordable Quality' (CentreForum, 2012) [2], making a case for higher adult-child ratios for childminders and a model of provision based on the childminder agencies developed in the Netherlands. In the same pamphlet she proposed the bypassing of local authorities, with the funding for nursery provision going directly to 'academy nurseries'. A key tenet of her argument was that by deregulating childcare, providers would be able to look after more children and thereby employ more highly qualified staff. This argument was swiftly challenged by the early years sector. As Stuart Turner, Director of Professional Standards at the National Childminding Association, pointed out, 'the system in the Netherlands is now in the process of being abandoned because it was not successful; costs increased and quality was driven down' (PACEY, 2012).[3]

Comparisons with other European countries are oversimplified and Truss appears unaware of the structural differences that exist between the UK and most European countries. In the UK, funding is directed via the parent, who is then able to purchase childcare services from a number of different providers, whereas in most European countries the State provides most of the funding directly to the service providers. In the case of France (another country Truss uses as an exemplar but does not fully understand), childcare, whether in *Écoles maternelles* or in the form of after-hours provision in the *halte-garderie*, is provided by the Mairie or local authority. Typically, around 80% of the costs are met by the State, while in the UK the government contribution is indirectly made through subsidies and meets only around 13% of the costs.

When challenged, Elizabeth Truss is undeterred; she simply changes her focus and moves on, rather like a rapidly mutating virus. Once the flaws of the Dutch child-minding model had been exposed she flirted briefly with Scandinavian models before realising that they were dependent on high levels of taxation, and instead turned to France to support her case for increasing childcare ratios in England. In *More Great Childcare* (DfE, 2013) [4], she made the case for increased ratios as a means to reduce the cost of childcare in England and at the same time increase the quality of provision, conveniently avoiding the contradictory nature of achieving high quality on the cheap. Subsequent modelling of the impact of ratios, detailed in 'The Implications of Adult-Child ratios for Childcare Providers' (DfE, 2013) [5], was branded 'a work of fiction' (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2013) [6] and critiqued by the London Early Years Foundation (2013).[7] Once again Elizabeth Truss looked to France to justify her claims. In addition to having higher ratios, nursery teachers in France are (according to her) more highly qualified and better paid than their English counterparts. However, when you compare like with like, this turns out not to be the case. In France there are two categories of practitioners who work in *Écoles maternelles* – qualified teachers who follow exactly the same training route as primary school teachers, and nursery assistants who have a post-secondary qualification. If compared directly with state-

maintained nursery schools and classes, the picture is the same: teachers have the same level of qualification as primary school teachers and are required to have qualified teacher status, while nursery assistants have a minimum of a Level 3 qualification. Rates of pay are broadly comparable. Truss's comparisons are made between the state provision in France and the private and voluntary sector in England, a sector that is characterised by low pay and generally low levels of qualifications.

Similarly, when she announced on 11 April 2013 that 'Teach First' (*Nursery World*, 2013) [8] would be able to bring untold benefits to the under-fives, she based her argument on erroneous and misleading comparisons with France and Sweden. She failed, yet again, to compare like with like, arguing that practitioners in both countries are more highly qualified than their English counterparts. As I have argued elsewhere (*Nursery World*, 2013) [9], by comparing France, where provision is almost entirely within the state sector, with the private and voluntary sector in England, Truss shows a worrying lack of understanding of the sector for which she has responsibility. As a minister she should know that there are over 1300 nursery teachers with qualified teachers status working in maintained nursery schools in England. They have all been educated to degree level and many have a PGCE qualification which includes assessment at master's level. In addition to a degree they also enjoy the same rates of pay and conditions of service as their primary school colleagues. It is in the private and voluntary sector that the levels of qualification are low, something that is a major cause for concern that needs to be addressed. Truss has proposed that this can be achieved by increasing the adult-child ratio, which she claims would enable providers to take on more children, lower their fees and at the same time employ more highly paid teachers. This proposal, which assumes a 100% occupancy rate, was met with derision by the sector and it quickly became clear that the minister's knowledge and understanding of the economics of running a business is severely lacking.

That the Under Secretary for Education and Childcare seems to be totally unaware of the existence of state-funded nursery schools and classes is inexcusable. It is, however, to her credit that she has managed to unite a sector made up of state, private, voluntary sector providers and parents in opposition to her proposals. Such was the strength of opposition that in early June, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that plans to allow nurseries and childminders to look after more children were being dropped (*Pre-school Learning Alliance*, 2013).[10]

It is not just ratios to which Elizabeth Truss has directed her attention: in April 2013 the *Daily Mail* [11] reported her criticism of the established approach to the education and care of young children, where she described nurseries as being 'chaotic' and accused them of failing to prepare children for school life. The *New Statesman* [12] subsequently reported that children were, in her words, 'uncontrolled toddlers ... running around with no sense of purpose' and that she suggested that nurseries needed to be more like the *Écoles maternelles* in France, where children spend more time under the direction and

control of adults. Once again she provoked 'a storm of protest' (*Nursery World*, 2013) [13] from the sector. It was subsequently revealed by *Nursery World* [14] that the minister's comments were based on a total of six visits to early years settings between 2010 and 2013. Her claims about the superiority of the French system do not appear to be based on anything other than her personal opinion. Pre-school Learning Alliance Director Neil Leitch paints a very different picture on BBC News (2013) [15], and 'Starting Well', an international benchmarking study produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit [16], reveals that France scores lower than does the UK on all four measures used, ranking ninth for the quality of provision, against the UK, which is ranked third.

Like an 'uncontrolled toddler', it seems that Elizabeth's destructive tendencies are still being allowed to play themselves out. Following an extensive consultation on the Standards for Early Years Practitioners, calls from the sector for greater emphasis on play-based learning have been rejected (*Nursery World*, 2013) [17], and the recommendation in the Nutbrown review, 'Foundations for Quality' [18], that a 'new early years specialist route to QTS, specializing in the years from birth to seven, should be introduced, starting from September 2013' (DfE, 2012, p. 72), has been accepted only in part, as the new category of 'early years teacher' will not be awarded qualified teacher status. TACTYC, the Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators (*Nursery World*, 2013) [19], claims that rather than professionalising the early years workforce, this decision will serve to reinforce the lower status accorded to many working in the sector. Nursery teachers working in state-maintained nursery schools and classes will still be required to have qualified teacher status (QTS), and will enjoy higher status and pay than the sub-class of teachers working within the private and voluntary sector. Like her boss Michael Gove, Elizabeth Truss appears to be driven by ideology rather than by evidence and, like a virulent disease, is in danger of destroying early years education and childcare in England. It is positive that the entire sector is united against the worst elements of her proposals, but for how long? In mid-July, BBC News [20] reported a proposed change to existing legislation in order to open up the provision of childcare to schools and academies, which has the potential to sideline the smaller private and voluntary providers that are, in the main, opposed to the minister's plans. It remains to be seen whether schools will take up this newly endowed commercial opportunity, but it is, as are most of Truss's ideas, highly problematic. Experience of working with children's centres in London and the south-east of England has made me increasingly aware of the problems that can arise from co-locating childcare and wrap-around services with schools. First, there is a tendency for heads and governors to see these as services that meet the needs of the school first and foremost. Essentially they become a source of potential recruits for the school, with children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds being seen as less desirable. Second, claims that 'schools are central to their local community, trusted by parents' cannot be easily substantiated. Many parents in what are described as 'hard-to-reach' groups have had negative experiences in their own schooling, making it less

likely that they will make use of school-based services. There is no evidence that opening up the provision of after-school care to schools will reduce costs, and the proposal to remove adult-child ratio and qualification requirements for school-based providers of 'wrap-around' care is likely to adversely affect the safety and quality of provision.

Truss appears hell-bent on pursuing her own agenda without any apparent regard for the needs, rights or safety of either the adults or the children who will be most affected, rather like the 'uncontrolled toddler' of whom she has been so dismissive. Any prospect of her adopting a more considered approach that makes proper use of the research evidence and pays attention to the concerns of the early years sector in England is looking increasingly remote.

Notes

- [1] <http://www.elizabethtruss.com/about-elizabeth-truss-0>
- [2] CentreForum (2012) *Affordable Quality: new approaches to childcare* <http://www.centreforum.org/assets/pubs/affordable-quality.pdf> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [3] Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) (2012) http://www.pacey.org.uk/news/news/may_2012_news/deregulation_isnt_the_answer.aspx (accessed 23 July 2013).
- [4] Department for Education (DfE) (2013) *More Great Childcare*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/170552/More_20Great_20Childcare_20v2.pdf (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [5] Department for Education (DfE) (2013) *The Implications of Adult-Child ratios for Childcare Providers*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/202882/Ratios_economic_modelling.pdf
- [6] Pre-school Learning Alliance (2013) *Pre-school Learning Alliance Dismisses Government's Childcare Ratios Profits Report as a 'Work of Fiction'*. <https://www.pre-school.org.uk/media/press-releases/377/pre-school-learning-alliance-dismisses-government-s-childcare-ratio-profits-report-as-a-work-of-fiction> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [7] London Early Years Foundation (2013) *Countdown to Our 1st of June Picnic – A Plea to the Weather God*. <http://www.leyf.org.uk/blog/leyf-response-to-ratio-model/> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [8] *Nursery World* (2013) *Exclusive: Teach First will benefit under fives*. <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/article/1178135/exclusive-teach-first-will-benefit-fives?HAYILC=TOPIC> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [9] *Nursery World* (2013) *Do We Really Need Teach First for the Early Years?* <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/article/1178284/really-need-teach-first-early-years> (accessed 22 July 2013).

- [10] Pre-School Learning Alliance (2013) *Alliance Delighted by Government Decision to Scrap Childcare Ratio Plans*. <https://www.pre-school.org.uk/media/press-releases/380/alliance-delighted-by-government-decision-to-scrap-childcare-ratio-plans> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [11] *Daily Mail* (2013) A Generation of Unruly Toddlers: minister under fire for 'ill-judged' claims that nursery children aren't taught manners. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2312657/A-generation-unruly-toddlers-Childcare-Minister-Elizabeth-Truss-ill-judged-claims-nursery-children-arent-taught-manners.html> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [12] *New Statesman* (2013) Like Most Parents, Liz Truss Appears to Be Making it up as She Goes Along. <http://www.newstatesman.com/glosswitch/2013/04/most-parents-liz-truss-appears-be-making-it-she-goes-along> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [13] *Nursery World* (2013) Sector Vents Anger over Childcare Minister's Remarks. <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/article/1179418/sector-vents-anger-childcare-ministers-remarks> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [14] *Nursery World* (2013) Childcare Minister Has Visited Six Nurseries 'Officially'. <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/article/1180360/childcare-minister-visited-six-nurseries-officially> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [15] BBC News (2013) Toddlers 'Cry for a Month in French Nurseries'. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22815837> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [16] Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) *Starting Well: benchmarking early education across the world*. Lien Foundation. http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/publications/sw_report.pdf (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [17] *Nursery World* (2013) Government Rejects Calls for More Focus on Play in New Qualifications. <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/article/1190602/government-rejects-calls-focus-play-new-qualifications> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [18] Department for Education (DfE) (2012) Foundations for Quality: the independent review of early education and childcare qualifications <http://media.education.gov.uk/MediaFiles/A/0/9/%7BA098ADE7-BA9A-4E18-8802-D8D4B060858D%7DNUTBROWN%20FINAL%20REPORT%20-%20final.pdf> (accessed 22 July 2013).
- [19] *Nursery World* (2013) Why Early Years Teacher Standards Fail the Youngest Children. <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/article/1192249/why-early-years-teacher-standards-fail-youngest-children?HAYILC=RELATED&HAYILC=INLINE> (accessed 23 July 2013).
- [20] BBC News (2013) Schools 'Well-placed' to Offer Childcare, Say Ministers. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-23328459> (accessed 22 July 2013).

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