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Early Years in Crisis?

Reflecting on the past ten years, hoping for the future

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Anyone involved with early education in England over the last 10 years or so will have been struck by the unprecedented stream of new initiatives. Early years specialists had always complained that they were ignored, devalued and marginalised. We were often referred to as the Cinderellas of the profession, so difficult was it to get our concerns on the national agenda. So, has the new focus on early years been beneficial? This article offers some personal reflections on the last 10 years and some hopes for the future.

In all of my work I am driven by the following strong beliefs:

- Young children have a right to an enjoyable, stress-free childhood
- PSE and communication skills are the key priorities for children under six
- The younger the children the more highly trained and skilled their practitioners need to be
- Practitioners have a responsibility to challenge developmentally inappropriate initiatives and practices and have the right to be supported in this role.

These beliefs influence my thinking and practice and also my view of new initiatives and directives. For me, the last 10 years have been a roller coaster of emotion and there have been times when I wished the government had continued to ignore us! So, what has been positive and what has been regrettable?

Children

Before looking at policy it is essential to remind ourselves of the children it is designed to support. Children are a product of the world they live in and their development is affected by what they experience at home and in their communities. Increasing numbers

of children in the 21st century live in fractured families where relationships are complex and sometimes challenging. Child abuse remains persistently prevalent. Many still live in poverty in spite of the Government's efforts to tackle this, whilst others have so many material goods they seem to have lost the art of creating play opportunities out of next to nothing. Few children have opportunities to play outside freely in the way that previous generations did and there is concern about children's fitness and general health. Indeed, some specialists have warned that some of today's 3 year olds will not outlive their parents. Television, video/DVD and computer games have an increasing role in children's lives and some argue that this is one of the causes of the increased numbers of children with language delay.

From this very brief overview of some of the social conditions children experience, it would be reasonable to conclude that national policy should place a strong emphasis on personal social and emotional, physical and language development. It is also clear that practitioners are key to offering security, and consistency of approach, to groups of children with such wide-ranging needs.

Quality of early years provision

Over the last 10 years or so we have seen the introduction of the nursery voucher scheme and its rapid replacement by the nursery grant scheme. This led to all forms of provision in the maintained, independent, private and voluntary sectors being able to claim they provided nursery education. Quality was evaluated by OFSTED inspections. There is little doubt that, overall, quality of provision has improved, with many more practitioners accessing in-service training, but is it good enough? It is still difficult to compare the quality of maintained provision in nursery schools, nursery classes and maintained Children's Centres with provision in the private, independent and voluntary sectors as the inspection regimes are different. Several recent research projects (EPPE, REPEY and the Millennium Cohort study) concluded that quality care and education for children is highest when teachers are employed to work directly with the children. Nursery schools and Early Excellence Centres with their specialist Headteachers and teaching staff were found by EPPE to offer the best outcomes for young children. In spite of this glowing endorsement Early Excellence Centres have become Children's Centres and many are facing serious funding cuts as they lose their Early Excellence money and transfer to less generous Children's Centre funding. Nursery schools have

also been (and still are) under threat. A large number have closed over the last 10 years but many others have become part of bigger multi-disciplinary Centres. These Children's Centres with a strong nursery education core have been found to offer the best outcomes for children and families. By contrast the Millennium Cohort Study (2007) found that 'centres linked with Sure Start Local Programmes were of poorer quality, possibly due to the focus on family rather than child-based services.' We now have a great deal of evidence highlighting the characteristics of provision which offers the best service for children but in 2007 only a minority of settings have these characteristics.

Quality of workforce

Over the last 10 years or so, qualifications and routes into work with young children have proliferated. The internationally acclaimed NNEB qualification has been replaced by NVQs, and teacher training has become so generic there is now a dearth of real early years specialists. On the other hand many practitioners have achieved Foundation and Early Childhood Study degrees and others have gone on to study for MAs or even PHDs. There are now some very well-qualified leaders in the field.

Training overall has become more accessible. Placement based training routes are widely available enabling many more practitioners to train whilst earning a living. Whilst this is to be welcomed, there is concern that the quality of qualifications is too dependent on the practice observed in the placement and on the quality of the assessor.

Employers argue that it is difficult to know what someone with NVQ3 should be capable of when practitioners holding the qualification have serious gaps in their knowledge and understanding. It was particularly alarming to learn that many early years practitioners have not achieved full NVQs (Adult Learning Inspectorate 2007) because they were unable to achieve the standards for literacy and numeracy.

Early Years Professional (EYP) status was introduced in 2006 to increase the number of graduate leaders in the field. In the future it will be essential for every setting to have an EYP leading practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The first groups, who included a high proportion of teachers, have achieved the status via the shortest of four pathways. Others are following the longer pathways. It is feared that, in the future, those without a degree, or with a degree completely unrelated to early childhood education, will be able to achieve the status. Anecdotal evidence indicates that EYP

status raises many of the same concerns about consistency as the NVQ qualifications have done.

As we saw earlier, the quality of education and care is highest when teachers are employed to work directly with the children. Although some EYPs are also early years teachers, many will not be. There is a danger that, in the long term, teachers will be replaced by EYPs with vastly inferior pay and conditions of service. This would have serious consequences for the status of the early years profession as a whole.

Curriculum

Prior to 1996 the Government had never imposed any form of curriculum structure on those working with children from birth to five. In 1996 the Desirable Learning Outcomes were introduced in conjunction with the nursery voucher scheme and OFSTED inspection. These were replaced in 2000 by the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS). This new Guidance was widely welcomed as it included principles and practice guidance which were already well embedded in best practice and established the period from 3-5 as a key stage in its own right. This document enabled reception teachers to bring their classes back into the early years domain (rather than Key Stage 1), and to argue for outdoor facilities.

Birth-to-3 Matters was introduced in 2003 and was widely acclaimed, although less experienced practitioners have sometimes found it difficult to use. However, just as these two documents were becoming familiar, the Early Years Foundation Stage appeared and must be implemented in September 2008. It is difficult to see how this framework takes us on from where we were. The separation of the practice guidance from the statutory requirements will inevitably lead to inconsistent interpretation, and the learning and development grids (which track each early learning goal back to birth) will be used by weak or inexperienced practitioners as a checklist to lead planning and assessment – this is exactly what has happened with the stepping stones. Much of the practice guidance, because it covers from birth to the end of the reception year, is vague and the photos and video material do little to clarify practitioner's thinking about vital aspects such as the learning environment.

Tensions are already arising between this document which claims to promote a personalised approach to planning and the implementation of the Rose Review, which recommends that children should be taught synthetic phonics. Although Rose and the EYFS document state clearly that practitioners should use 'principled professional judgement' as to when systematic phonics teaching should start and that for most children this should be 'by the age of 5', once they have accessed a language rich curriculum, many practitioners say they are attending literacy training where they are being pushed to start synthetic phonics teaching much earlier. Once again Government thinking does not 'join up' and practitioners are left to deal with the mixed messages.

Hopes for the Future

In conclusion, I believe that the early years sector is currently teetering on the edge of a serious crisis. I hope that, before it is too late, Government will:

- take active steps to protect the remaining nursery schools and to ensure that Children's Centres with a strong nursery school presence do not lose funding – these provide the role models of excellent practice that must not be lost.
- strengthen entry and initial qualifications for all early years work so that we move away from the idea that anyone can work with the little ones.
- re-establish a specialist early years teacher programme which covers from birth to 8 and which prepares candidates for interagency working. If such a teaching qualification were available there would be no need for EYP status.
- recognise that waiting longer (till at least year 1) before introducing formal teaching of reading and writing would have long term benefits.

Above all, I hope that as a society we will appreciate the needs of our youngest citizens and enable them to enjoy a happy, playful early childhood.

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