**Being Bold in 2018: New Year Resolutions for Ofsted, the DfE and policy makers**

**Di Chilvers – Advisory consultant, author and researcher in early education**

I don’t usually sit down and write out my resolutions for the New Year as I have got into the habit of having a dry January and that usually does it! But this year is different – 2017 was not a great year for many reasons and then it started to look even bleaker for young children with the arrival of Ofsted’s Report *Bold Beginnings* (Dec 2017), research showing that children in Nursery and Reception classes are being streamed into ‘ability groups’ (National Education Union) and that £10 million will be spent on a one size fits all Baseline Assessment when this money (which will probably reach at least £20 million when you add in all the other expenses) could be put to much better use in the EYFS along with the millions that have been spent on 30hrs Funding.

2018 has to look better for everyone in the Early Years Foundation Stage but particularly for young children and their families. They deserve some Bold Beginnings which will nurture, support and stretch their development and learning in all aspects of their lives, tuning into where they are NOW and giving them aspirations for a more creative, inspiring and exceptional educational experience in school, for a future that we can only imagine. This aim in itself requires *all of us to be Bold* to make sure that young children have the early childhood experiences and opportunities they need and deserve in the first 72 months of their lives. These are some of my thoughts…

**Bold Resolutions for all of those who are involved in young children’s lives but especially Ofsted, the DfE, Policy Makers, Head Teachers and Curriculum Leads in Schools**

**Resolution 1: Go back to the values, themes and principles of the EYFS and talk about them together**. **They are a Statutory Duty for the Early Years Foundation Stage which is a Key Stage in its own right from birth to 60+ months**

Being Bold means going back to your values and principles and asking the question posed by Loris Malaguzzi in 1944, “*What kind of future do we want for our children?*” Malaguzzi, a primary teacher, was determined, along with many families, to create a better future for the children in Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy after the Second World War. In Reggio they still ask this question now as the landscape for them has changed over the years as it has in our country.

Education, like Dr Who, needs to re-generate and transform in light of the present and future we all live in. It has to respond to the needs of the current generation and those to come and not be a constant replaying of values that belong in the early 19th century or based on ageing politicians experiences of public school. The view that knowledge on its own is everything and measurement of knowledge by binary testing, starting at 4 years old, will provide an education for all is inherently flawed and will not raise the creative thinkers of the future.

It’s time to be Bold and recognise that…

We cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them

Albert Einstein

It is 2018 and we still have to defend the values and principles of early education despite knowing so much more about the impact high quality early education has on young children’s development, thinking and learning in the most critical period of their lives. Wide ranging research, some commissioned by this Government (SEED) and previous Governments (EPPE, REPEY) as well as research in brain development, particularly regarding the sensitive period of birth to 7 years old ([Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/5-steps-for-brain-building-serve-and-return/)) and the development of executive functioning including self-regulation and meta-cognition.

Having to consistently defend early education, the best early intervention strategy we have for ensuring all children have the strongest start in life, is exhausting, frustrating, condescending and above all limiting the opportunities the sector has in developing the quality of pedagogy and practice to be comparable with outstanding practice in other countries. It is a sector which has become a political football with point scoring on all sides and no one listening to hard evidence, or professionals, or parents, or children. If Early Years was a football club they would have sacked the managers by now!

**Resolution 2: Remember that all children are competent and capable participants in their development, thinking and learning.** **How you view children, including babies and toddlers will define how you educate them and the aspirations you have for them**

Young children make their own Bold Beginnings long before they enter a Reception class. They have already:

* taken bold steps in acquiring language and making their voice heard
* learned to walk, move and have physical control of their bodies
* connected with others, building relationships and becoming social
* developed a sense of self, their personality, confidence and well-being
* become primed thinkers and learners; making Bold steps to Play and Explore as Active Learners and Creative and Critical Thinkers

When children reach the Reception class in September they are between 48-60 months old and have experienced a wide range of learning opportunities, some greater than others. They come with a past on which their transition should be built in bespoke and sensitive ways especially in the first half-term to ensure that their developmental momentum is maintained.

**Resolution 3: Children are all Unique. They have different starting points, different experiences and different needs. Being Bold means knowing and understanding each child as an individual person**

Beginnings are very different for children; they all have unique pathways and experiences which mean they have distinct starting points. For example, the beginning for a summer born boy (who may also be premature) is going to be up to 12 months different from his peers who were born after September 1st. Knowing and understanding the impact of children’s unique starting points and pathways on their developmental progress is a crucial part of teaching otherwise we are in danger of making assumptions about learning.

Education is not a one size fits all, mass-produced conveyor belt of teaching measured by narrow, often binary, outcomes. In the 21st century we have to be more aspirational and imaginative than this; what we need now more than ever is unique, creative and deep thinking learners.

**Resolution 4: Ensure that all of those who make decisions about teaching and learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage have a full and deep understanding of the way in which young children develop and learn** (or find someone who does)

Bold Beginnings for Reception (F2) are about understanding that children’s development and learning has already begun and that the mission is to seamlessly pick up the ‘baton’ and maintain the momentum of each child’s learning journey. It’s about working from the ground up and not the top down; the direction of travel begins at children's starting points and builds on these foundations.

“By tuning in to the child’s thinking, the practitioner is helped to focus on the right subject matter, to follow the connections that the child is making in their thinking, and to respond appropriately with conversational turns that maintain the child’s learning momentum.”

Julie Fisher, (2016, p. 79)

Indeed, Ofsted are interested in children’s *starting points and* want to know about the progress they make in their learning and development relative to where they started (Ofsted August 2015, Ref.150068 p.146).

**Resolution 5: Please can we all be Bold and read all the research on how play, for young children, is an integral and essential part of their thinking, learning and development? It is time to acknowledge this and see what is in front of us when we make informed observations of children’s play – we are seeing young children learn.**

Children’s talk and child-initiated play are their Bold Beginnings into mathematics, reading and writing, as well as many other aspects of their development and learning. For example:

* babies and toddlers engaged in their innate schematic play are forging the early foundations of spatial awareness, speed, distance, time and capacity to mention a few mathematical concepts
* imaginative play supports the development of creative and critical thinking and significantly underpins the ability to move from concrete to symbolic thinking. A cognitive shift change which enables children to make sense of the abstract symbols and letters of phonics, reading, writing and maths
* child-led play in continuous provision is where we see children’s true understanding and mastery of their learning; it’s where they ‘get it’ and can start to connect and deepen their learning in collaboration with others

This all needs adults to understand the complexities of child development including cognitive and language development. Adults who work with young children and those who make decisions about the way in which they are taught (and tested!) should have an informed, professional understanding of child development and the psychology of learning.

Teaching young children is a highly skilled process, very different to the way in which teaching is undertaken in KS1 and KS2; it is about the complex relationship between child-initiated play and adult-focussed teaching which Ofsted has helpfully covered in ‘Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?’ (Ofsted, July 2015) and in its definition of teaching (Ofsted August 2015, Ref.150068 p. 35/36 and Ref.150066 p. 59)

“While long-held beliefs about teaching and play have proven difficult to shift, the danger of allowing them to continue is all too real. If those in the early years sector continue to see teaching and play as separate, disconnected endeavours our future generations will continue to fall at the first hurdle.” (Ofsted July 2015 p. 5)

Using simplistic assessment tools and binary tests to capture the complexity of young children’s thinking, understanding and learning is like trying to condense the works of Shakespeare into one sentence. The richness and depth of their understanding is lost along with their creativity, spontaneity and originality.

Informed observation of children engaged in autonomous child-led play will tell skilled adults all they need to know about their progress and development; a statutory assessment process that is already used in the [Early Years Foundation Stage](https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2017/03/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf) (p.13) and described by the Standards and Testing Agency as *Responsible Pedagogy* ([EYFS Profile Handbook 2017 p.11](https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2017/02/2017_EYFSP_handbook_v1.1.pdf))

**Resolution 6: Acknowledge that the Early Years Foundation** Key **Stage is the Bold Beginning of children’s lives beyond home, with Childminders; in Play Groups; Private Nurseries and Pre-Schools; Children’s Centres and Nursery Schools and Schools. These are much more than places to ‘get children ready for School’. They are places where children’s thinking and learning happens in its own right as part of the momentum of their development without which there would be no firm foundations on which to build in KS1**

Bold Beginnings are about building the foundations of lifelong learning or what Guy Claxton calls ‘learnacy’ or ‘learning power’. The Characteristics of Effective Learning encompass all these dispositions and attitudes and provide the scaffold for teaching knowledge (the areas of learning) and understanding which makes contextual sense to children. They are the tools for becoming a Bold thinker and learner from a position of autonomy, independence and self-regulation. We can see this in Bailey’s reflections on his learning…

“All year I have been making things out of paper, Sellotape, string. I know you have to make things the right size. If you want to change the size you can, but you do have to compare. I know that you make my worm the longest I need to know how long Carrigan’s is. I can only know that if I compare it. But I remember you showed me how to make things level. Today I remembered myself.”

Bailey (5 yrs. old) is Boldly and confidently making complex connections in his thinking and life-long learning; he has already Begun…

**Resolution 7: Read the Early Childhood Forum’s [Charter for Early Childhood – Transforming policy](https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/ECF_charterleaflet_June2014_v9.pdf)**

**[and practice](https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/ECF_charterleaflet_June2014_v9.pdf) for a clear understanding of the key priorities of Early Education (0-7 yrs.) which, when combined together, provide a cohesive approach to early intervention. Have the courage to stick to what we know will have an impact on children’s well-being, development and progress and see it through over the long term. Remember that children and families are not political footballs!**

Finally make a promise to **Listen** to children and what is meaningful to them in their lives, especially in their child-led play…

**A CHILDREN'S CHARTER FOR THINKING AND LEARNING**

* I make sense of my world in my own unique way through what interests me
* I view myself as a competent thinker and learner
* I am a different kind of thinker to an adult - what interests me is very different to what interests you
* I like to construct my learning together with the other children and adults around me
* When I follow my interests I begin to think in a much 'deeper way'. I can 'unpick' my ideas and 'explore' through the activities I am interested in
* I spend a long time at the activities that interest me. I concentrate for longer, become very involved and persist at what I am doing
* When I am interested in an activity I want to keep coming back to it day after day. I get excited about my learning, it's fun and I enjoy it - I want to do more
* I like my thinking and learning to be real and to be part of something interesting, like trains, messy play, people and music. I don't want my learning to be separated into pieces like literacy, numeracy, geography - I learn in a holistic way
* When I can follow my interests and adults support me (and are interested as well), this makes me feel good. Then I feel confident, secure and happy. I trust people and make good relationships with them
* When I follow my interests, my 'thinking language' becomes more creative. I will invent words like 'clunks' and 'bobbles' to explain what I mean and be very creative. I like to think out loud and I can do this through my talk. I can also do this through my non-verbal expressions, through my behaviour, through watching others and through my drawings, pictures and models. You just have to listen to me
* When I follow my interests I can offer my own ideas and express them. I can build them up with other children and adults. I can sustain my thinking and share it with those around me

This charter was formed from a research project in 2008[[1]](#footnote-1), which looked at thinking and learning from the children's perspectives and how they take responsibility for their own learning through their ideas, interests and child-led play. It is the scaffolding for Sustained Shared Thinking and led the children into deeper levels of thinking, talking and learning.

Other research projects[[2]](#footnote-2) (Talk for Reading, Talk for Maths Mastery, Balancing Child-initiated Play and Sustained Shared Thinking) in the Foundation Stages and KS1 (Y1) in schools over the last 5 years have shown a substantial impact on children’s development, learning and progress. The projects all have in common a child-led approach to learning and teaching which has been based on Ofsted’s definition of teaching and [Ofsted’s Good Practice Survey ‘Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?’](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-a-balancing-act)

**Di Chilvers – January 2018**

1. Re Footnotes 1 and 2 - Di Chilvers has led clusters of Schools in Extended Professional Development Initiatives which use an evidence based approach to monitor the impact of the project on children’s progress and the quality of pedagogy and practice. For more information on Initiatives and Projects see Di’s Website at [www.watchmegrow.uk](http://www.watchmegrow.uk) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)