Reclaiming Our Children's Rights from the Jaws of School Effectiveness

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Currently, within the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (birth-8 years) in England, a conflict exists between the need to respect children's rights and the 'pernicious paradigm of school effectiveness' (Fielding 2001: 134) which is now infiltrating early years' settings. Despite apparently laudable intentions to positively affect children's access to high quality provision (DCSF 2009), in practice the focus on standards disrespects our children by imposing on them irrelevant external top-down pressures. These pressures distract from processes which might support children's genuine learning and development needs. This short paper considers the context of children's rights and school effectiveness in England before considering how outcomes might be discarded in favour of more meaningful processes as a measure of high quality provision that is genuinely respectful of our children's rights.

Children's Rights

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNESCO 1989), contains 54 articles which specify, among other issues, children's rights not to be economically exploited, that children's best interests be addressed as a primary consideration, that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that those views are given due consideration.

Despite UK ratification of the Convention in 1991, the United Nations has repeatedly voiced much criticism of the UK government's lack of progress in meeting its obligations in relation to children's rights (Harvey 2002). More recently, the UK government has claimed that progress has been made towards addressing many points for criticism (HMG 2007), with, for example, the introduction of the children's agenda. However, given that UNICEF placed Britain's children as poorest in terms of well-being within a measure of 27 'rich countries' (2007), it seems that our children's rights are not as well addressed as we might wish.

Part of the reason for this may be an embedded cultural belief in England that children are inferior to adults. For centuries in western cultures, the particular needs of children were

not recognised (Aries, 1962; Jenks, 2005). With the beginning of the Enlightenment in Western Europe and America in the seventeenth century, perceptions began to change. By the end of the eighteenth century, there had been a shift from universal acceptance of religion as the leading driver for how people lived and thought in favour of 'emancipating mankind through knowledge, education and science' (Porter 2001:5). With a new thirst for literacy and education gathering pace and increasingly quenched, those who were not literate or educated became separate from those who were; incidentally, this is as true of England now as it was then (Sergeant 2009). In the new context that the Enlightenment heralded, children in western Europe and America became distinguishable by their 'deficit' in literacy and education simply because they were not yet literate or educated (Jenks 2005). Consequently, 'childhood' became defined as discrete from 'adulthood' (Aries 1962; Postman 1982). Childhood was a period for making up the deficit: a time for filling children with knowledge in preparation for adulthood. With a few exceptional periods (post-Plowden, for example), this has continued in England to the current 'fever pitch'. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that there was a 'golden age of childhood' within western cultures between about 1850-1950 (Postman 1994).

In addition to literacy and education, a third strand has been proposed as contributing to the separation of childhood and adulthood during the Enlightenment: sexual innocence (Postman 1994). In European cultures in the middle ages, paedophilia had been widespread (Aries 1962). The idea that this might be inappropriate gained ground as people increasingly accessed writers such as Erasmus who suggested in his *Colloquies* of 1516 that sexual modesty was essential to any civilised society and that young people should be protected from sexual encounters (Postman 1994). This became widely accepted as the dominant discourse from the Enlightenment through to the current day (Piper 2000). However, more recently, there has been growing concern about precocious sexual awareness among pre-pubescent children (Renold 2002). Much of this may be modelled behaviour: many children in contemporary western cultures have relatively ready access to portrayals of adult sexual behaviours via technologies that were inconceivable until recently. Commercialism also seems to play a role with wide availability of sexually provocative goods aimed at children (Postman 1994; Meikle, 2007; Meltzer 2009).

In this context, then, prevailing alongside England's children's agenda, it appears that there is considerable work to be done before England can be proud of its record on

children's rights. Nutbrown suggests that 'Respecting children means finding out what they think and feel and responding honestly to their ideas and emotions' (1996: 43) but currently there seems to be little of this in relation to statutory education in England (Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE 2008). Of greatest concern for English ECEC is that the current government agenda seems destined to disrupt features that have long been strengths, many of which have their provenance in the English nursery school movement. Examples are reciprocity between practitioner and child and the practitioner's endeavour and ability to empower young children. Paradoxically, then, the obsession with measurable outcomes may cost us dearly in terms of processes of high quality learning and care. A nursery colleague of mine shared an experience she recently had which exemplifies this. She was criticised by an OfSTED inspector for not making a group of three-year-olds practise forming letters. Though self-effacing, that practitioner is a qualified early years' teacher *and* an Early Years' Professional and has many years of experience. The inspector based the criticism on observing her during an adult-focused activity with five children for five minutes. Who knows best the children's needs?

'Effectiveness'

In the form of simplistic measurements of EYFSP data and transmuting OfSTED schedules, the 'pernicious paradigm of school effectiveness' (Fielding 2001: 134) that has increasingly prevailed in English schooling since the 1988 Education Reform Act is now intruding on provision for children aged 0-5 years in England.

This intrusion has recently gathered significant pace. However, processes- rather than outcomes seem to be a more effective way to evaluate quality in the complex worlds of young children (Gammage 2007; Dahlberg *et al.* 2007; Laevers 2000). There is a wealth of literature and empirical research that should give us confidence that particular processes lead to high quality learning for young children (*inter alia* Bredekamp and Copple 1997; Brown and Cleave 1991; Ball 1994; Pascal and Bertram 1997; OECD 2001, 2006; Moyles *et al.* 2002; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002; Sylva *et al.* 2004; Montie *et al.* 2006; Evangelou *et al.* 2009). These include:

- Genuine and strong philosophy developed by and for each setting to create an underpinning ethos appropriate to take account of those in the setting;

- Play-based learning that starts from each child's interests and builds through provision for autonomous experiences and skilful interactions leading to co-construction of new understandings;
- Respectful, equal engagement with children's primary carers;
- Sufficient staffing characterised by democratic structures and practice with high quality training embedded in the setting's work;
- Sufficient access for everyone in the setting to physical resources that are fit for the purpose of high quality learning [these do not have to be smart or expensive];
- Concern and provision for children's care in equal measure to concern and provision for education;
- Monitoring, evaluation and review which include everyone in the setting so that provision is developed by everyone to prioritise each child's needs.

Many of these processes have been addressed within the *Early Years Foundation Stage*. Although it has its flaws and its detractors (Lipsett 2007) EYFS has, on balance, been a driver for positive change in many settings and could beneficially be extended for older children (Alexander 2009). This is not to say that there is not much work still to be done, for example in addressing inappropriate literacy expectations and encouraging practitioners to engage in more critical open discourse (OpenEye 2009). However, given there is currently well supported consensus on a number of processes which best support young children's learning, it is wholly appropriate that this discourse should continue to be developed dynamically by those engaged in practice and research in the field.

My current concern lies in the real damage that is being done by the methods currently being used in England to judge provision. These methods are politically motivated: the more funding government puts into ECEC, the more it demands a measurable return on its investment. However, external simplistic measurements of EYFS Profile data and 'snap' inspections are not fit for the purpose of evaluating complex provision. There is now disproportionate focus on EYFSP data (DCSF 2009) and a state of high anxiety regarding OfSTED among those working with children (Curtis 2009). Both adversely affect provision because they divert staff attention from the children's needs in the micro-contexts within which those needs arise: this is disrespectful of our children and sidelines their rights.

Reclaiming Young Children's Rights

Respecting children's rights in the ways that Nutbrown suggests (1996) means that we need to focus on more important *processes.* ECEC should be developmentally and contextually appropriate for its children (Bredekamp and Copple 1997; Gammage 2002). To achieve this, practitioners must be able to find out and respond to children's concerns and they need sufficient resources to do so. Practitioners need both empathy and expertise, which means they need to be well nurtured themselves in terms of high quality training, pay and conditions. For this to happen, ECEC needs to be morally, rather than politically driven and government may have to accept that it may not be possible or desirable to measure quality of ECEC provision quantitatively.

In our ECEC settings, the focus on externally dictated outcomes and the ways they are measured in the form of EYFS Profile data and the current OfSTED inspection regime are militating against our children's rights. Given England's exceptionally poor record on children's rights, coupled with our children's poor well being in comparison with similar countries, the use of these instruments of school effectiveness for judging and controlling ECEC provision in England should be retracted as a matter of urgency.

Some questions:

1. **What do you see as the key processes for high quality ECEC?**

2. **What have your experiences of OfSTED been?**

3. **What are your experiences of the EYFS Profile?**

4. **Could we manage without OfSTED and, if so, would we need something in its place?**

5. **What are your views on children's rights?**

6. **If you are a practitioner, how do you ensure that your children's rights are accommodated?**

Any response? Please contact j.moyles@ntlworld.com

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