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## [Editorial] **The Early Years Foundation Stage: Whose knowledge, whose values ?**

The choice of term to use when defining practitioners who work in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is never straightforward. As the central focus of inquiry of Education 3-13 is on primary education, this could lead to an assumption that the relevant contexts for investigation would be school nursery and reception classes, and the participants would be teachers with Qualified Teaching Status (QTS) or Teaching Assistants. Over the last twenty years, curriculum and workforce reform in the UK have served to blur the boundaries between who is responsible for the care and education of our youngest children. In fact, it is now hard to imagine that there was a time when two year olds would not be found learning in a primary school, or a graduate teacher would be working with babies in a day nursery.

The intended formulation of the statutory EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2017) was to unite the state maintained and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector through their joint care and education responsibilities. Yet so far, reform has failed to find common ground in the establishment of a unifying title that is representative of the responsibilities, values and knowledge base that early years practitioners possess (McGillivray, 2008). For example, whilst the title of Early Years Educator officially defines Level 2 or 3 practitioners, this is a term that can equally be used to define any professional who works within the sector (as illustrated by both Boardman and Traunter special edition). Alongside this, we have also witnessed a shift in a responsibility from preparing children to be socially and emotionally ready, to academic readiness. Pedagogically, this has meant a shift in 'free' play and self-expression to scripted learning in order to achieve more pre-determined curriculum based learning outcomes. As these responsibilities belong to *all* practitioners, regardless of their professional qualification, status or terms and conditions of employment, then it is important that any research concerned with the teaching and learning of young children has to take account of the whole sector. Consequently, for the purpose of this editorial and the papers contained in this special edition, the titles attributed to early years practitioners who are delivering the EYFS curriculum will be as varied as the sector itself.

One thing that binds this eclectic group of early years practitioners together is the core values that inform the ways in which they work with children and their families. These values are underpinned by an historical knowledge base informed by multiple theoretical perspectives that view children holistically as active, independent learners. Further and Higher Education Institutes have played a key role in the professional development of practitioners by creating spaces to foster an understanding of how such values and knowledge base translate into a relational pedagogy. In 2001, Janet Moyles wrote a now frequently cited paper entitled '*Passion, Paradox and Professionalism*'. She warned of how the effective and affective relational dimensions of being a 'passionate' early years professional can be at odds with what she termed as the 'black hole' of performative demands of policy imperatives. In her research, Moyles outlined how the hierarchical

relationships that exist within educational establishments, coupled with the necessity for early years practitioners to have appropriate professional knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence were all contributory barriers that meant that many were unable to put their values into practice. It seems that the early years practitioner is caught between a rock and a hard place - trying to be all things to all people. On the one hand there is the assumption that they will offer the 'professional love' (Page, 2017) that is expected of being an early years practitioner. For parents this is certainly a disposition that they value when they make their choice about the setting their child will attend. Yet perhaps within the wider field these values have been misinterpreted as romantic ideals which do not equip them to meet their professional obligation to 'ready' children. The government's vision in England, that the early years of a child's life are fundamental to all children reaching their potential and living a more fulfilled life (DfE 2017) is compelling, but this has increasingly turned practitioners into policy puppets who are pushed and pulled between sometimes competing policy imperatives ( Basford and Bath, 2014). As a consequence they have a 'paralysing fear' (ECA, 2012) to speak out against the performative demands of the curriculum. This fear also creates unintended divisions and mistrust between the maintained and PVI sector – where genuine collaboration between schools and other local providers has been replaced by competition. Just as the curriculum has served as a sorting device to determine those who 'can' and 'cannot', the governing technologies in place to measure quality of provision determine those who are effective practitioners, and those who are ineffective.

The issues that Moyles raised have continued to be taken up by many others who have researched pedagogical practices in both the maintained school and PVI sector – of which this special edition is no exception. This remains our endeavour, and is indeed our obligation, to represent the views and experiences of those who typically find themselves at the 'bottom of the epistemological hierarchy' (Moss & Urban, 2010) where research is concerned. So when the government commissioned both the Tickell (2011) and Nutbrown (2012) Reviews and the calls to evidence were specifically aimed at experts in the field – namely those who are doing the job (practitioners), and those who have informed knowledge about young children (educators and researchers) there was a sense of hope that the values, experience and rich knowledge base that the sector had to offer would serve to shape curriculum and workforce reform. But something happened along the way. The key messages that the sector was sending out about a curriculum that demanded too much too soon for both the learner and the practitioner; and that there were inequalities within the sector related to professional status and qualification, seemed to get lost in the 'black hole'. In the case of the Nutbrown Review for example, only 5 of the 19 proposals were accepted (Nutbrown, 2013). Out of these proposals came a commitment set out in Early Years Workforce strategy (DfE, 2017) to undertake a feasibility study of Early Years Teachers, and those with Early Years Professionals Status (EYPS) to lead nursery and reception classes in maintained schools. This was a welcome signal to the sector that the knowledge and skills base of these specifically trained graduate professionals would gain the

same recognition in terms of pay and conditions as their counterparts who have QTS. Yet in July 2018, it was announced that the plans had been dropped, with limited explanation regarding the rationale that informed the decision.

The government's decision to roll out Baseline Assessment provides a further example of how the voice of the sector seems to be marginalised. In the consultation on primary school assessment and accountability (DfE, 2015), question 6 of the consultation asked "*Should we introduce a baseline check at the start of reception?*". 51% of respondents said "NO", many of whom expressed concerns about the damaging effect of assessing children at such a young age. The ethical and methodological consequences of Baseline assessment have continued to be highlighted in numerous ways. For example the 'More Than a Score' campaign; the compelling research by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2016) report commissioned by the Teaching Unions and the BERA (2018) report have all drawn on an expert knowledge base that advocates for an approach that is embedded in the values which are 'authentic, holistic and developmentally appropriate' (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2016). It seems that gaining statistical evidence of pupil attainment at the start of school for accountability measures has priority in England over the emotional needs and experiences of the children in the early days of education. The outcomes and implications of this are yet to be researched.

### **Whose knowledge base is informing early year's policy and practice?**

The concerns and tensions already raised lead us to pose the question of what do we value as the most appropriate educational experience for our youngest children, and how do we know? In a recent report by Sim et al (2018) on *Teaching, pedagogy and practice in early years childcare* it was noted that too many studies examining the effectiveness of different pedagogical strategies lacked specific detail and description about the actual programmes. The House of Commons Education Committee (2019) report related to tackling disadvantage in the early years also commented on the insufficient evidence base that allow for an informed judgement about the effectiveness of interventions. In order to better understand why certain strategies work and for whom (Sim et al, 2018), there is a drive to develop studies which provide empirical evidence that uses comparison groups, as opposed to methodologies that generate self-report or capture the experience and perception of the practitioner. The recent priority in the focus of Education Endowment Foundation research funding into early years education in England may help to change this research landscape.

The few comparative based studies that exist have tended to take place in the USA. Take for example the Perry High/Scope study which informed the Head Start programme. This was a longitudinal study spanning over fifty years which provided a strong evidence base demonstrating the long term gains of early intervention and a clearly defined curriculum approach that encourages lifelong dispositions to learning. This study stands out, as it focused on a very particular socio-cultural group and used a mixed methods approach drawing on both instrumental data sets and narrative inquiry. What was also notable about

this study is the time and commitment that the researchers made to developing authentic relationships with their participants in order to gather a genuine insight into the impact of the interventions that the study was seeking to measure. Yet even in a project such as this, there were still reported challenges of home visitors being able to complete their regular schedule of visits (Penn et al, 2006). In an era where research funding grants are dependent on demonstrable outcomes within limited timeframes and budgets it brings into the question the feasibility of such studies. Additionally, as Penn et al (2006) warn – the key findings from just three US studies have widely influenced policy initiatives in the UK, and have been used to justify policy rhetoric regarding early intervention.

The rationale for the Sure Start Programme in the UK is a point in question. Influenced by the Head Start programme, but unlike in the USA, the lifespan of the programme dwindled well before any of the intended benefits could be evidenced. The policy decisions that emerged from the National Evaluation of Sure Start (2008) to create 3500 Children's Centres by 2010 were influenced by the NESS *results*, not the actual *evidence* (Melhuish, 2016). As early years researchers, we are regularly faced with a moral dilemma over the extent to which we participate or lead research which has short term funding, and which may not serve the educational needs that align with our own knowledge and beliefs. Qualitative and quantitative evidence can have different values for different stakeholders. Just like the early years practitioner, we also run the risk of becoming policy puppets, where the knowledge that we produce can equally become lost in translation dependent on the lens in which it is viewed. Ensuring that research is robust, well evidenced and incorporating multiple stakeholders in its design and implementation is a priority.

### **Helicopter Initiatives: Competing and confusing policy imperatives**

The House of Commons Education Committee (2019) acknowledges that there has been 'little strategic direction regarding early years policy', resulting in set of ad hoc policy initiatives. Some of these initiatives are at odds with each other, and with the vision and values of the sector. This is in part due to conflicting priorities amongst government departments. One particular consequence of the lack of joined up thinking, is that we have found ourselves having to manage a range of 'helicopter' initiatives that only have a life span of the government's priorities at that moment in time. Such initiatives swoop into our lives, creating turbulence in the field as they hover over our practices watching from a distance. When the moment has passed, and the helicopter moves on, we are left to sort out the disruption it has left behind, uncertain as to if and when the helicopter will return.

The government's flagship 30 hours childcare policy for working families serves as an illustrative example of how the intended aims of the scheme to increase access to quality childcare provision have created unintended consequences for the most disadvantaged families. Only families who are working are eligible for the additional 15 hours nursery provision, which seems contrary to the government's social mobility agenda. Whilst the government claims that the most disadvantaged children need the best early education

experience, they are the ones who are not eligible for the additional hours of nursery provision, and are consequently spending less time in preschool than children from more affluent backgrounds. It has also been reported that the take up of places for the most disadvantaged two year olds has diminished, as it is economically more sustainable for providers to have older children in a setting who require a lower staff: child ratio.

So where does this leave us in our drive to have our knowledge and values recognised in the shaping and implementation of early years educational policy ? Practitioners are seen as part of the solution to solving the problems identified in policy through the application of (usually scientific) knowledge and skills that have been acquired through their professional development and training. In our endeavour to equip the future workforce to be critical, reflexive practitioners we introduce them to alternative ways of knowing in our hope that this will give them some authority to challenge some of the taken for granted assumptions about what is the right type of educational experience for young children. In a time when we are particularly cynical about the merits of living a democratic society, it is perhaps worth considering Biesta's (2017) thoughts about the relationship between democracy and power. Biesta states that democracy is about turning authority into power. We have to hold on to the hope that the authority that our own research and practice give us can at least influence those in practice, and (ideally) policy makers as well.

Funding mechanisms are pulling us towards comparative studies in order to provide a more informed knowledge based about the specificities of pedagogical practices. However, we have to be careful that findings do not get lost in implementation, re-emerging as formulaic teaching and learning approaches. The most persuasive data comes from practitioners, children and their families. It is our responsibility to open up these spaces to understand more about the effectiveness of policy at a localised level. In this special edition, we have endeavoured to do just this. The papers included in this edition cover topics related to curriculum, pedagogy and professionalism in both the maintained and PVI sector. The authors have paid particular attention to the policy and practice relationship and they offer insights into the lived experience for children and practitioners as they mediate their own knowledge, experience and values with the wider political field.

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