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Do We Need Teachers in Children's Centres?

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ABSTRACT This account considers the need for qualified teachers and headteachers in Children's Centres in England. It describes the ongoing decline in the importance of nursery education, and the concurrent expansion of childcare. The author argues that the best response to increasingly formal approaches in the early years is to maintain the role of the specialist nursery teacher and headteacher. The best tradition of the nursery school is the close observation and study of young children, leading to the development of an appropriate curriculum. That tradition is now in danger of extinction. Current government proposals for the early years are undermining the connections between the early years and the rest of the educational system; the author argues that teachers need to re-assert the importance of their position.

What do nursery teachers actually do? If you are finding it hard to answer the question, perhaps that explains the current uncertainty in government. Should there be any 'teaching' going on in the new Children's Centres, where there are babies and toddlers on roll as well as three- and four-year-olds?

It is nearly fifteen years since I first took courage and applied for a job as a nursery teacher in a small infant school in Sheffield. Originally a junior-trained teacher, I had spent two enjoyable years teaching a mixed-age class which included five-year-olds. Towards the end of that second year, I had asked my headteacher if I could have the nursery class the following year. I have never been sure whether his distracted response – 'what, you want to spend your time wiping noses and bottoms?' – exemplified what he understood to go on in a nursery class, or how he saw the school's nursery teacher. It seemed the right time to look for a new job.

But to be honest, although I knew he was wrong, I did not exactly know why. The evening before my interview I was in quite a state so I phoned a friend. I had no idea what sort of questions might come up, let alone how I would answer them. 'So do you do planning in the nursery, then?' I asked her. 'And what if they don't want to do the things you've planned?' I was given some helpful and reassuring answers. In any case, I don't think there were too

many applicants for the post. At least one member of the panel wanted a male nursery teacher for political reasons. The job was mine.

I was lucky that I was joining an experienced team of nursery nurses so that I could 'learn on the job'. I was also lucky to come to Sheffield at the exact time that Cathy Nutbrown was starting an action-research programme at Sheffield University involving nursery and reception teachers. In my case, whilst there was something lacking in my input to the 'research' part of this arrangement, there was certainly plenty of action. I mainly remember benefiting from Cathy's constant questioning of things I said. 'So why is that important then?' she would ask. 'Why do you do that?' I would find myself floundering, yet again, and realizing that I was applying some notion of what I thought teachers should do, rather than thinking about the children. It was a kindly induction into a new world, where learning and teaching begin with the careful study and observation of children. I was used to beginning with the programmes of study from the National Curriculum and trying to fit the children in.

Many years have passed, but explaining the rationale for having trained and qualified teachers in the early years can still be difficult. Because the pace of institutional and workforce reform makes it easy to miss the latest development, should you happen to blink, a quick recap of recent changes may be useful. The government is currently consulting on a new position, to be called the 'Early Years Professional' (EYP), with the aim that each 'setting' will, in time, have at least one EYP on the staff team. EYPs may, in time, replace nursery teachers. There is also a new qualification for the heads of integrated early years centres, the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) which now has the same status as the more familiar National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH). The government is also currently consulting on a legally-binding curriculum for babies through to five year olds, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

But all this work is being done on the same fault line I found myself on fifteen years ago – an uncertainty about what to make of learning and teaching in relation to young children, and unwillingness to enquire into the purpose of having teachers in the early years.

Back in the 1970s, Lesley Platts – who could be described as a defender of nursery schools and nursery education, were it not for the fact that she so obviously relished being on the attack – coined the term 'custodial childcare' to describe the sort of nurseries that essentially exist to keep the children safely within their four walls for an agreed number of hours per day. Since the 1970s, there has been a huge expansion in the quantity of childcare in England. But here is some grave news: during this time of expansion, the number of nursery schools has declined from 650 in 1977 to 456 today. So it is fair to say that whilst the idea of 'childcare' is on the rise, nursery education is in decline. Why else would the latest government Bill, which concerns itself with the learning and care of children under five, be called the 'Childcare Bill'? Indeed, it is striking to see how in all the new terminology there is never a reference to

education, schools, teaching or learning. Instead, we have 'Sure Start', the 'Early Years Professional', 'Centre Leadership' and 'Early Childhood Services'.

The Treasury's paper, with its strangely punctuated title *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*, even argues that 'working with pre-school children should have as much status as a profession as teaching children in schools.' There is so much to ponder in this sentence. Did the Treasury not notice that the National Union of Teachers and its supporters won the battle to have qualified teachers in nursery classes and schools several decades years ago? Isn't it interesting that one group of staff is seen as 'working with' children, and another as 'teaching' them? And isn't 'pre-school' a fascinating term? Primary schools have never been called 'pre-secondary schools', let alone 'pre-City-Academies', and presumably sixth form colleges will never become 'pre-universities'. But in the early years, we are stuck with 'pre-schools'. As a phase of education, we only exist by virtue of the stage we come before.

I would much rather avoid terms like childcare, preschool and the like, and stick with 'nursery teacher'. 'education', and 'nursery school'. But I do not wish to paint over the fact that there are genuinely some problems with the idea of 'teaching' in the early years. As Annette Brooke MP recently argued in the debate about the Childcare Bill, '*taught*, whatever the dictionary definition, has connotations: it implies a group of young people, children or adults receiving instruction, rather than learning by experience at the right level.'

I could quibble, and argue that teaching has often been used to mean the organisation of 'learning by experience at the right level' – what else was the Plowden Report about? But I think there is a more important point to be made: Annette Brooke is, indeed, right to worry about ever more formal approaches in the early years. Jim Rose's recommendation that four-year-olds should have formal lessons to learn letter sounds and names will soon have the force of law, as will the proposed curriculum for babies and toddlers (the Early Years Foundation Stage).

Which takes me back to the 1990s, and Cathy Nutbrown insisting, albeit gently, that what I was planning for my nursery class had to be undone through a process of thought, study and analysis. I like to think of this as the need for humility, an acceptance that I knew little about young children, how they learned, and how adults should go about organising spaces and resources for them.

You will have spotted that I have left out 'teaching'. One of my most powerful responses to my experience in Sheffield was that I became immensely distrustful of teaching, and in particular ashamed of the impact of my own, gauche attempts to get little children into big groups to make sure that they learnt what I had planned for them. Likewise, I am sure that many sensible people would agree with Annette Brooke that we must protect little children from 'teaching'. Heaven knows, they will have enough of it in their lives, so do they really need it before they are five? This concern has even led to the coining

of an ugly new word, 'schoolification' – which is what the Daycare Trust, among others, worries is happening in the early years.

So, is there a role for teachers working with such young children? Government policy is sliding towards an answer to this: no. So we have a qualification for 'centre leadership', not headteachers, and we may soon have Early Years Professionals, rather than nursery teachers. Equally, the main lobbying organisations concerned with childcare, the Daycare Trust and 4Children, have little to say about teachers, and a lot to say about their fears of 'schoolification' – where they are joined by eminent early years experts like Professor Peter Moss at the Institute of Education. Where policy does uphold the importance of nursery teachers, like the current requirement for each Children's Centre to have the input of a part-time teacher, it has been framed in such a way that it will almost certainly fail. I only know of one person unfortunate enough to have this 'teacher input' post, coming in two and a half days a week to give advice on planning, assessment and to model good practice. She is now so unwelcome in the Children's Centre that she has returned to her local authority base whilst those in charge decide what to do for the best. It isn't difficult to see how this has come about. I can imagine how I would feel, if I were a member of staff at that particular centre with an NVQ3, working full time, over long shifts, with young children. Someone comes swanning into the room where I work once a week … isn't it inevitable that I will experience this as 'teacher interference', rather than 'teacher input'? We went down this road in the 1980s when teachers were sent into social services day nurseries to improve planning and practice. It just isn't a sensible way to change people's views, let alone their practice.

But the outcomes of poor policy and planning for Children's Centres should not (mis)lead us to the conclusion that there is no place for teachers working with young children. The Treasury's *Ten Year Strategy* states that it draws one of its conclusions, that Children's Centres should be led by graduates, from the EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project) Research Project. But EPPE found that the best early years centres are led by qualified headteachers, *and* have qualified teachers working alongside other well-qualified early years educators/nursery nurses. Somehow this message has been diluted into a plan to create lots of Early Years Professionals – rather than follow the example of, say, New Zealand where the government's policy is working towards all early childhood centres being staffed by qualified teachers.

Having qualified teachers working directly with young children does not lead to inappropriate, over-formal practice. The opposite is true. In my experience of working with and visiting many private and community nurseries, as well as nursery classes and nursery schools, it is invariably those with the least qualified staff that have the most formal practice. It is in private nurseries that you are most likely to see worksheets, children grouped together for formal lessons and all the other nonsense that Annette Brooke and others quite rightly have in their sights. The very same organisation that warns of 'schoolification' – the Daycare Trust – helped to design this year's materials to go with National

Sure Start Month which include a worksheet, a colouring-in sheet, and a dot-to-dot picture. The Daycare Trust may not like 'schoolification' but that doesn't prevent it from being unable to distinguish between play-based learning and the sort of rubbish that no nursery school teacher would ever produce. Whilst the NPQICL may not refer much to schools or teaching, its overall approach to children's learning is clearly inspired by the tradition of nursery school education in England. You won't find much about childcare or daycare in the NPQICL course, but there is plenty about children's learning and theories of learning.

And this takes me back to Sheffield and perhaps the frontier of this problem of teachers, Children's Centres and young children. There is a real fear about using the word 'teach' in the early years; and we have to overcome this fear. If teachers won't talk about teaching in the early years – let alone do it – then we are contributing to our elimination whilst we complain about it. Few people argue any more over the idea that education is about more than a portfolio of facts and skills: it is also about being able to think for oneself, to consider and reflect on different experiences, to develop as a person, to be able to engage and co-operate with others. This is as true of nursery education as it is of university education. Just as the early years fits well with this mainstream notion of what education is about, it also fits increasingly well with the way that professionals and politicians alike have started talking about children's learning. 'Personalised learning' has been around for a long time in the early years, where there has always been a concern for the individual child, and where the teacher's role has always been about finding or developing experiences at just the right level for each child.

But I would argue that we need to be as confident about 'teaching' in the early years as we are about 'education' and 'learning'. We need to continue to think in terms of a 'curriculum', which means planning and selecting experiences and resources, and organising routines, because we judge them to be valuable. A curriculum is far from the 'anything goes' approach of many nursery and childcare facilities which are packed with poor quality plastic toys, cluttered with unattractive *faux-Disney* window stickers, and stacked with colouring-in books and worksheets. We need to continue to think about 'assessment' – not the dumbed-down 'look, listen and note' that is proposed in the Early Years Foundation Stage – with a sharp focus on understanding the child's interests, capacities and thinking, so that we can inform our planned curriculum. And we need to be confident about teaching – about interacting with children through new and challenging experiences to change their mathematical or scientific understanding, about showing children how to mix paints, or cut with scissors, or write a letter.

Which means that, whilst it is desirable to have more graduates working in the early years, there is still an important role for fully trained and qualified teachers. Nursery schools and Children's Centres need to remain part of the mainstream educational scene in England, with teachers who observe and assess

the children they work with, plan for their development and learning, and – teach.

References

For a full account of the debate about the Childcare Bill and Annette Brooke's concern about teaching see http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm060309/debtext/60309-28.htm

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