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Does Two into School Really Go?

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ABSTRACT Policy in relation to early years education is developing apace and is likely to be a significant issue in the 2015 election. This articles critiques current government thinking with its emphasis on 'school readiness'. The article argues that the emotional and learning needs of young children are being neglected by a system that sees early years education as necessary to ensure 'we can compete in the global race'. The article argues that we must resist the drive towards 'schoolification' and instead ensure that the long-term emotional well-being of children is the central aim of early years education.

In the run-up to the general election in 2015, one of the key policy debates will concern childcare and early education, and how to achieve both 'quality' and 'affordability' in the sector. Both the Department for Education (DfE) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) are focused on the notion of 'school readiness' in the early years – on the role of the sector as being about preparing children for their statutory education. As part of this drive, government and regulator have both talked repeatedly about increasing the number of two-year-olds in school-based early years settings, and offering a more 'structured' kind of learning. The rationale behind this policy is that this is the best way to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged children. This article seeks to explore the issues around moving more two-year-old children into school-based settings, and the impact of a 'school-readiness' agenda. It will explore the practicalities of the policy and the potential impact on children's long-term emotional well-being, and ask whether questions of 'affordability' are being put ahead of the rights of young children.

The period from birth to five years old is a time of incredibly rapid development for babies, toddlers and young children. During these years, they learn how to sit, stand, eat, walk, run and talk. They build an understanding of their environment, through playing within it. They utilise a whole range of multi-sensory interactions with their world – putting toys in their mouths and chewing on them, getting covered in mud in the garden, picking out familiar words from the sounds that surround them, swinging and sliding in the park.

Young children also learn social skills, develop emotionally, and gradually become more independent from their parents or carers. At the same time, though, these are the years in which a child most needs adult support and secure emotional attachments. John Bowlby's 'Attachment Theory'[1] noted that the nature and quality of these attachments in the early years is critical in helping children develop into stable and emotionally balanced adults.

Many new parents sense that the 'best' environment for their baby or very small child is in the home. This is a place where they can feel emotionally secure, develop strong attachments to primary caregivers, and play in spaces that feel familiar, cosy and safe. But most parents must work, or want to sustain their careers, and so they have to make difficult choices about childcare for their young children. Where finances allow, parents typically choose a childcare environment for their young children that mirrors home. Those who can afford to do so will work part time, or pay for a nanny to look after their small children. If this is not possible for economic or practical reasons, parents might choose a local childminder, or find a nursery or early years setting that feels as secure and welcoming as possible. It is hard enough to leave your baby or small child in the care of others: a parent's main focus is on their child feeling settled, happy and safe, not on whether they are being prepared for compulsory schooling. It is worth remembering that, until the term after a child turns five, there is no statutory requirement for them to be in education. If parents so wish, they can keep their child at home until this point.

Clearly, there are some home environments that are very far from being the 'best' place for the children who live in them. In these instances, should the State step in, and take over more and more of the parenting role, or is it better for government to support parents in improving their own skills? The latter approach was a key goal of the Sure Start Centres, set up under the last Labour government. Whichever approach government chooses, it is vital that the system works well for all children, and takes into account their emotional, as well as their learning, needs. These emotional aspects are often particularly important for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, because they are also likely to have high levels of emotional need. A policy of placing high numbers of vulnerable two-year-olds into a school environment, no matter how well intentioned, has the potential to do more harm than good. We must consider the long-term impact on children's emotional well-being of putting the majority of disadvantaged two-year-olds into school settings.

The blogger Sophy Christophy writes in telling detail about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on her 'Respected from Birth' blog.[2] Christophy points out that the UNCRC is 'legally binding', with Article 3 stating that '[t]he best interests of the child must be a top priority in all things that affect children' and Article 5 stating that '[g]overnments must respect the rights and responsibilities of parents to guide and advise their child'. At present, government policy appears to be moving towards a position of 'if you cannot parent your child properly, the State will do it for you' – a quasi 'nationalisation' of parenting. Policies such as free school meals for infants, the

closure of Sure Start Centres and fines on term-time holidays demonstrate that intervention/removal is becoming the default position. The State 'protects' the child from what is perceived as 'harmful' or 'inadequate' parenting, rather than supporting parents in changing their approach.

In November 2013, Baroness Sally Morgan (then Chair of Ofsted) gave a speech at a conference organised by Ark Academies.[3] In her speech, she called for 'all-through schools', suggesting that 'strong providers' should 'go further down the system'. This top-down attitude to the early years is troubling for a number of reasons. We need to ask ourselves whether we feel that the 'best interests' of children are served by being put into the school environment at two years old. The separate and unique nature of early years provision is in danger of being subsumed into the very different world of 'schooling'. The reaction from the early years sector to Baroness Morgan's speech was one of almost universal condemnation. Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, called the suggestion 'beyond belief'.[4] He pointed out that while 'social equality needs to be addressed in many ways', 'taking very young children away from their parents and placing [them] in schools is not the answer'.

Leitch also noted 'an obsession by Government and Ofsted to drive our youngest children into a more formal school environment before they're ready'. This drive has been apparent in the language used by Childcare Minister Liz Truss, who talked on *Newsnight* (12 September 2013) about the issue being whether learning 'should be entirely child-initiated, or whether it should be teacher led'. Truss's comments highlight her misunderstanding of the nature of early years settings, which use a careful balance of child-initiated, adult-initiated and adult-directed learning. During her appearance on *Newsnight*, Truss referred repeatedly to 'teachers', without once mentioning the childminders, nursery nurses and early years practitioners who make up the majority of the early years workforce. Government ministers and Ofsted refer repeatedly to the notion that young children must be 'taught' in the early years, so that they are 'school ready'. The idea that children might learn and develop in a gentler, more organic way, as they would do in the home, seems anathema to politicians.

The notion that children must be 'school ready', rather than that school should be ready for children, has come to prominence over the past few years. This ongoing 'schoolification' of early childhood is a worrying trend. The deficit model, whereby children (and by definition, their parents) are 'missing' essential qualities, puts the emphasis on families to fit into the system, rather than building a system that supports young children and their parents. Another worrying trend is the talk of 'more affordable' childcare. While it is important for parents to be able to manage the financial aspects of caring for their children, the emphasis should be on quality and the rights of the child, rather than on the financial viability of the early years offer. When Liz Truss suggested a change to the adult:child ratios in early years settings, this was met with universal condemnation from the early years sector. The suggestion that one adult should be responsible for four babies, four one-year-olds, or six two-year-

olds appears to be based entirely on questions of 'affordability', and not on the emotional well-being and safety of our smallest children. The early years sector responded with the 'Rewind on Ratios' campaign and, under pressure from Nick Clegg, the DfE backed down on the proposals.

The DfE's 'More Great Childcare' report [5] removes the requirement on schools to register separately with Ofsted in order to take children from the age of two. The report also suggested that parents could be given more 'choice' by the introduction of 'more traditional nursery classes' (p. 12). The 'existing flexibilities' mentioned in the report involve a group of up to thirteen small children of three and four years old being taught by a single adult. Although this ratio has been in place for several years, many early years settings choose not to utilise it because it makes it very difficult for children to learn through self-initiated play. Worryingly, the report also proposed removing the regulations for a specific amount of floor space for each child, an area for children to sleep, and an area where staff can talk confidentially to parents and spend time away from the children. Neil Leitch of the Pre-School Learning Alliance pointed out that 'there is very little talk of what's right for the child in this – it's just an attempt to get cheap childcare'. In another clear signal of intent, the DfE is funding a pilot scheme to look at the provision of childcare for two-year-olds in schools. Those schools that took part in the pilot received a grant of £10,000 each.[6] Some early years providers have reported being contacted by pilot schools and being asked for advice on how best to cater for such small children. Those within the early years sector are keen to work together to achieve the best possible provision for young children. However, there is an irony in asking the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector to help implement a policy for the maintained sector, a policy with which some practitioners fundamentally disagree.

The opening sentences of the abstract on the 'More Great Childcare' website page flag up a number of striking assumptions, again about the financial implications of childcare, rather than about meeting the needs of small children. 'More great childcare is vital to ensuring we can compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and readying children for school and, eventually, employment. And it can help build a stronger society, with more opportunities for women who want to work and raise children at the same time.' The message is that childcare allows us to 'compete in the global race', rather than it being a way to support young children and help them develop in their earliest years. It is also interesting to note that a message about getting mothers back into the workplace has become conflated with the provision of childcare, as though it is only women who can or should care for children within the family home.

In September 2013, the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) published a report entitled 'What Does "School Ready" Really Mean?'[7] This report highlights the gap between what professionals in the sector feel is meant by the term, and what policy makers in government believe it to mean. A striking 97% of childcare professionals agree that 'school ready' should mean a child who is curious about the world, has a desire to learn, can

cope with the emotional separation from parents or carers, and is relatively independent with their personal care**.** One of the key recommendations of the PACEY report is that 'Government should do more to promote play in early education'. At the same time as sector professionals highlight the vital role of play, Liz Truss talks repeatedly about the need for more traditional methods of early education. Indeed, she has made more official visits to French nurseries than she has to those in England.[8] Truss has frequently praised the style of French nurseries, with their traditional methods and the emphasis on children being obedient to adults.

The creeping of State control over many aspects of parenting is a worrying trend. The growing lack of trust in parents mirrors the lack of trust that the current government appears to feel in those teachers and educationalists who are part of what Michael Gove has termed 'the Blob'. If parents and teachers are painted as untrustworthy in the media, government intervention in both parenting and education appears a logical, rather than a worrying, response. The first step, it would seem, is to demonise teachers, parents and their children. In an article in the *Daily Mail*, Lord Nash, the Schools Minister, referred to teachers having to spend months trying to 'socialise' children when they first start at school.[9] Most in the sector would agree that it is normal for a child to have a toileting accident at the age of four, or to need support in building independence or learning how to socialise and build confidence in the first year or so at school. Anecdotally there does appear to have been an increase in the number of children needing support with these skills. However, the idea that the best response is for the State to remove them from their families earlier, rather than to support those families in improving their parenting skills, is concerning.

In making an argument against the merits of putting two-year-olds in schools, it is important to note that many early years settings are *nothing like* a school, unless that school has a separate purpose built-nursery building, or is a nursery school. A full daycare nursery will have plenty of space for the children and an area with cots/beds, where they can sleep without being disturbed. There will be places where bottles can be stored safely, and where these can be washed and sterilised. There will be few or no 'formal' areas with desks and chairs, but there will be plenty of toys and other resources that can be freely accessed by the children. Similarly, a preschool setting will typically operate from an open space, such as a village or church hall. This is often a space that is already familiar to the children, from attending a toddler group. For much of the time, the children will be able to move around the setting and play as they wish, with adult input to support, guide them and help them learn. Childminders use their own homes, visiting local parks and other facilities as part of their provision. In all these settings, the emphasis is on learning through play, both structured and child-initiated, in a 'home-like' environment, and preferably with free access to the outdoors. Liz Truss said in an interview with the *Daily Mail* that she has 'seen too many chaotic settings, where children are running around'.[10] In a speech at the Nursery World Conference in 2013

[11], Truss said that 'free-flow play between outdoors and indoors is not a requirement and not something Ofsted is looking for'. The more regulated and regimented a setting becomes, the easier it is to run that setting with a high ratio of children to adults, and consequently the cheaper the provision becomes. If your aim is for children to be free to play and learn as they wish at least some of the time, you will need more adults within the setting.

The period from two to three years old is a particular stage in a child's life. At this age, children have very specific developmental needs. This is a time at which their vocabulary increases exponentially. At the same time, they can get easily frustrated, be destructive when angry, and struggle to sit still and concentrate for more than a few minutes. Those two-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds will often have language delay, and will typically struggle the most to settle into a 'formalised' educational environment. If we look closely at the language surrounding the early years, we can see that there is a gradual erosion of the notion that young children should be free to play, with the emphasis being on 'teaching' rather than on 'playing'. In his report 'The Importance of Play' [12], Dr David Whitebread of the University of Cambridge explores the vital role of play in the brain development of young children. The government, and those who inspect the system, appear to place very little importance on play as an approach to early learning. In March 2014, Sir Michael Wilshaw sent a letter to early years Ofsted inspectors [13] about how to inspect early years provision, in which he used the words 'teach' and 'teaching' fifteen times. Although the need for a balance between child-initiated and adult-directed learning is still made in documents such as the statutory early years foundation stage (EYFS) framework, the message coming from Ofsted and the DfE appears to suggest that the balance should tip towards adult-led teaching.

Voluntary-run playgroups and preschools have been a key feature of the early years sector in the UK for over half a century. These settings were originally a response by groups of parents and other interested local people (including some faith-based groups) to the need for childcare and for opportunities for their children to play and learn together. Voluntary-run childcare settings are a fine example of what David Cameron has referred to as the 'Big Society'. These voluntary preschools are run by parents, for their own children, and for the children of other local parents. Leoarna Mathias explains more about the crucial role of voluntary run settings in her blog, 'Setting them on the right course for less than the price of a Latte'.[14] Mathias notes, 'That we are not-for-profit and managed in part by the very families who use our service is the true beauty of our system; we are for the people, by the people.' As someone who has been chair of a committee-run preschool for over four years, it has been striking for me to see how little attention the government has paid to supporting voluntary-run settings. In official reports and documents, the talk is of 'businesses' and 'school nurseries', with no mention of the voluntary-run settings that make up such a large proportion of the sector. It would seem to make sense for the State to do all it can to support parents in helping their small

children learn, especially given that this is not a compulsory phase of education. Many in this part of the sector are concerned that the latest changes will be a death knell for parent-run preschool settings.

With the government's talk of making childcare more affordable, and of widening choice, the irony is that a policy of putting two-year-olds in schools could end up making childcare more expensive for parents. A typical daycare nursery takes babies and young children from the age of around 8 weeks right through until they move on to their statutory education. At our preschool we take children from the age of 2 years old until they are ready to move to school. If a full two years of funded care and education are taken away from childcare settings, this may make many of them financially unsustainable. Certainly, it is likely that we would see the movement of the best-qualified staff to school nurseries, if this is where the majority of two- to four-year-olds are placed. But if we lose the variety of childcare settings that are currently on offer, then parental choice is not widened, but limited. It will become harder for parents to make their own decisions about what is 'best' for their child, rather than relying on the State to make this choice on their behalf by providing a particular type of care.

The evidence being quoted to support many of the current changes is based on outcomes achieved by different early years settings. Historically, school nurseries have been funded for the number of places they offer, rather than for the number of children attending. This has made it easier for school settings to plan for the future and to balance budgets. Schools are required to employ qualified teachers in their nurseries, and to pay them on the qualified teacher status (QTS) pay scale. Consequently, the type of staff working in different early years settings can vary widely. Even with the introduction of the 'Single Funding Formula', the way that school nursery settings are funded is still different to other settings. Because of the requirement to have a head teacher and to have QTS-qualified staff, school nurseries still receive more funding than their counterparts in the PVI part of the sector. At present, the hourly funding rate per child for non-maintained settings is around £3.50 per hour. At this rate of funding, it is hard for most PVI settings to afford to employ a full-time teacher. Many settings are small, and to employ an early years teacher on the QTS pay scale would mean having to limit the number of staff in the setting.

In April 2014, Ofsted published its first annual report [15] focusing solely on the early years sector. The report suggests a benefit in moving disadvantaged two-year-olds into school-based early years settings. The perceived benefit is based partly on an analysis of the results of nursery schools, where a higher proportion of Ofsted inspections than in PVI settings lead to a judgement of 'good' or 'outstanding'. Perhaps it might also be useful to note the factors that potentially contribute to this difference in outcomes: purpose-built provision, funded in such a way that they can employ the most highly qualified staff, and led by a head teacher. Were the rest of the sector funded at the same levels, this comparison of outcomes would be more equitable. It is interesting to note that this focus comes at the same time as national concerns about a shortage of

primary school places, and it is perhaps telling to ask where the additional places for two-year-olds will actually come from. For schools to provide additional provision suitable for two-year-olds, it is likely that they will need to add new purpose-built facilities to their existing buildings. Again, the question of where the money will come from to achieve this has not yet been answered.

England already has one of the youngest compulsory school starting ages in Europe.[16] The majority of children begin in reception classes at the age of four. The fact that they do not have to start school until the term after they turn five is not widely publicised by the government. Although it is not compulsory to attend an early years setting, with the advent of free funding for three- and four-year-old children, and now funding for disadvantaged two-year-olds as well, the vast majority of parents use at least some of their free childcare entitlement. In theory, the early years entitlement should be a wonderful chance to support young children's emotional, social and intellectual development in a high-quality environment that is as much like a great 'home' as possible. The funding should not be seen as simply a way to get more parents into the workplace, as early as possible after they have produced children. Nor should it be about creating 'school-ready production lines'. The early years are a unique and special phase in a child's life. These years are not a preparation for school, but a short window of time when children can grow, develop and learn at their own pace. Yes, school may be a great institution, but some two-year-olds are not *ready* for an institution. It is critical that we prioritise children's long-term emotional well-being over and above economic advantages or whether they are deemed 'ready' for school. To fail to do so would be to fail some of our youngest and most vulnerable children.

Notes

[1] http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/a/attachment01.htm

[2] http://respectedfrombirth.wordpress.com/2014/01/12/living-with-young-people-understanding-childrens-rights/

[3] http://www.bbc.com/news/education-24818439

[4] https://www.pre-school.org.uk/media/press-releases/428/alliance-challenges-ofsted-s-call-to-enrol-two-and-three-year-olds-in-all-through-schools

[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219660/More_20Great_20Childcare_20v2.pdf

[6] http://www.bbc.com/news/education-26031574

[7] http://www.pacey.org.uk/pdf/School%20Ready%20Report%20FINAL2.pdf

[8] http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/371031/a-world-without-play-literature-review-2012.pdf

http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1107076/truss-visited-french-nurseries-uk-settings

[9] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2575647/Teachers-spend-months-socialising-children-start-school-eat-mix-toilet-minister-warns.html

[10] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2312657/A-generation-unruly-toddlers-Childcare-Minister-Elizabeth-Truss-ill-judged-claims-nursery-children-arent-taught-manners.html

[11] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/elizabeth-truss-speaks-about-2-year-olds-policy-and-practice

[12] http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr_david_whitebread_-_the_importance_of_play.pdf

[13] http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/letter-hmci-early-years-inspectors-march-2014

[14] http://hunkydoryearlyyears.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/setting-them-on-the-right-course-for-less-than-the-cost-of-a-cleaner/

[15] http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/earlyyearsannualreport1213

[16] http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/index.cfm?9B1C0068-C29E-AD4D-0AEC-8B4F43F54A28

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