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## Early Years: young children deserve the best possible start in life

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**ABSTRACT** That all young children should have the best possible start in life is a statement that tends to be met with universal agreement. This article, however, argues there are very many different kinds of ideologies that shape the kinds of ‘best starts’ early years teachers should strive for at a time when childhood poverty is rising and when early years settings are expected to promote a particular current type of ‘school readiness’. Another national challenge is the fragmentation of workforce that directly impacts on the quality of the early years settings. This article calls for more efforts to sustain good-quality practices, such as integrated early years centres, and regardless of cost to develop long-term solutions for all young children.

Every child deserves *the best possible start in life* and the support that enables them to fulfil their potential. ... The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children’s ‘*school readiness*’ and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide *the right foundation for good future progress* through school and life. (Department for Education [DFE], 2014, p. 5, emphases added)

The quotation above, from the introduction to the latest EYFS government policy document for all professionals who work with 0-5-year-old children, reveals one of the emblematic difficulties of this document. There are very many different kinds of ideologies and values that shape the kinds of ‘best starts’ teachers should strive for at a time when childhood poverty is rising dramatically in the United Kingdom and in other developed countries. The quotation – and the phrase ‘every child deserves’ – appears to nod towards equality of opportunity and suggests that this can be achieved through

individual teachers' and providers' efforts. This raises a critical question: Are teachers, of all children, in a position to create 'the right foundation for good future progress' today when funding has been cut and when these cuts have already impacted disproportionately on the most disadvantaged communities and families? The leading English thinkers and writers in early years, such as Payler and Wood (BERA/TACTYC, 2013), believe that an equity-based approach is essential in ensuring that everyone, especially disadvantaged children, is able to make good future progress. But, sadly, this is not yet happening.

There are different approaches, different ideological responses, to this high and increasing level of societal inequality. In the absence of a clear and consistent commitment to reducing inequalities within the early years policy itself, teachers and managers in early years settings have a duty to develop their own solutions to dealing with the societal problems that are evident in their classrooms. Solutions can be grouped within the following three types:

1. Conforming – maintaining the rise of inequalities: (a) the neo-liberal and (b) the conservative way;
2. Reforming – reducing inequalities: (a) the liberal-progressive and (b) the social-democratic way;
3. Transforming – identifying and removing the reasons and obstacles that cause inequalities: (a) critical pedagogy and (b) the socialist/Marxist way.

The rhetoric of the early years policy is framed in language that suggests a need to reduce inequalities. However, it is also riddled with dichotomies that create problems for all early years teachers and professionals, and ultimately for the children themselves and thereby for the future society. For example, the close proximity of the two statements – that is, 'the best possible start in life' and the pledge to promote 'school readiness' – is deeply worrying and demonstrates an explicit adherence to neo-liberalism. It is not, of course, 'school readiness' per se that is questioned here but the kind that is promoted by this document and Office for Standards in Education school inspectors. Neo-liberalism and the education policies favoured by both the Labour and Conservative governments have promoted 'free market' principles. Since the Education Act of 1988 successive governments have aimed to increase competition by testing individuals' performance and by fostering a hierarchy of subjects, schools and educational outcomes. These governmental aims are privileged and prioritised through powerful inspection and surveillance regimes.

The current definition of 'school readiness' is firmly related to four and five years-olds' knowledge of literacy and numeracy, and in particular their ability to decipher real and imaginary words in a test situation at the age of five or six years. The rationale put forward, and the anticipated outcome of these early tests in raising literacy levels later on in children's lives, both derive from false assumptions and go against research evidence from different parts of the world. For example, the Cambridge Primary Review pointed out in 2009 (Alexander, 2009) that in the majority of countries (14 of the 15) where

children did not start school until they were six or seven, the Programme for International School Assessment (PISA) scores in literacy and numeracy were higher than in England. The downside of this English testing regime is that some children are marked as winners and some, inevitably, as losers at a very young age. To most early years teachers this is unacceptable and they – rightly so – want to know how the label of ‘not meeting the expected standards in phonics’ at the age of five or six years, and of being labelled as a failure, matches the need to provide for the best start in life. Many professional organisations are, therefore, running campaigns and lobbying the Government to change its direction.

There is also a concern that ‘the current early years qualifications system is not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to give babies and young children high quality experiences’ (Nutbrown 2012, p. 5). It is difficult to see how the recent drive to fragment the early years workforce and to introduce one kind of national pay scale and a training programme for early years teachers *with* qualified teacher status (QTS) and a different one for those who undertake the new programme of Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) *without* QTS, will work towards raising the quality of the workforce in all settings. The fragmentation of the workforce is, and will remain, a challenge for all providers of training and for all leaders, managers and head teachers.

There is a danger that in spite of advances in theoretical underpinnings and in viewing children as capable citizens and experts in their own lives, young children will continue to be prioritised as economic units rather than agents in their own and their communities’ lives. The 2006 Childcare Act (introduced by the Labour Government) had a major impact on the landscape of childcare. Marketisation of childcare together with a duty to close the gap between the most and the least well-off children is now enshrined in law. Today approximately 80% of all childcare and 40% of early education in England is provided by for-profit businesses. It is rare for a European country to go this far in its legislation; only the Netherlands has passed a similar law.

The message for politicians, head teachers, administrators and managers of early years settings is that every effort should be made to sustain good-quality practices on a local scale – such as integrated centres in the model of children’s centres – and regardless of cost. In developing long-term plans for society and educating the future generations of teachers, doctors, policy makers, as well as those who dream imaginary worlds that will sustain our imaginations and those who will solve unprecedented environmental and social disasters, we must collectively aim to ensure that all children have the best possible start in life.

## References

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