

EDITORIAL

Better Beginnings: an early years special issue

This special issue comes with an apology. *FORUM* carries the strapline ‘for 3–19 comprehensive education’, yet of the 434 articles published in the last ten years (2009–2018), just 12 were relevant to the education of children in the 3–5 age group. Four of these articles were included in a single number in 2017, *FORUM* 59(2) – *Assessment: crisis and resistance* – guest edited by Terry Wrigley. We hope the present issue begins to make amends for this decade of neglect.

What have we learnt from reading the articles in this special issue? We are now reliably informed that, in Reception at least, ‘going’ rhymes with ‘boing’ and that cucumbers should be avoided at all costs. Such advice – and the articles by John Hodgson and by Eve Lumb will furnish readers with the necessary context – might be dismissed as light-minded and frivolous. But it serves to tell a deeper story of wanton and heedless change imposed on early childhood pedagogy, and of the increasingly dirigiste policy climate now prevailing.

Last year, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI), Amanda Spielman, commissioned a report into the Reception curriculum (for ages 4 to 5) and allied pedagogic approaches in England entitled *Bold Beginnings: the Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools* (Ofsted, 2017). The stated rationale was to identify how school leaders planned for and implemented teaching and learning in Reception classes and the impacts of different approaches on pupil outcomes. In particular, through a focus on ‘successful’ schools, the report aimed to identify high-quality provision for disadvantaged children – seemingly a worthwhile task. But the tone and content of the document – as well as the narrowness of its evidence base, and what was deemed to be missing – resulted in a prolonged and intense outcry from early years professionals. These professionals, who already felt marginalised in a system geared towards delivery of the National Curriculum, saw *Bold Beginnings* as misrepresenting and misunderstanding their unique and important work.

It is now a year since Ofsted published *Bold Beginnings*, but the fury and ‘violent outcry’ noted by Colin Richards in his critique have been sustained by practitioners and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) specialists, who

recognise a direct challenge to the basis of their pedagogy. So incensed were they with the apparent misunderstanding of good practice in early childhood education and with the lack of awareness of the needs of our youngest learners, and indeed with the lack of understanding of the purpose of the Reception year, that they have ensured the debate continues.

This special issue of *FORUM* provides an arena to explore the *Bold Beginnings* report and related matters. *Bold Beginnings* was defended as being of a piece with several other recent policy documents. But, as Pam Jarvis's article shows, there are important new departures in *Bold Beginnings* which seem to signal a further intensification of the drive against 'play' as fundamental to EYFS approaches. For articulation of the 'purpose' of the Reception year lies at the heart of both Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* report and many of the subsequent critiques. A deep division is apparent in the way the nature of the Reception year is understood. Perhaps this is why Ofsted refused a Freedom of Information request by the journalist Warwick Mansell (for his Education Uncovered website) for early drafts of the *Bold Beginnings* report to be released along with the correspondence between Ofsted and the Department for Education over edits to the final version.

For its part, *Bold Beginnings* proceeds to establish dichotomies such as play-based pedagogy versus direct teaching, and child-initiated learning versus the acquisition of knowledge, which practitioners know to be false. Broader questions arise. Should Reception be unique, standing alone from what is to come, or is it simply the beginning of the great conveyor belt of education? Are we seeking, Victorian style, to prepare children for, and deliver them into, the next stage of their education, shaping conformist and unquestioning workers, or are we seeking to develop more rounded morally responsible citizens of the future? The language of *Bold Beginnings* would suggest the former. Although the report refers to Reception as 'unique', it also repeatedly states that the central purpose of the Reception year is to prepare children for the demands of the National Curriculum, bringing the curriculum content and pedagogic expectations for Reception into line with Year 1 (ages 5-6 years).

As Wendy Scott makes clear, the urge to reshape the Reception year so that it emulates Year 1 disregards the expert understanding of early years practitioners and demonstrates a lack of respect for historically developed early years practice. The articles by Mary Briggs, Jenifer Smith and John Hodgson reveal the insightfulness of that understanding and practice in relation to the teaching of early mathematics and early reading. In particular, the vividness of Jenifer Smith's narrative and reflective account of working with a single child at the beginning of her involvement with books serves as a reminder of what is at stake. There can be no resiling from that principle whose establishment John Dewey likened to education's Copernican revolution. At the heart of the educational process, whatever Ofsted might prefer, remains the child. It is not the curriculum, nor the approved best practice, nor the imperatives of school readiness, but the child that is the centre about which the appliances of education are to be organised and revolve.

An attempt to consolidate the idea that the Reception year should mirror Year 1 might suggest that all is right in the Year 1 world and that the roses round the door are blooming, as are the children in their classes. Of course, given the relentless pressure of new policy which has infiltrated all ages and stages of education, this is not the case. Year 1 teachers and children are currently grappling with the increased content expectations required by the recent changes to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), which see five-year-olds engaging with early algebra ($7 = \square - 9$), naming cuboids, pyramids and spheres, not to mention employing negation in their writing. Further, Year 1 teachers are still getting to grips with the teaching for, and administration of, the phonics screening check, that all-important test of a Year 1 child's capacity to read nonsense. Laura Williams raises concerns from her perspective as a newly qualified teacher (NQT), while from the vantage point of long experience, Helen Trelford does likewise, arguing for the indispensability of patience against the urge to 'prepare' children.

Bold Beginnings is right in highlighting a mismatch between the expectations for the end of Reception and those for the start of Year 1. However, blame for this situation and the burden of changing it should not be placed on the shoulders of early years practitioners; after all, they did not shift the goalposts. Highlighting such mismatches raises questions as to the real intention of Ofsted's report. Agnieszka Bates draws attention to the close similarities between Ofsted's research findings and recent government policy in relation to assessment and initial teacher education (ITE). Louise Kay's article astutely expounds the rhetoric of 'school readiness' and the formalisation of the early years, touched on in the earlier work of Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017), who problematise the pressures for schools to focus on literacy and mathematics, and note how increased assessment at the very beginning of formal schooling has an impact on young children's mental health and well-being.

The focus broadens toward the end of this special issue with three articles which explore questions implicit in the preceding critiques of *Bold Beginnings*: what it is to be a teacher now? What value is to be accorded the social, and emotional, dimension of education? And how is the idea of 'quality' to be addressed? Kathryn Spicksley offers an insider's account of the way current approaches to teacher recruitment – notably, 'Teach First' in alliance with the academisation drive – work to burn out new entrants. She also shows how such approaches can insulate new recruits from a broad, rounded and more fully informed understanding of the nature of teaching and learning. James Park offers an account of the history of ANTIDOTE, the organisation he founded to help foster more emotionally supportive school environments – for example, via the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme. Both articles illustrate how the crucial idea of 'quality' continues to be a site of struggle in education: on the one hand conceived of in business-efficiency terms and used to discipline at a distance, and on the other as emerging from reflective discussion among participants and requiring judgements of value. Michael

Fielding scrutinises this fundamental tension and its implications for practitioners in his concluding article.

The *Bold Beginnings* report, and the critiques of it in articles here and elsewhere, could provide us with the ‘beginnings’ of a strong and vital debate, where practitioners’ voices, resonant with the experience of working with some of the youngest school starters in the world, sound at the centre. Alongside a number of recent research reports into practice in Reception (e.g. Pascal et al, 2017), we have ample evidence to inform a strong, balanced discussion which could help ensure that all young children have access to a joyful, appropriate education.

Finally, we would like to note that at the end of this year Michael Fielding is relinquishing his role as chair of the *FORUM* editorial board. Michael provided the stability, continuity and foresight so necessary after the sudden and untimely loss of Michael Armstrong, our previous chair, and across a period when we also lost the vital energising contribution of Clyde Chitty. During his tenure Michael has helped bring new members to the board, as well as widening the journal’s reach and scope by inviting guest editors to produce particular issues of the journal. He has ensured that *FORUM* remains guided and inspired by an understanding of education predicated on social justice, democratic togetherness and human flourishing. We offer warm thanks and hope that, in stepping down as chair, Michael may now have more time to write for the journal, and for himself.

References

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