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In Search of *Bold Beginnings*: 'good early education', ethics and moral responsibility

AGNIESZKA BATES

ABSTRACT The Ofsted report entitled *Bold Beginnings: the Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools* is part of a research programme aimed at reviewing the primary curriculum and its implementation. Although the report highlights the 'uniqueness' of the Reception year, it also undermines the principles of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and much independent research on early education by heavily privileging synthetic phonics and number work. Serious concerns have, therefore, been voiced about the report, in relation both to Ofsted's recommended approach to 'good early education' and to aspects of its research methodology. This article focuses on the absence of explicit ethical reflection in the report and proposes an alternative approach to early education that arises from the notion of 'moral responsibility' as the foundation of good education.

> For too many children, the Reception Year is far from successful. It is a false start and may predispose them to years of catching up rather than forging ahead. (Ofsted, 2017, p. 9)

Much has happened since the publication in November 2017 of Ofsted's report on the curriculum in Reception. Serious concerns have been expressed in response to *Bold Beginnings* by early years organisations, professional associations and academics (e.g. CREC, 2017; Ford, 2017; TACTYC, 2017; UKLA, 2018; Weale, 2018). Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman was questioned about the purpose of the report by the Education Select Committee (Parliament, 2018). Gill Jones, Ofsted's Head of Early Years and co-author of the report, has held briefing talks for early years professionals in which she emphasised that the report was intended to 'shine a spotlight' on the Reception year (Gaunt, 2018). The newly appointed Ofsted Head of Research, Professor Daniel Muijs,

emphasised during his first public appearances in his new role that 'being evidence-informed is a moral duty' (IOE, 2018; Muijs 2018). Although he is yet to articulate an explanation of the notion of 'moral duty', it is a welcome direction of travel, given the notable silence on morals and ethics in *Bold Beginnings*. The report was published prior to the appointment of Professor Muijs, but its ambition to define 'good early education' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 4) could have begun with a reflection on what 'good' for children actually means and how this might be enacted. Instead, the report has created a dichotomy between *Bold Beginnings* and a 'false start', pointing the reader in two opposite directions and taking attention away from the vast territory in between. This article, therefore, takes up the idea of 'moral duty' to examine two issues arising from the absence of explicit engagement with ethics and morals in *Bold Beginnings*. First, in the territory in between *Bold Beginnings* and a 'false start' important questions arise about the meaning of childhood in relation to children's education, human life and the world we live in, which is also the 'children's world' (Alexander et al, 2010). Many of these questions have been addressed in the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander et al, 2010), the most comprehensive review of primary education since the Plowden Report, which has been ignored by English policymakers post 2010. The second issue concerns the 'methodology' developed for generating the findings presented in *Bold Beginnings*, and particularly the problematic role of Ofsted inspectors acting as researchers collecting research data in schools, presumably within the hierarchical power relationships established within Ofsted inspection regimes. The 'existential threat' (Richards, 2018, p. 129) that inspectors pose to teachers during Ofsted inspections, combined with the tendency of schools to 'perform' to inspectors (Perryman, 2009), may have compromised both the ethics of voluntary participation and the validity of the data collected by inspector-researchers. This article now proceeds to develop these issues and concludes by proposing an alternative *bold beginning*.

'Good Early Education' and the Issue of Ethics

The territory between *Bold Beginnings* and a 'false start' is imbued with ethical significance. Exploring this territory is a complex task, because questions about 'ethics' and 'morals' generate multiple, sometimes contradictory, answers. 'Morals' and 'morality' have traditionally referred to the distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' or 'good' and 'bad', while 'ethics' has pertained to rules, codes and norms that guide moral conduct (Freakley & Burgh, 2001). What is considered to be 'moral' may vary between individuals and societies and may change even within an individual's lifetime. What counts as moral behaviour has been codified from different starting points, yielding a number of ethical perspectives. For example, ethics of duty prescribe rules for moral conduct such as respect for others from a premise that respecting the dignity of others is intrinsically good. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989, p. 4) is an example of this ethical perspective as it sets out an

obligation that '[i]n all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'. Ethical judgement is, however, complex even in this seemingly simple obligation: what may be considered to be in the best interests of the child now may bring about unforeseen problems in the future. The focus of consequentialist ethics is on actions that are considered to be right or wrong by virtue of their consequences. If the outcome is considered to be 'good' or 'right', then the end (i.e. the outcome) may justify the means used for its achievement. This ethical perspective, however, assumes that it is possible to ascertain the outcomes in advance of action. In acknowledgement of the unpredictability of the future, the ethics of care perspective presents an account of morality that is sensitive to people and contexts on the basis of connectedness with, and care for, others. As many commentators have noted, contemporary social relations have been increasingly driven by consequentialism and its underpinning instrumental reason, which calculates actions, objects and people in terms of their utility value rather than the value they have in themselves (Bauman, 1993; Nussbaum, 2010; Biesta, 2013). For example, instrumental reason calculates the value of education not as something that is intrinsically good but as a means to an end, as in the utilitarian mantra of education as the 'engine of the economy' or as in politicians or schools using children's test results as 'evidence' that their policies have worked. A similar instrumentalist ethic is implicit in *Bold Beginnings* and encapsulated in the logic which links the lasting effects of the Reception year to children's future GCSE scores: 'a child's early education lasts a lifetime. Done well, it can mean the difference between gaining seven Bs at GCSE compared with seven Cs' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 8).

The key problem with making consequentialist ethics the foundation of good education is that it fails to start 'at the beginning', focusing instead on future goals and the most efficient ways of reaching them. The ensuing instrumentalist preoccupation with prespecified outcomes may lead to an obliteration of the boundary between persons and things, or, in other words, to an objectification of children – for example, in seeing 'children-as-data' rather than as persons possessed of unique personal qualities and dispositions (Bates, 2016). Pursuing prespecified ends without paying attention to their unintended consequences may bring about harm in the long term. It may also obscure education's 'own inherent purposes and ethical commitments' (Hogan, 2011, p. 30), even though it is these inherent purposes that are aligned to the question about the 'best interest' of the child. In effect, children may become the 'casualties' of the standards agenda (Alexander, 2010) or other future-orientated projects, especially when their teachers, caught up in the maze of diverse ethical and practical concerns, disconnect from the moral responsibility 'inscribed' in our relationships with others (Biesta, 2013, p. 19). I return to the notion of moral responsibility later in this article.

Possibly due to the absence of explicit ethical reflection, *Bold Beginnings* is silent on the meaning of 'good' education, despite the opening statement that refers to the importance of 'good early education'. Instead, the report lists

numerous examples of what the Reception year is like in good and outstanding schools. Consider the following statements:

> [Reception] is a time when leaders and staff establish the rules, routines and expectations of learning. (p. 8)

> Leaders and staff ignored the perceived tensions between the principles of the EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage] and teaching a whole class directly. They recognised that teaching the whole class was at times the most efficient way of imparting knowledge. (p. 16)

> Leaders and staff knew that most learning could not be self-discovered or left to chance through each child's own choices. Teachers appreciated that most knowledge, skills and processes needed to be taught directly. (p. 17)

> Interventions ... when children were not as quick to pick up knowledge and understanding as others, they were given the extra support needed to help them keep up with their peers. (p. 18)

These statements convey an idea of 'good early education' that socialises children into the whole-school rules and routines and moves them on 'more quickly from their starting points, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics' (p. 10). That these are Ofsted priorities is unmistakable in the repetition of such words as: 'quick' and 'quickly' (referred to 14 times in the 28 pages of the main report); and 'direct', 'formal', 'whole-school' and 'whole-class' (referred to 32 times). Where the progress is not quick enough, interventions are applied so that nothing is 'left to chance'. Implicit here is pressure on children, leaders and teachers to 'quickly' achieve the desired outcomes. The Cambridge Primary Review researchers have found that the balance in the EYFS was often 'distorted by the downward pressure' on Reception: 'Many teachers feel obliged to prioritise literacy and numeracy as well as to drill four-year-olds in the routines of lining up and sitting still and listening' (Alexander, 2010, p. 16). And yet:

> There is no evidence that a child who spends more time learning through lessons – as opposed to learning through play – will 'do better' in the long run… research suggests the opposite; that too formal too soon can be dangerously counterproductive. In 14 of the 15 countries that scored higher than England in a major study of reading and literacy in 2006, children did not enter school until they were six or seven. (Alexander, 2010, p. 16)

Reception is thus defined by Ofsted in terms of constraints, and it is in the area of play that control has been promoted the most:

> Teachers sometimes directed children's play until they became confident to play without adult intervention… at the start of the year, teachers had spent time teaching children how to play. (p. 17)

> In every school, leaders and staff were clear about the purpose of play and understood its place in the curriculum. They were even clearer about its implementation… Even within play, teachers made decisions about how structured or unstructured, dependent or independent each opportunity would be. (p. 16)

> Play ... was used primarily for developing children's personal, social and emotional skills. (p. 4)

> Some headteachers did not believe in the notion of 'free play'. They viewed playing without boundaries as too rosy and unrealistic a view of childhood. (p. 16)

> Some [leaders] did not endorse providing free-flow provision [of play]. In these schools, children had access to the outdoors at set times of the day… The outdoors was used when it was the best space; for example to help children develop physical skills. Teachers focused on getting children active, raising their heart beat and teaching them to balance, ride bikes and climb. (p. 16)

References to 'implementing' play, 'teaching children how to play' and 'using' outdoor play to 'raise' the children's heartbeats are suggestive of excessive control and surveillance. The idea of 'useful' play diminishes the potential of free, imaginative play to support children in becoming 'capable of living with others without control' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 99). As Nussbaum explains:

> Play begins in magical fantasies in which the child controls what happens… As play develops, the child develops a capacity for wonder… as confidence and trust develop in interpersonal play with the parents or with other children, control is relaxed and the child is able to experiment with vulnerability and surprise in ways that could be distressing outside the play setting, but are delightful in play. (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 99-101)

The educational and ethical value of imaginative play resides in how play connects children's experiences of their vulnerability to curiosity rather than to anxiety. The children imagined in *Bold Beginnings*, however, are not allowed to be vulnerable or entitled to carefree play. 'Good early education' is thus conceived in the report as interventions aimed at quickly 'moving children on', within a climate of 'ambition and high expectations' that may put undue pressure on four- to five-year-olds and undermine their confidence, especially if they do not make 'quick' enough progress in literacy and numeracy. The

damaging consequences of learning in this kind of environment may include stress, anxiety and disaffection (Hutchings, 2015). Perhaps of most concern is the point that the Reception year is a 'false start' for children who are not 'successful'. By extrapolation, the only 'true' start is to do with success, while failure is erased as 'false'. This is instrumentalism taken to the extreme based on the assumption that the Reception year means nothing if children do not make the 'expected progress'.

'Methodology', Knowledge Production and Moral Responsibility

As outlined below, 'being evidence informed' as a 'moral duty' (Muijs, 2018) is as complex as enacting 'good' education as an ethical endeavour. But let us first focus on the research undertaken by Ofsted inspectors as explained in the 'Methodology' section of *Bold Beginnings*. The report purports to offer 'a fresh insight into leaders' curriculum intentions, how these are implemented and the impact on outcomes for pupils' (p. 2) whilst emphasising the 'uniqueness' of the Reception year. However, when scrutinised, it is difficult to find 'unique' or 'fresh' insights in this report. The research emphasis on 'leaders' curriculum intentions' spells out a hierarchical approach that appears to diminish the teachers' perspective and that excludes the perspectives of the parents and teacher educators. There are also some strong resemblances between the research findings and government policy, most notably in relation to the reported problem of excessive workload created by the EYFS Profiles (EYFSPs). The key Ofsted message that the Department for Education (DfE) should 'streamline the EYFSP' to reduce teachers' workload (p. 7) appears to support the government's controversial Baseline Assessment (DfE, 2014). The reference to early years teachers not being prepared well enough for teaching in Reception is reminiscent of the adversarial attitude to university initial teacher education (ITE) of the former education secretary Michael Gove (2010):

> Some headteachers said that early years tutors in initial teacher education (ITE) promoted only one view of early years practice. They felt that this downplayed the importance of reading, writing and mathematics for the under-fives in favour of play-based pedagogy and child-initiated learning. This prevented effective progression into Year 1. (Ofsted, 2017, p. 29)

Although Ofsted appears to be critical of ITE tutors promoting 'only one view of early years practice', its report does the same, by praising schools where 'all staff had to be teaching reading, writing and mathematics in the same way' (p. 15).

But a question also needs to be asked about the extent to which the data collected by Ofsted inspector-researchers has been a genuine articulation of leaders' and teachers' views. Any researcher observing or interviewing participants, as Ofsted inspectors did, needs to take into account the possibility

of 'impressions management' by research participants seeking to construct a particular image of themselves (Alvesson, 2011). Managing impressions may have been exacerbated by power relationships, as well as being affected by issues around ethical access to leaders and teachers, some of whom may have felt obliged to participate in this research. The 'Methodology' section of the report is also silent on the complexities around the politics of knowledge production, researcher values and positioning.

Instrumental reason and the objectification of others, both of which have found their way into educational practice, may also be at work in research, rendering research participants into 'objects' of our scrutiny, whereby we use their data to pursue our own goals. When the research participant is 'dissembled' into 'traits' (Bauman, 1993, p. 127), the researcher may lose sight of the whole person as a moral subject. The findings can then be targeted at these specific traits rather than at the person, as in the traits reported as 'lacking' in the teachers in the schools, such as 'understanding about progression' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 29). Therefore, while 'being evidence informed' may be a 'moral duty', the very process of producing evidence may compromise both research ethics and the moral responsibility of the researcher to approach others as moral subjects.

An Alternative *Bold Beginning*

To conclude, let us consider an alternative beginning, by taking ethics and morals rather than educational outcomes as our starting point. The main ethical challenge in the contemporary world is to recognise and check the instrumentalist impulse of 'using' others for our own ends. While respecting the dignity and the rights of others may be enshrined in ethical laws that we are obliged to adhere to, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly important in the education of young children are ethics of care and the contingencies of situations and individuals that they require of us to be sensitive to. Above all, however, there is our moral responsibility for 'the other', not as 'something' that we choose because we care or because it is a 'moral duty' that we are obliged to abide by (Bauman, 1993; Biesta, 2013). Our responsibility for 'the other' is always already there, it is given, even though we may refuse to recognise it. This moral responsibility shines a spotlight on education conceived not as an attempt to take control to deliver predefined outcomes, but as an attempt to let go of control to let the new happen. It is a beginning that we are responsible for, even though we cannot control it. As Hannah Arendt (1977, p. 196) has noted, education begins:

> at the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it… And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us.

In light of Arendt's insight into how education begins, it is clear that *Bold Beginnings* has taken a narrow, instrumentalist view of what the Reception curriculum and pedagogy should be, based on control and routines of formal teaching, at the expense of play and development of imagination. The narrow Ofsted parameters of 'quick' progress and 'ambitious' GCSE scores that define both educational success and 'good' education lead to the 'dissembling' of children and teachers into sets of 'traits' that need to be worked on, inspected and improved. In the process of this 'dissembling', children and teachers lose their status as whole persons – moral subjects – and the vast territory in which questions of ethics and morals arise becomes a moral desert. If *Bold Beginnings* is to shine a spotlight on 'good early education', then the Ofsted formula needs to be rebalanced to recognise the importance of children and teachers as whole persons and the right of children to play (UNICEF, 1989). To negate the importance of play or resort to 'using' play for extrinsic ends is to sever the connectedness among children that arises in play and to stunt children's capacity for wonder that makes learning magical (Nussbaum, 2010). It is within children's play and in sensitive relations between teachers and children as whole persons that early years education can connect anew both to its magic and to its moral dimension, in ways that are unforeseen by us.

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AGNIESZKA BATES teaches in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Prior to entering higher education in 2008, she worked as a primary school practitioner in the roles of teacher, senior management team member and teacher governor. Her book *Transforming Education: meanings, myths and complexity* (2016) evaluates education policy, school leadership and everyday educational practice in the light of groundbreaking insights into social relations offered by complexity theory. *Correspondence*: agnieszka.bates@uea.ac.uk