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Bold Beginnings: what is at stake?

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ABSTRACT This article offers a critique of Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* report based on the author's own experience as an early years practitioner. It draws attention to the growing 'readiness' agenda of the Department for Education (DfE) and to its focus on a primarily transmission-based model of teaching. It reaffirms the necessity of an approach to the Reception year which keeps the meaning-making child at the centre, allowing inquiry to develop and thrive and creativity to flourish.

When Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings: the Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools* was released, in November 2017, it drew substantial criticism. This was made prominent in the open letter published in the *Guardian* on 16 January 2018, coordinated by Keeping Early Years Unique (KEYU). Detailed critical responses were also published by a number of organisations concerned with early years education and practice, including TACTYC (2017) and CREC (2017). TACTYC pointed out how Ofsted's report also became fodder for the press, highlighting Camilla Turner's inflammatory article in the *Daily Telegraph* (Turner, 2017) entitled, 'Reception Teachers Are Failing a Third of Five-year-olds, Major Ofsted Report Finds'.

Ofsted chief Amanda Spielman gave the concerns raised by many in the education community short shrift, describing the report's findings as not 'very controversial' (Spielman/Ofsted, 2017). Yet, in spite of Spielman's attempts to underplay the contentiousness of the report, disquiet about its content remains, nearly a year on from its publication.

A Treacherous Idea

Bold Beginnings is billed as shining 'a spotlight on the Reception Year and the extent to which a school's curriculum for four-and-five-year-olds prepares them for the rest of their education and beyond' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 2). Within this statement lies a key area of contention, the idea that the Reception year is primarily concerned with preparation for something else. One theme to which

the report often returns is how successfully the current Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) programme readies children for Key Stage 1. Now, in the words of Dewey, '"Preparation" is a treacherous idea' (Dewey, 1938, p. 47) when 'the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a superstitious future' (p. 51). I want to consider some of the things which might be threatened if we make the pursuit of readiness for the curriculum demands of Year 1 our key aim. I also hope to show how *Bold Beginnings* is ideologically related to other recent output by the Department for Education (DfE).

Attention has been drawn to the report's 'questionable methodology' (TACTYC, 2017, p. 1). Certainly, there appears to be little consistency about the way in which comments are selected for inclusion, other than how well they support the report's underlying agenda. From the narrative created by Ofsted, recommendations have been extrapolated, so it seems reasonable to question the degree to which schools selected for inclusion in the report are representative. Where are the views of the many good and outstanding schools which take a different, more child-centred approach to teaching and learning in the Reception year?

More than half of the report's recommendations relate to the direct teaching of reading, writing and number. Prioritisation of these subjects is justified by the suggestion that children are arriving at school better prepared for 'content-led areas of the wider curriculum' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 10). Current early learning goals (ELGs) in these areas are regarded as 'insufficient preparation for children's learning in Year 1 and beyond' (p. 5). While Reception is deemed 'a unique and important year' (p. 8), the worth of Reception would seem to be defined in terms of how well it prepares children for formal learning and the curriculum demands of Key Stage 1; how well it acts as a 'bridge between the EYFS and ... the start of the national curriculum' (p. 8).

Is Curriculum King?

Those who doubt the agenda behind *Bold Beginnings* need to look no further than the Draft Revised Statutory Framework for the Early Years (DfE, 2018b), where echoes of the report's recommendations can be clearly detected. The new framework, to be piloted from September 2018, has been described as a 'rewrite of the EYFS curriculum by the back door' (Early Education, 2018, p. 2). Changes include, but are not limited to: an increased number of literacy ELGs; a reduced focus on communication and language; an increased focus on number and the removal of the ELGs for understanding and for shape, space and measure. The reduced importance attributed to how children learn, as distinct from what they learn, is implied in the de-prioritising of the characteristics of effective learning. A detailed critique of the implications of the changes can be found in the commentary on the draft curriculum published by Early Education (2018).

The *Bold Beginnings* report and the draft Early Years Framework can be seen as part of a wider move by the DfE in favour of a knowledge-based curriculum. Consider the recent announcement from Schools Minister Nick Gibb (a self-confessed E.D. Hirsch enthusiast) that the DfE is to invite bids from schools to take part in a £2.4 million pilot programme to investigate the effects of the use of 'complete curriculum programmes' (DfE, 2018a). These are described as 'complete packages of resources that teachers need to deliver a National Curriculum subject across a key stage. They include a long-term plan, with content and knowledge sequenced carefully, as well as all the resources and training required for teachers to deliver individual lessons. Crucially, these curriculum programmes are knowledge-rich, and have teacher-led instruction and whole class teaching approaches at their core' (DfE, 2018a, p. 6). The professed aims of the pilot are to determine the effect of these programmes on pupil outcomes and teacher workload.

With potentially huge changes afoot across compulsory education, it is worth remembering that the *Bold Beginnings* report was released at a time when 94% of early years providers were rated good or outstanding (Spielman/Ofsted, 2017). There is room for improvement, of course, especially to address the needs of those children served by settings which have been judged to be inadequate or requiring improvement, but overall, the vast majority of schools are successful. As well as considering the performance of schools as a whole, we must continue to focus on those children who face particular challenges and disadvantages. Few would argue that the progress and welfare of these children should be a key priority. However, instead of looking closely at the difficulties these children face, and taking into account their broader developmental needs, *Bold Beginnings* suggests that if we can just do more reading, writing and number, then we will save children 'all the painful and unnecessary consequences of falling behind their peers' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 4). This 'one-size-fits-all' approach to learning is alarming, especially when one considers children with a 'special educational needs' (SEN) designation, children for whom English is an additional language, and summer-born children – groups which, perhaps because they fit less readily into neatly organised, subject-driven models of education, this report chooses to ignore.

Many schools have fought to reject the idea that curriculum is king, and to value the process of learning as much as, if not more than, the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge. There is a wealth of recent evidence from, among others, the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project (Sylva et al, 2014), which supports child-centred, play-based learning throughout the Foundation Stage, including in Reception. Indeed, it is not so long ago that the DfE stated: 'Play-based learning and emphases on choice, independence and child-initiated activities are effective and age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of education' (DfE, 2010, p. 4).

Continued Conservatism

Although the *Bold Beginnings* report does acknowledge the need for play, the types of play that it describes in a positive light are of a very particular kind – adult initiated, traditional and leading on from direct teaching (Ofsted, 2017, p. 17). This kind of play has value but, in my experience, the real richness of play comes from what is personal, current, exciting. The report takes a reductive attitude to the benefits of play, focusing on the 'social and emotional' (p. 4) elements, rather than acknowledging that 'play in humans is adaptive and is fundamental in supporting a whole range of intellectual, emotional and social abilities' (Whitebread et al, 2012, p. 28).

In the 2012 Brian Simon Memorial Lecture, Michael Armstrong bemoaned 'the remorseless insistence of successive governments on a narrowly didactic conception of education. Pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools, all seem in thrall to a deep-seated academic conservatism which no longer recognises education as a critical and creative practice whereby culture is not only assimilated but challenged, revised, appropriated, and remade' (Armstrong, 2013, p. 2). Such conservatism continues.

Being a Reception teacher was the most creative, engaging and intellectually challenging job I ever had. It was also an often joyful experience. It is a great privilege to be part of a thriving classroom community where children prosper as learners and as human beings, where individual and group projects, from the smallest to the most ambitious, are realised. Allowing time for these to take shape and still more time to reflect with the children on their learning and achievements was a choice I found easy to justify. When two children wanted to make their own outfits, to dress as bride and groom, I watched as they worked together to measure out the necessary lengths of paper to cut off our big reel and I listened as they reasoned with each other about where and how to make armholes. Then there was a bow tie, a cummerbund and a posy to create, and then the problem to be solved of how to secure their outfits to each other. Finally, they were ready to play at being bride and groom; acting commenced and solemn words were spoken. By now many other children had become part of the enterprise. The children recalled and described weddings they had attended. Similarities and differences were noticed; invitations made and distributed.

I could add more to this vignette which would speak further of the life of learning and play that blooms in Reception settings under the right conditions. As an example of classroom life, an instance such as I have described is simultaneously unique and typical. Unique because it is about those children and their plans and priorities, the meaning they have made together and the skills they have used. Typical because it is just one of many, many incidents of purposeful, self-initiated learning I witnessed and was part of as a Reception teacher. Such occurrences led me to agree with Michael Armstrong's assertion that '[c]reativity is the highway to skill' (Armstrong, 2006, p. 177). Just think for a minute of all of the skills the children used to make the 'wedding' happen:

communication, collaboration, compromise, problem-solving, measuring, writing, inventing, to name just a few.

Yet neither 'creative' nor 'creativity' appears in the *Bold Beginnings* report.

The kind of learning illustrated in my vignette is rich and real, but it takes time. How does it square with comments in the report such as: 'leaders began by making sure that their staff started teaching quickly, including the specifics of reading, writing and numbers... They did not believe in a prolonged settling-in period' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 16)? Or with those which speak of 'the need to move children on more quickly from their starting points, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics' (p. 10)? Such comments rather suggest that, notwithstanding the fact that our children are among the youngest entrants in the world to compulsory education, we can still push them harder, to achieve more high-status skills more quickly.

The Importance of Patience

Those who advocate this not-a-moment-to-lose approach to the Reception year might also consider how such an outlook sits alongside an honest appraisal of the realities of the classroom. I have yet to find a practitioner who agrees that, increasingly, 'more children are arriving in Reception personally, socially and emotionally ready to learn' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 10). The gritty truth is that as well as supporting children in their early encounters with formal learning, practitioners must attend to tears, injuries, arguments and toilet accidents. These take time to deal with and can have unpredictable effects on the learning and timetable. Reception settings must have the necessary leeway in their timetables to allow for these very natural occurrences to be dealt with sensitively and appropriately. A holistic approach to children's learning often means turning difficulties into opportunities to develop empathy, resilience and independence. This takes time, patience and skill, but is central to children's well-being.

It is also important to remember the crucial role of motivation. TACTYC warns that 'adherence to the report's recommendations will cause long-term, detrimental effects on young children's confidence, motivation and disposition to learn' (TACTYC, 2017, p. 1). Children's early engagement with reading, writing and mathematics needs to be playful, low-pressure and enabling. In my experience, the enemies of motivation are frustration and boredom, and for this reason I find the report's many references to the benefits of 'schemes' troubling. While some schemes may be useful, they are by no means essential, and they are rarely the most inspiring or engaging route to understanding. The danger of schemes and complete curriculum programmes is that they give the illusion that a paint-by-numbers approach can serve the learning needs of all children. Yes, planning individual lessons takes time. But it also lends itself to reflection on prior learning, and about how best to provide that meaningful context which considers the priorities and interests of our own classes. Dewey's observations, from more than a century ago now, resonate when we consider the motivational difficulties children face when the teaching they receive is abstracted from their

own experience and when learning is presented in a 'ready-made fashion' (Dewey, 1902, p. 26).

It is also worthwhile to consider the effects on the motivation of teachers, who, increasingly educated to master's level, see their professional judgement undervalued and their autonomy reduced in this drive for conformity and quick results. Contrast this with the autonomy afforded to Finnish teachers, who 'can decide themselves the methods of teaching as well as textbooks and materials' (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017, p. 13).

Disregard

Bold Beginnings reports a number of troubling comments relating to assessment in the EYFS. For example:

> Most Year 1 teachers spoken to said that the EYFSP [Early Years Foundation Stage Profile] provided only shallow and unnecessary information about a child's achievements. Typically they wanted more specific information about a child's reading, writing and mathematical ability, such as the specific Grapheme/Phoneme Correspondence (GPCs) children knew and their knowledge of numbers. They considered this information to be more useful in helping them to provide an appropriate key stage 1 curriculum than a discussion about all 17 ELGs. Reception and Year 1 teachers discussed an individual child's achievements across all areas of learning only when a child had special educational needs and/or disabilities or was showing a specific developmental delay. **(**Ofsted, 2017, p. 26**)**

The apparent disregard displayed here for children's broader range of capabilities, interests and needs is shocking. I believe this lack of respect for children's creative and investigative engagement with the world around them, their social development and their health and well-being, is profoundly dangerous. Assessment is and always has been fundamental to the practitioner's role, but this comment shows how a target-driven assessment culture is fast encroaching on a properly child-centred, holistic, 360-degree approach to thinking about learning.

This assessment of what is worth and not worth saying when we talk about children's progress may also cause us to consider the report's characterisation of the moderation process. While I would agree with the call from Early Education to consider a revised approach to moderation which balances 'the need for consistency (across and between schools and local authorities) with workload and best practice in assessment' (Early Education, 2018, p. 5), my own experience of external moderation, in Norfolk, has been very positive. Although it was not without its pressures, I always appreciated the opportunity for intelligent, professional dialogue with knowledgeable and experienced moderators. At these times I took great pleasure in sharing the

work of children in my class, and in drawing on my observations to tell the story of their learning. However, according to the report, not all teachers feel the same: 'Teachers told inspectors that moderators often appeared to use moderation events as a way of promulgating their views about early years education rather than checking the accuracy of teachers' assessments' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 28). Now, there is nothing in this statement to explain what these 'views' might be, or on what evidence base they were presented. However, it seems to me that fellow professionals, charged with the job of supporting teachers to assess and understand what children have achieved, might quite justifiably make reference to their views about early years education. Sadly, if the idea that the value of a child's achievements can be reduced to a series of scores (how many GPCs they know, etc.) is actively propagated, it is surely not unreasonable to predict the demise of learner-centred, dialogue-based moderation.

The report also contains recommendations for initial teacher education (ITE) providers, for Ofsted and for the DfE itself, but these are all variations on the theme of this article – namely, the report's emphasis on how all parties must adapt to ensure that learning in Reception more closely aligns with the curriculum demands of Year 1. My response as an educator, first of young children, now of people undertaking ITE, and also as a parent, is to state my belief that the pursuit of these priorities should not be permitted to become so all-encompassing as to inhibit the spirit of inquiry which thrives in so many schools. If we genuinely value children for who they are *now*, as well as for who and what they might become, then we should allow them plenty of time to get to know themselves as learners and to explore their own ideas about the world. When we do introduce children formally to the more abstract skills involved in reading, writing and mathematics, we should remain cognizant of the difficulties which many, if not all, children will face, and be ready to adapt our practice accordingly. There is no doubt that beginner teachers need to be prepared for the statutory demands of their profession at the point at which they qualify. However, it must be acknowledged that while policies come and go and the priorities of governments change, many of the values, qualities and skills needed to teach well over many years will remain unchanged. These include reflectiveness, intellectual engagement, professional responsibility, autonomy and principled resistance.

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