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A New Public Conceptualisation of Education and Care for Younger Children: bridging the public–private divide

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ABSTRACT Over the past two decades there has been substantial expansion of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision. This has led to significant expansion of the role of the private sector. Alongside this, there is a substantial evidence base about the importance of high-quality, pedagogically appropriate provision, delivered by highly skilled practitioners. This article argues that to provide high-quality ECEC a reconceptualisation of provision for young children within public education is needed. These changes would allow developments to build on previous reforms through an increased role for public provision as a distinct education phase, creating a more highly skilled workforce with clear career pathways and offering a pedagogically appropriate curriculum.

Introduction

Over the past two decades there has been sustained change in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy. The sector is unusual in covering two 'phases' of education. Between the ages of 0-2 the majority of provision is private, between 3-4 much of the provision is private although there is more public provision and this varies geographically, and from 4-5 years old the majority of children enter public mainstream schooling. This variation is characterised by different policy, workforce structures and curricula. In the context of rising poverty, the government aims to raise social mobility, and the importance of supporting children to achieve their 'potential', framing ECEC as being vital to 'promote' children's learning. There is a need to review the structure and approach to ECEC. This article discusses these points and argues

for changes to ECEC, to reposition provision for children aged 4-6 as a distinct public phase of the education sector.

Current Policy and Provision for Young Children

Three factors have dominated the compulsory phases of English education over the past decades; increased marketisation, a focus on the assessment of outcomes through testing, and sustained structural and curricular reforms. There has been substantial impact on ECEC, although this is given less public prominence. For young children the increasing 'free entitlement' is accessed by over 90% of eligible 3-4 year-olds and 70% of eligible 2-year-olds. However, complexity is already evident as the 'free' aspect of early education entitlement is only available for 3-4 year-olds for 15 hours per week for the equivalent of 38 weeks of the year. The additional 15 hours, raising the entitlement to 30 hours per week is only available to children of working parents below a set income threshold. The 2-year-old offer, again for 15 hours a week over 38 weeks, is only available to 'disadvantaged' children (Albakri, 2018). Following this, most children enter school at 4-5 years old, earlier than in most countries, where schooling begins at 6-7 years old. It is worth considering that the school starting age in England was set in the nineteenth century and was designed to get women back to work, and this still dominates ECEC policy (Williams, 2018).

Successive governments have attempted to raise standards in the education system, with the aim of reducing inequality and promoting social mobility (HM Government, 2011). Over past years the government has re-emphasised social mobility as a measure of successful education. Accepting the contested nature of the term and fact that it is dependent on often narrow measures of social status, a dominant factor restricting social mobility is child poverty and the number of children living in poverty has risen in the UK by over 500,000 during the years 2013-18. Many children living in poverty have a working parent or parents. However, many jobs are low paid, government financial support has become restricted and housing costs have contributed to rising levels of child poverty.

As well as financial impact, poverty has a pernicious effect on families and when experienced alongside adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) has the potential to impact on health and well-being throughout the life course (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018). Being the victim of abuse or maltreatment, living with a parent with a mental health condition, experiencing parental abandonment, household drug or alcohol abuse are all examples of ACEs. It is estimated that approximately 50% of children experience one or more ACEs and 10% four or more (Health Scotland, 2017). The more adverse experiences a child experiences the more the likely impact rises, with the potential to lead to severe and multiple disadvantage throughout the life course. Given the potentially enduring impact of ACEs, governments are prioritising attention to tackle these (Health Scotland, 2017; Public Health Wales, 2018). Resilience is a key protective factor for children who experience ACEs. Policy targeted at

effectively supporting families, responsive services and skilled practitioners that support young children and their families can make a meaningful difference to families experiencing poverty and ACEs (Walsh, 2018).

The ECEC Workforce

In 2018 the estimated number of practitioners in the ECEC sector was 430,000. Approximately 252,800 were employed in group-based settings, 47,800 as child minders and assistants and 130,000 in school-based nursery/reception classes, with the majority being female (Department for Education [DfE], 2018). There are three factors worthy of consideration in relation to the workforce: qualification level, diversity of practitioners, and pay and conditions. The link between higher quality provision, better outcomes for children and higher-level qualifications for practitioners has been well established (Nutbrown, 2012). In ECEC there is a stark difference in qualification levels between the school sector (predominately providing for children aged 4-5years and above) and the childcare sector (predominantly providing for children aged 0-4). In terms of degree-level qualification, 37.1% of all female workers hold a degree, compared to 92.8% of teachers and 25.1% of practitioners in the childcare sector. Over the past decade those in the childcare sector studying for a higher qualification has fallen from 22.7% to 14.9%.

There are many characteristics of a diverse workforce. In the ECEC sector 7.4% of practitioners in the childcare workforce are male. In comparison to other sectors of education this is very low. In the hair and beauty sector, where comparisons are often made to the childcare workforce, male workers account for 13.7%. For the childcare workforce pay is low in absolute and relative terms. Across the female workforce population, average hourly pay is £13.20, while for the childcare workforce average hourly pay is £8.20 and in real terms has dropped 5% since 2013. The impact of low pay is clearly illustrated by the fact that 44.5% of the childcare workforce is claiming benefits/tax credits in order to manage financially (Bonetti, 2019).

The private sector has a heavy reliance on the childcare workforce, employing approximately 80% of practitioners (i.e. nursery nurses; childminders and assistants). There is an association with pay and the age of children, with those who work with youngest children usually being paid the least. In addition, the qualification level of those who work with children aged 0-4 years old is often lower than those who work with children of school age. In the private sector there is also often less job security, contracts with variable hours and fewer development and career progression opportunities (Bonetti, 2019).

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework for children aged 0-5 (and more recently with reference from pre-birth to 5) became a statutory

requirement from 2008. The strategy was revised in 2012 in response to the Tickell (2011) review. The revisions reduced the number of learning goals and focused on three prime areas and four specific areas. They simplified the approach to assessment at the end of the foundation phase; they introduced a progress check at 2, to be completed by a practitioner known to the child and to be shared with parents; and they emphasised that practitioners need to make judgements on the appropriate balance between play, learning, child-led and practitioner led activities. Further revisions were made in 2014 and 2017. Tickell (2011) restated that there should be a continued graduate ambition for the childcare sector and clear career pathways. This overall aim was supported by Nutbrown (2012), who argued for rigorous qualifications for the sector overall, emphasising the impact of graduates as vital in providing excellent pedagogical leadership.

Recently there has been considerable debate about the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2017) report *Bold Beginnings,* reviewing practice in Reception (see *FORUM* 60/3). The report states that Reception should provide the foundation for progress in school and life (Kay, 2018). This is problematic as it positions Reception as a preparation phase for school, rather than seeing it as an important phase in contributing to children's holistic development. Critics of this view may argue that a more formal approach provides the basis for later educational success. However, it is not about not wanting children to succeed. Children being prepared for school is positive but a focus on Reception as preparation for the next school year contributes to what the OECD terms 'schoolification' of ECEC. This potentially creates tension between Early Years and school policy. Kay (2018) argues this is particularly evident with Reception being seen as 'a site for school readiness ... through a circular discourse of preparation for year one' (p. 329). A more effective response is for schools to be more ready with child and pedagogically appropriate practices for young children (OECD, 2017; Trelford, 2018).

A positive step when the EYFS was introduced was the focus on play. There were criticisms about the complexity in terms of content and assessment, but these were addressed by the Tickell (2011) review. However, following proposed revisions to the EYFS and reports such as *Bold Beginnings*, there is pressure to increase the focus on literacy and number, and a narrowing of personal and social education to self-regulation and building relationships. In addition, over half of the recommendations for Reception classes in *Bold Beginnings* are about a didactic approach towards reading, writing and number. Overall there are concerns that a shift to facts and content will reduce the focus on how children learn and divert it more towards what they learn, prioritising a knowledge-based curriculum and play which is directed by adults rather than being child initiated (Trelford, 2018). This approach contradicts multiple evidence sources and early childhood experts who argue for more play-based learning and a later start to formal learning (Whitebread, 2013).

Responding Effectively: a new public conceptualisation for ECEC

Copious evidence emphasises the early years as a crucial stage of life. As well as the immediate impact on young children, early experiences can affect physical, emotional and economic well-being throughout the life course. To address this, and promote social mobility, action is needed across the lifecycle, starting in the foundation years (HM Government, 2011). The debate on school readiness is often positioned as an argument for or against a more formal, structured and didactic approach to the teaching and learning for young children. At worst, this could be seen as arguing for or against children being made ready for school or achieving their potential. As stated earlier, it is not about disadvantaging any child. These discussions should be informed by evidence and what a pedagogically appropriate curriculum to support holistic development and long-term success for young children should include (Trelford, 2018). To achieve this requires a new approach to policy and structure, a focus on developing and upskilling practitioners to deliver (a term more appropriate to ECEE) a coherent curriculum as an important foundation for young children.

A New Approach to ECEC Policy and Provision

Many countries in Europe and other continents have a school starting age between 6 and 7 years old. It is difficult to make direct comparisons between countries as the structure of the school system will vary; however, England is out of step with the majority. The increasing expectation for formal learning in school settings, evidence from a range of academic reports, educational league tables and ECEC experts supports a raised school starting age to 6-7-years old. Children's early years provide the building blocks for lifelong development. To foster curiosity and a positive disposition to learning, effective child-centred early years policy needs to be at the core of any approach to impact positively on life chances (often seen in government policy as synonymous with social mobility) for children (Bonetti, 2019).

To accommodate this, significant structural change would require a new public role for ECEC. With the three levels of entitlement in England there is already significant investment in ECEC provision, although much of this investment is accounted for by private-sector settings. Total public spending in 2018-19 was over 800 billion pounds (Office for Budget Responsibility [OBR], 2019). Bonetti (2019) estimates there are over 700,000 childcare workers. More emphasis through policy and provision is needed to retain, motivate and upskill the workforce, particularly to ensure that provision is managed and pedagogically led by appropriately qualified graduates. There are a number of requirements to achieve this, but an important area is pay and conditions. This will require public investment in both people and provision. As an example, to improve the pay level of the childcare workforce to the level of the general female workforce would cost approximately £5 billion pounds. While this is

significant, set in the context of public spending, this amounts to an increase of slightly over 0.5%. With increased funding it is appropriate to demand higher qualification levels, enhanced evidence-informed practice and better outcomes for children, so additional finance goes hand-in-hand with increased quality. In addition, this would see increased tax receipts from workers to the public purse and decreased claims for benefits and tax credits, reducing the additional expenditure further still. At present most children in receipt of ECEC do so through private provision. Successive governments clearly have increased private sector provision in ECEC. However, restricted government funding, the perceived low status of the sector, and the historic devaluing of work in the childcare sector have contributed to overreliance on practitioners qualified at level 2 and 3 in early years practice and have restricted career development pathways (Tickell, 2011; Gambaro, 2017; Bonetti, 2019). Further consideration is needed to creating a structure for the ECEC sector that is complementary to a revised school starting age of 6-7 years old to provide effectively for children's holistic development.

A New Public Emphasis for ECEC Professionals

A social pedagogue approach to practice is concerned with children's well-being and learning. Kyriacou (2009) sees social pedagogues as focused on five dimensions of children and childhood: care and welfare; inclusion; socialisation; academic support; and social education. Successive governments have promoted initiatives across different professional groups to support children's development. Often these initiatives are focused on specific professional groups. For example, the government has recently announced plans for 1000 health visitors to be trained to support children's early language and communication needs during routine home visits. Whilst this may have benefit in a workforce of over 500,000 working with children and families, the reach will be extremely limited.

A commitment to training and funding graduates using a social pedagogue model would support children to develop socially, emotionally and physically, as well as cognitively (Nutbrown, 2012). This also has potential to promote children's resilience and to respond to trauma experienced by children – a key protective factor for ACEs. A social pedagogue approach would support children experiencing ACEs and lay the foundations to support the development of children's cognitive, social and emotional skills for effective learning (Walsh, 2018). This approach could be integrated with the current school system to create an extended foundation stage for children aged 4-6 years old, working with children, other agencies and importantly parents. This approach would reconceptualise the role of those who work with young children and has the potential to offer career pathways for practitioners to enter/progress to graduate-level positions, with appropriate terms, conditions and professional expectations. The ECEC workforce lacks diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and increasingly age, with fewer younger practitioners (Bonetti, 2019). The

proposed reforms have the potential to attract more diverse practitioners, through the provision of improved career prospects and remuneration, and for practitioners to reflect more accurately the diversity of the children and families they serve.

Supporting All Children

The EYFS focuses on social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. However, recently the emphasis has shifted to focus more on cognitive skills and didactic teaching and less on play. Walsh (2018) argues that the early years need to focus on 'softer skills' rather than academic preparation. The early years need to foster positive dispositions, encouraging children's ability and willingness to learn. Resilience is supported through an interplay between internal, personal and environmental factors. Approaches that support curiosity, creativity, problem solving and appropriate risk-taking can develop resilience (Rawding, 2019). Approaches to support resilience are vital as a key protective factor against ACEs and can be supported by a social pedagogical and trauma informed approach (Walsh, 2018) to effectively support all children. Government action to address poverty and other social inequalities, which can generate trauma, are also vital.

A key aspect of ECEC is curriculum. All practitioners need to ensure that children's learning experiences support their development (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019). As well as skilled ECEC practice, this requires a curriculum that is pedagogically appropriate and responsive to children. In terms of curriculum content there is clear pressure to formalise the early years curriculum to ensure children achieve their academic potential (Kay, 2018; Trelford, 2018). A brief review of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) outcomes of 15 year-olds, which assesses 'the extent to which 15-year-old students ... have acquired key knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies' (p. 3), ranked 72 countries from a sample of over 500,000 students. Examples of top-ranked countries include Singapore (school starting age 6-7); Japan (school starting age 6-7); Estonia (school starting age 7); Finland (school starting age 7) and Australia (school starting age 6) (OECD, 2018). These results show that outcomes at 15 are not detrimentally impacted by a later school starting age. This supports the establishment of a public education phase for children aged 4-6, led by graduates and leading on to the next phase of education.

An effective early years curriculum, drawing inspiration from academic sources, other countries and structures (such as kindergartens) provides a sound evidence base for a pedagogically appropriate curriculum as part of a new public education phase. A focus on relationship building, empathy, problem solving, exploration, play-based approaches, and fine and gross motor skills lay the foundations for effective learning (Walsh, 2018). Melhuish and Gardiner (2019) discuss structural and process quality. Structural quality relates to adult–child ratios, practitioner qualifications and characteristics of the physical environment.

Process quality includes the quality of the curriculum, pedagogic practice and children's actual experiences. Highly skilled practitioners, with scope for professional autonomy, who focus on teaching and learning to support children's verbal communication, teach social skills, promote self-awareness, self-regulation, sharing, turn-taking, empathising with others, and providing new experiences in an environment of respect and positive feedback show how practice and practitioners are integral aspects of quality ECEC (Tickell, 2011; Nutbrown, 2012). Each phase of education is about knowing, understanding, making sense of the world, problem-solving, engaging in dialogue, developing and maintaining relationships, and cultural awareness (Alexander, 2016). These skills and attributes, often referred to as soft skills, are vital alongside 'hard' academic knowledge as these are the very attributes that enable people to achieve, work and live together productively in society.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades many changes have been made to ECEC. Funded provision has increased substantially and the number of places has risen sharply. However, overall outcomes for young people at age 16 have remained relatively static. Based on the evidence, a radical rethink of the place of ECEC within the broader education sector offers the potential to respond effectively to children, families and practitioners. To achieve this there is a clear role for the public sector, to position ECEC for children aged 4-6 as a structured part of the state education system. Adopting a social pedagogue approach offers the potential to support all children, including those with ACEs, to develop socially, emotionally and physically as well as cognitively. These changes alongside leadership from well-qualified graduates and a pedagogically appropriate curriculum for young children could provide every child with a bold beginning to achieve their potential. This offers a new conception of school readiness – with a focus on learning and the individual child – not an either or – valuing play, experience, and supporting lifelong curiosity, creativity and discovery.

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