Rethinking early years: how the neoliberal agenda fails children

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> Because care and education for young children and the social institutions we construct around early childhood lie at the very heart of any human society, they define what we are and what we aspire to become as a society.[1]

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted some startling disparities in relation to young children's life chances and educational experiences. Children are going hungry not just for food, as highlighted by Marcus Rashford's campaign to extend food vouchers, but for social contact with their friends and their wider family, their carers and educators. Some children will have benefited from having adequate indoor space and resources for playing and learning, access to outdoor space and contact with the natural environment and rich play opportunities provided by parents who are able to give them some undivided attention. Others will have had none of these things. Indeed in the government's response to the current Covid-19 crisis, provision for under-fives has not been recognised in any of the funding for educational support or building

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of new settings, or in creating training opportunities for staff.[2] The National Day Nurseries Association reports that currently 71 per cent of nurseries are running at a loss.

The existing provision for under-fives is in crisis, with private providers going bankrupt and the underfunding of the entire sector causing cuts and closures. Before the pandemic, an Early Years Alliance survey of 6300 nurseries reported that more than a third were likely to close. In the next round of cuts, many settings plan to increase fees, charge for extra services such as lunch or trips, and scale back on equipment resources and adult child ratios, including cutting provision for young children with special needs or disabilities.[3] This will result in a two-tier system with parents who cannot afford the extra costs, often in the most disadvantaged areas, receiving a poorer quality experience for their children. This is clearly unacceptable if the government is seriously concerned to 'level up' and give every child an equal chance.

The current crisis is a good opportunity to look at what we really want to guarantee for our youngest children. For most of the past one hundred years this phase has been recognised as distinct, requiring education and care to cater to the needs of children who have just left the security of their families and close communities, and are at a very rapid stage of development, physically, emotionally and socially as well as intellectually.[4] What forms of support for families and what kinds of education and care we should be providing? Who should be providing it and how should it be funded? How do we, as a society, provide the education and care that young children need outside the home, from birth to school-starting age?

To help answer these questions we describe in this article the current arrangements and varieties of provision and approaches in England; we discuss what we know from research about young children's development and early learning; and we look at the current national early years curriculum and how it contrasts to other international models and pedagogical approaches. We also discuss the importance of play-based learning, as well as the role of adults in observing, recording and assessing young children's learning and supporting each child's learning journey. A further central theme of our discussion is an emphasis on the holistic nature of children's learning - which makes education and care inseparable in young children's lives.

The social and political context of current early years education

The effects of austerity

Government data for 2019 shows 4.1 million children living in poverty and an increase in children living in severe poverty (3.7 million). 70 per cent of these children are in families where the adults are working.[5] A report commissioned by the United Nations in the same year expressed in the strongest terms that severe increases in poverty, homelessness, stress on families and poor mental health were a result of deliberate government policy.[6] The stress of living in poverty has a direct impact on the adults caring for children, and thus can affect their physical and emotional well-being. The latest annual report by the Social Metrics Commission found that nearly half of black African Caribbean households were in poverty compared with just under one in five of white families.[7] Migrant and refugee families are in an even worse position.

Recent reports show, and teaching unions confirm, that many children are arriving at school hungry.[8] Low wages (often below the minimum wage, especially in the case of black and minority ethnic workers), zero hours contracts, the benefits freeze, the introduction of universal credit and the imposition of the two child limit for child benefit have driven many families into poverty. People on lower incomes are also disproportionately affected by the lack of public housing, and the pursuit of policies that place the responsibility for meeting housing need largely with private developers, as well as the progressive dilution of legislation protecting tenants' rights, which has led to increasing housing insecurity and an overall deterioration of standards.[9] This too affects children's education and development.

This makes early years care all the more important, but at the time of writing state funding has been withdrawn from early years settings, with the threatened closure of local children's centres, including highly prized maintained nursery schools. Local authorities can no longer offer 30 hours of free early education to disadvantaged families, which means that inequalities are being increased. (The 30 hours offer is in any case already regressive, with most funding going to better off families.[10])

Furthermore, Iain Duncan Smith's policy of denying full-time nursery places to the children of the unemployed as a benefit sanction means that the children of families suffering the distress of new unemployment will lose their 30-hour nursery

place. This will halve the income of many nurseries, forcing even more to close.[11] At the same time there is a crisis in children's services across the country, due to massive cuts in central government funding to local authorities.

Many facilities which used to provide free and safe play and leisure experiences for children have been forced to close, not because of Covid-19 but due to the withdrawal of public funding. For example, after school extended play schemes and breakfast clubs, school holiday play activity and adventure playgrounds, swimming pools and libraries, have either been cut or transferred into the hands of private providers who charge for their services. Many families cannot afford to access these, with the result that the poorest and most disadvantaged children are further marginalised.

Our progressive demands for appropriate universal and free provision for young children become more urgent given these factors.

Types of provision, funding and accessibility

There has historically been a distinction between settings primarily involved in education (maintained nursery schools, nursery classes in primary schools, private schools and hospitals schools) and those involved in care (community nurseries, private day nurseries, social service day nurseries, workplace creches and childminders). There have also been settings which specifically acknowledge the important role of play in the development of young children (preschools and playgroups, playcentres and play buses, and one o'clock clubs). In practice children learn from every experience and every relationship they encounter, and many settings acknowledge and provide for education, care and play (children centres, combined nursery centres, early excellence centres, family centres, Sure Start programmes and early years units). All the above settings have different organisational frameworks and different funding mechanisms and different levels of staffing and qualifications. It is a fragmented and confusing picture. We need quality as well as diversity, and although there is not a one-size-fits-all model, quality cannot be achieved without serious investment in people, buildings and resources. In the short term such investment is expensive in terms of appropriate training and retraining of staff, and creating or adapting buildings, so that, for example, children have direct access to an outdoor area from the playroom or classroom. But studies have shown that this investment will bring rich rewards in terms of children's

health and happiness and life chances.[12] This is an investment in the future that we urgently need the government to make at this time.

The fact that the education and care of young children is not regarded as a universal right with the cost borne by the state (as is the case for education at later stages) poses great problems for parents and children alike. In Sweden, Finland and Norway by comparison, there are universal state-funded nurseries, and all staff have a degree with child development prioritised. The Sutton Trust has called for the UK government to invest £88 million in transitional funding in order to give nursery children the same pupil premium as primary schoolchildren. That would certainly help. But in the meantime parents are forced to make very difficult choices and to patch together as best they can the childcare that suits their needs, relying increasingly on the unpaid labour of grandparents, family members and friends simply because they cannot afford the child care they require. This is a scandal of the same order of magnitude as the underfunding of the care system for senior citizens who need help in later years.

Since the 1990s successive governments have encouraged a dramatic rise in the number of private nurseries, which are increasingly run as businesses, often by preschool chains. This marketisation of education for the very young means that the profit motive can come into conflict with the need for high-quality provision and staffing. The impact of moving responsibility for education and childcare from the state to the private sector has resulted in a reduction in the minimum qualifications of staff, which has had an impact on quality of provision for children.[13]

With the private market now dominating the provision for young children, it is a case of you get what you pay for. There is currently an entitlement to 15 hours per week (extended to 30 hours for working parents) of free childcare - which is entirely insufficient - but many settings have refused to implement the 30 hours offer because the amount of money they are given for this by the government does not cover their costs. Most private nurseries do not have a trained teacher on their staff because they cannot afford to pay them. Some parents can afford to top up the fees from their own pockets, however, thus introducing a postcode lottery. Because of massive cuts in funding, local authorities have been forced to reduce their responsibilities for the very young and the very old, and have either closed premises or handed them over to the private or voluntary sector. Practically the whole of preschool education and care has now been outsourced to the private

sector: 66 per cent of places are provided by the private and voluntary sector, 14 per cent by childminders and only 20 per cent by maintained nursery schools and classes.[14] This means that such services are no longer accountable to their local communities; nor can those communities examine the books and influence how money is spent.

The closure of public provision has often been strongly resisted by parents, trade unions and local representatives. This shift has been a central government political decision underpinned by a belief in the market and in reducing the role of the state in family and community life. There are clear parallels here with the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic: local authorities and local public health authorities have been bypassed in favour of handing contracts to the private market without undergoing any kind of democratic scrutiny.

Another problem is that there is a potential conflict between the needs of young children and needs of working parents in the early years. Parents, particularly single parents, in order to earn a living or to secure their careers, may need to work longer hours than a young child would ideally spend in nursery. Many working parents will choose to place their child with a childminder rather than in a nursery because childminders cover longer and more flexible hours and also provide a home environment. Many childminders are good and they are inspected by Ofsted. There has been considerable improvement in the provision of training to childminders, partly in recognition of the skills that are necessary to do this work. Nevertheless, Ofsted, in successive reports, has pointed out that some of the most inadequate provision is that offered by childminders.

There is also an issue of equality of access. A good childminder is usually more expensive (and the ones with a good reputation amongst the Mums Net generation are circulated within WhatsApp and internet groups) and is beyond the means of those on lower incomes.. The same applies to private nursery provision, some of which is good but which is unaffordable to many working-class parents. What chance has a marginalised family?

One solution here might be for parents to have guaranteed paid parental leave for at least a year after the birth of a child, and their jobs secured until school starting age, as is the case in some Scandinavian countries.

Early years education and care during the New Labour period

The nature and purposes of education for young children has been the subject of fierce debate between specialists and policymakers, particularly in recent years. Since the 1990s, early years education has been targeted by politicians who emphasised its significance for employment, economic prosperity and competitive participation in the global economy.[15] There have been clear differences, however, between the approaches of the two main UK parties, particularly in relation to funding.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, Tony Blair asserted that it was through education that inequalities and social division would be reduced. New policies for early years education were identified as a key strategy for promoting social inclusion, eradicating poverty and enhancing social mobility. Women were also seen as a valuable and under-used economic resource. The government saw the availability and affordability of childcare as a critical strategy for enabling mothers to return to work. This policy later became coercive in relation to single-parent families.[16]

The succession of initiatives and increase in government spending that followed demonstrated New Labour's aim to bring more consistency to different strands of early years provision and to integrate childcare and early years education. The government commissioned the biggest longitudinal research study conducted in England in recent years on quality in the early years, comparing children who attended different kinds of provision. The resulting Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study found that a play-based curriculum, high adult-child ratios and highly trained staff were guarantees of the highest quality and also resulted in the best outcomes for children at the end of key stage one in primary school and beyond.[17]

Sure Start Children's Centres fulfilled many of the aspirations outlined in the study, especially when the centre was based around a maintained local education authority nursery school. This flagship programme, introduced from 1999, provided open access and integrated services for children under five, and advice and support on health, employment, education and childcare issues for their families, as a neighbourhood-based one stop shop. They were aimed at the most disadvantaged communities and were not initially conceived as providing a universal service. After some adjustments, 2500 children centres were built by April 2008 with another 1000

due for completion by 2010. Sure Start children's centres provided a beacon for the development of inclusive practice through their focus on well-qualified staff, inter-agency work, and collaboration with parents and communities. A study by Oxford University in 2015 found that these centres benefited parents and families in poorer areas who regularly attended classes, contributing to less disruptive home lives, better maternal mental health, and improved social skills among children and adults.[18]

However, funding for Sure Start was progressively withdrawn by the following Coalition and Conservative governments. According to a National Audit Office report, Sure Start budgets in England were almost halved between 2010 and 2017.[19] During the same period central government funding of local authorities was reduced by 50 per cent. A recent evaluation by the Fiscal Studies Unit emphasised the impact of Sure Start on reducing health inequalities; it questioned current cuts to children's centre budgets and urged the Conservative government to acknowledge Sure Start's 'big positive effect' on children's health in future public spending plans. The story of Sure Start demonstrates what can be done when the political will is there - and what happens when it is not.[20]

In addition to setting up children's centres, New Labour were also making strides in recognising young children's skills as learners and enshrining their rights in policy. Two documents from 2003 are worth noting: *Birth to Three Matters* and *Every Child Matters*.

Birth to Three Matters set out for the first time an educational framework to support practitioners and parents in creating supportive environments and relationships to help babies and young children.[21] The document started from the assumption that even very young children are competent learners and skilful communicators. The steering group for this document consisted of practitioners, many of whom had been involved in developing an innovative curriculum framework, *Quality In Diversity*, produced by the Early Childhood Education Forum at the National Children's Bureau.[22]

Every Child Matters addressed social inequalities and demonstrated a commitment to children's rights. It was a well-received document which represented a major policy initiative and applied to all providers of services to children. Building on the Sure Start model, it sought to protect children at risk within the framework of universal services and emphasised the importance of multi-agency collaboration. It seemed as if the government was listening to the sector.

However, alongside these positive initiatives New Labour were rapidly developing coercive policies in the school sector through centralised regulation, prescribed curricula and the tightening of Ofsted inspection regimes, and this began a backwash on their early years policies, particularly in relation to the curriculum, which we will discuss later.

What is the best way of providing early education and care?

In order to answer this question we will need to look historically and internationally at the early years curriculum, interrogate what we know about young children's development and consider the evidence for the most appropriate provision.

What we know about learning and development

What is now known about how young children think and learn is based not only on centuries of observation and philosophical thought but, more recently, on neuroscience. The young brain and nervous system have a phenomenal capacity for growth of every kind and are uniquely sensitive to stimulation and emotional experiences. 90 per cent of a child's brain is developed by the age of seven. In early childhood, human organisms respond with great flexibility; the child's brain is remarkably responsive, with new meanings ascribed to their experiences and thousands of new connections being made on a daily basis. Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant report evidence which has shown that learning depends on neural networking across visual, auditory and kinaesthetic brain regions, indicating that opportunities for multisensory, active learning are a key to learning.[23] Other studies indicate that, from birth, children develop a capacity for multimodal learning, and that their early development should be viewed holistically within a process of multisensory, active learning. Different domains of development are interconnected, so that, for example, physical development lays the foundation for later cognitive and social skills.[24]

Such insights provide further support for the widespread agreement that had already developed among educationalists on what constitutes a developmentally appropriate curriculum for early childhood - an agreement that today is shared across many countries. Such a curriculum, initially founded on principles of the Enlightenment, was continuously developed by social reformers and progressive thinkers during the nineteenth (Pestalozzi, Froebel and Steiner) and twentieth

centuries (socialists Margaret and Rachel McMillan, feminist Maria Montessori and socialist Loris Malaguzzi) - helped by insights from studies of child development and child psychology by people such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Susan Isaacs and Jerome Bruner. Social theories from the left which emphasised children's rights as well as needs, the social and cultural context of learning and a concern for equality of opportunity have also been influential, and have been a particular target for the right.

Early years philosophy and practice is not founded on woolly-minded idealism but on careful observation of children, in-depth understanding of child development and ongoing research into what environments, experiences and relationships best support children's learning. It is founded on key principles, that require more than a brief acknowledgement in government documents.

It is helpful to contrast the current UK government's position on early years in England with innovative approaches that have developed internationally. For example, in the community-led early years centres in Reggio Emilia in Italy, children are regarded as powerful, creative and curious; as active constructors of knowledge and as authors of their own learning. It is recognised that children are inherently social in their approach to learning and use many ways to communicate - 'the hundred languages of children'.[25] Creativity and self and group expression are at the heart of this approach to learning.

In New Zealand, the statutory early years curriculum, *Te Whariki*, which had a strong input from Maori practitioners and parents, is based on the principles of Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community Relationships.[26] Goals for children's learning, instead of being subject based, are exemplified through key concepts of Well-Being, Belonging, Contributing, Communicating, and Exploring. In Denmark, the comprehensive provision of daycare is based on principles of freedom and democracy, and a key feature is the Forest school, which encourages young children to participate and engage in activities in the outdoor environment.

The approaches of all three of these countries acknowledge that learning from birth to age seven is qualitatively different from that of older children. The key role of self-directed activity and the place of play is stressed. They are based on the principles that young children learn holistically, and that, given autonomy and a rich learning environment, indoors and out, they will learn through exploration, play and imagination; that one experience may touch on many areas of learning; that

learning does not just take place in settings but also in families and communities, as well as in the outdoors environment; and that, since young children develop at very different rates, the curriculum must provide enough open-ended experiences to allow all children to succeed differently.

In the United Kingdom there was a time when most early years settings adopted these principles, and they were embodied in many curriculum frameworks produced by local authorities and by professional organisations. An example of this consensus is the *Quality in Diversity* framework, an integrated curriculum approach that was adopted in 1998 at the end of a four-year collaborative project by the Early Childhood Education Forum, which represented all national organisations in the UK - statutory and voluntary and in the private sector.[27] The framework, influenced by the New Zealand early years curriculum, proposed five 'foundations' for early learning: 'belonging and connecting', 'being and becoming', 'thinking imagining and understanding', 'being active and expressing' and 'contributing and participating'. Each foundational idea led to a series of goals for early learning, and was linked to children's entitlements. The final version was agreed by all the widely varying national organisations that had participated, and was used widely in training and in settings.

The special place of play

The United Nations Charter states that play is the basic right of the child. Playing is developmentally appropriate, it captures many of the features that lead to deep learning, and provides an optimum environment to develop the skills, dispositions and knowledge that children need to succeed.[28] Play maximises neural networking opportunities, and is a central mechanism in facilitating social, emotional and academic development in young children. All important and intimate cultural practices associated with family and community life are source material for children's play. And play can also be highly social, allowing for opportunities to learn from and about others.

There is a long history of observing and writing about 'free' or self chosen, self-directed play. The main characteristic of free play is its spontaneity. Based on children's first-hand experience, it is without extrinsic goals and involves children making up the rules and keeping control. It is characterised by pleasure and

enjoyment; children playing will be deeply involved and often difficult to distract from their deep learning. Both Catherine Garvey and Tina Bruce have pointed out that children try out their most recently learnt skills and competencies when they play and seem to celebrate what they know.[29] Play is systematically related to creativity, problem solving, language learning and the development of social roles and the exploration of culture. A recent detailed review of the evidence on the value of play for learning reports that learning through play supports overall healthy development and the acquisition of both the content (for example mathematical) and learning-to-learn skills (planning, exploration, evaluating).[30] As we have seen, the EPPE study concluded that the most effective centres were those which provided play environments as a basis of instructive learning.

In spite of this, the long debate about whether preschool education should be formal or informal is often summarised by the extent to which a curriculum is play-based. And in recent years, as successive governments have tended towards the introduction of more 'formal' approaches, teachers increasingly feel they need to justify its inclusion in the curriculum although they have been shown in surveys to place a high value on learning through play.[31]

What is often absent in these debates is an understanding of play-based learning: it does not mean that children 'play' all the time; rather, that the environment is structured so that children have opportunities to use playthings as vehicles for their learning. The play environment, indoors and especially outdoors, set up by a professionally trained educator is highly structured - in contrast to, for example, a creche run by a group of local parents, where the adults will not have been trained to see the potential for autonomous learning in the play materials. Both will claim that the children are learning through play, but the trained practitioner will have rated each piece of equipment, including the natural environment, for its learning potential, and through planning and observing will develop the learning potential of the activity. This enables children to learn autonomously, with the teachers stepping in to teach when the moment of progress is evident. And this is the reason why training takes time.

Extract 1 is an account of children playing with sand, pointing out what trained adults did to support and extend learning.[32] The adults are seen drawing on the professional skills of planning, resourcing, observing, intervening to scaffold learning, extending learning opportunities in response to children's interests and recording and assessing. All these experiences enabled active and connected

Extract1: Learning with sand

Adults had filled a sand tray with damp sand and a variety of utensils, including utensils and tools from different cultures (planning).Two children had chosen to engage with the sand in different ways depending on their different levels of experience. One child repeatedly filled and emptied different utensils with loose sand, was interested in the behaviour of the material and enjoying the sensation of handling sand. Another child filled a cooking utensil and packed the sand tightly, pressing down with a wooden spoon. She then turned it over and banged on the bottom of the utensil so that a well-formed pattie emerged. She offered this to the adult who asked her what was inside the pattie. She was told it contained chicken (scaffolded language, support imagination and encourage focus and perseverance). Another adult later observed this play (observation with potential for planning next extension of interest), and drew attention to the different ways the sand behaved (scaffolding learning). On the following day the adult provided dry sand and access to water (responsive planning). Children experimented with adding different amounts of water. This involved another level of challenge for children, and was interpreted by some as making soup and by others as making mud.

The adults had also planned for the bigger outdoor area sandpits (planning and resourcing), adding bigger buckets, guttering and a variety of small-wheeled vehicles. This created the opportunity for children to use sand for engineering tracks and ramps. As the children propelled vehicles around the tracks and down the ramps collisions occurred, and the adult asked children (scaffolding learning) to suggest solutions. She observed how they solved this problem (assessment). The children were very excited by making tracks, so she planned for more focus on creating tracks for vehicles, providing chalks for the outdoor area and large pieces of paper and felt tips indoors, so that children could draw tracks and map-make (responsive planning). She noted that mainly boys were engaged in this sand activity. Another aspect of her responsive planning was to encourage girls to engage in a sand activity.

Consequently, on another occasion, adults buried jewels in the sand tray, as an extension from an observation of children enjoying the story of Dora the Explorer, from popular culture, television and film. Children became engaged, and not only in finding them: some decided to make a map of where the treasure was to show other children and to decide in what country the jewels had been buried. This activity was very popular with girls who acted out being Dora and her friends.

learning, stemming from children's interests. The concrete experiences enabled children to develop abstract concepts and increase knowledge. These kinds of experiences are often disparaged as 'just play', but they are in effect enabling learning. This way of learning should be the foundation of the curriculum in the early years.

Play involves active and engaged thinking, iterative thinking (experimentation, hypothesis testing) and social interaction. All these characteristics ebb and flow as children are engaged in learning through play. The play-based approach is intellectually demanding and creative for the child and the educator. It would be difficult to find any creditable early years specialist educationist who would not endorse play as a vital part of children's learning.

It is also important to consider equal access to play. The way the adults behave affects children's ability to explore and share though play, their different ways of seeing and doing. If girls and boys, or children with special needs, do not feel equally able to access the provision, or if children do not feel comfortable to include their ethnic identities and cultural and linguistic experiences in the learning context, their ability to think creatively and so create new meanings for themselves will be inhibited.

The importance of relationships

When practitioners have had the opportunity to express their own views on their role, they have stressed the importance of values, attitudes and ideologies that are not measurable but which underpin their day-to-day work.[33] This kind of knowledge and expertise is often devalued or dismissed as emotional work. Yet these are key to ensuring inclusive practice and anti-discriminatory behaviours.

The affective element of working successfully with young children and the personal investment made by practitioners have been underestimated. Making relationships that help children feel safe and included is a necessary underpinning to their learning and development and is a skilled and sensitive process. Similarly, building relationships and establishing trust with families on a daily basis requires an emotional commitment and a critical understanding of the realities of their lives and impact on their children. The effective practitioner needs to know how to interact with parents - so that they can celebrate their child's achievements, but also

so that they can raise more sensitive issues, trusting in the relationship that has been built up day by day.

In short, research, theory and experience shows that a play-based approach to early years learning, based on sensitive relationships with staff, is the best way to foster children's educational and personal development during the early years.

What has actually happened to the early years curriculum?

The status of early childhood as a special stage that deserves protection has been progressively undermined as so many governments internationally have focused attention on school attainment, and have tailored programmes for young children that are supposed to link closely to the formal school curriculum. This approach to 'school readiness' demonstrates a misunderstanding about what will help children succeed in learning and life. Invalid views of how children think and learn are often promoted by the press and influence public attitudes and parents' expectations. Children have been constructed as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge rather than as agents of their own learning.[34] Such 'common-sense' conceptions of childhood are deeply ingrained in our culture and inform the policy, organisation and practice offered to the most vulnerable and powerless.

Unfortunately there is a history of ignoring evidence in favour of the opinions of politicians who have insufficient knowledge about the distinctive nature of education for children under seven. They have tended to promote the formalisation of learning at a younger and younger age. Adopting a neoliberal agenda, governments have centralised the early years curriculum and imposed a one-size-fits-all route to 'raise standards' - which one headteacher described as 'an industrial model where if the child doesn't fit on the conveyor belt it's unfortunate for them'.

In the UK, direct intervention into early years settings by government began in 1996, when the Conservative government decided to embark on an ideologically driven attack on early years philosophy and practice. Until that time local authorities and individual schools had had considerable freedom to define their own curriculum, often in collaboration with each other and sometimes with parents, and had been able to adapt that curriculum to local needs and communities. The government's document, *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Schooling*, immediately shifted the emphasis away from creating a

nurturing environment based on play, and towards ensuring specific outcomes by setting out a detailed and prescriptive curriculum. Alongside a new emphasis on the three Rs, there was a concerted attack on play as an educational process.

In 2000 New Labour replaced *Desirable Outcomes* with the *Curriculum Guidance for The Foundation Stage* (CGFS) as a document for the under-fives. (Foundation stage was their term for the early years - and it includes the Reception year of primary school.) On the one hand, the new guidance acknowledged that well-planned play was 'a key way in which children learn with enjoyment and challenge'; but, on the other, it aligned the early years curriculum with the subject-based areas of the primary curriculum and emphasised this important stage of learning as being simply the 'foundation for learning in Key Stage One' and as 'consistent with the national curriculum' for older children.

The positive aspects of the document were seriously undermined by the inclusion of too many detailed expected outcomes, with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy. It stated that the 'Early Learning Goals establish targets for most children to reach by the end of the Foundation Stage (age 5, end of the Reception year) but are not a curriculum in themselves'. Yet this is exactly what they often became.[35]

In 2008 an initiative to unite the early years sector brought together a number of different frameworks - the *Curriculum Guidance for The Foundation Stage*, the *Birth To Three Matters* Framework and the *National Standards for Under Eights In Daycare and Childminding* - into the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework* for all providers. This was largely well-received and started with bold statements of principle. Unfortunately these were compromised by retaining the statutory assessment requiring practitioners to assess each child against 69 learning goals.

Following a review in 2012 under the Coalition government, the Early Learning Goals were reduced to 17, but the assessment continued to be outcomes-based, with the aim of improving school readiness, and teachers still had to plan layers of overly directed activities in order to assess children at the end of the Reception year against often inappropriate standards. In a significant strategic move, all assessment data were to be submitted to the local education authority and ultimately to the DfEE for scrutiny and processing, thus placing onerous demands on teachers and senior managers to satisfy external bodies by providing written evidence for each outcome for each child. This changed the focus of teachers' attention from supporting

learning to tracking achievement.

The aim of the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) published in 2014 and 2017 was unequivocally to prepare children for school and work.[36] The standards agenda was evident in the narrow focus of the EYFS curriculum to fit compulsory schooling, and the reduction of its assessment to measurable outcomes that converged with those required for older children.

Quite a high percentage of children failed and continue to fail to achieve the expected levels specified in EYFS guidance, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Instead of realising that this is because they are inappropriate for young children, the Teaching Schools Council called for a review of Reception year practice in order to 'bring Reception into line with Year One by introducing year one teaching approaches into Reception class'.[37] In its response to the government consultation on the Reception year, the British Association for Early Childhood Education pointed out that the emphasis on formal teaching and assessment ignored evidence on child development and reduced the purpose of the Reception class to meeting the expectations of the National Curriculum written for older children.[38]

The assessments which staff were required to undertake related to quantifiable outcomes that did not take account of individual children's experiences, development and learning trajectories. Practitioners were often coerced into practice which they knew did not accord with their understanding of child development or early learning, and they and their schools were increasingly judged as to whether the children in their care achieved these expected outcomes.[39] Baseline Assessment, which involves assessing four- and five- year olds against standardised culturally specific criteria in the first few weeks after they enter the Reception class, was trialled and suspended in 2015, and rejected as unfair and unnecessary by the majority of early years teachers and school leaders.[40] A second attempt to introduce BA into schools in 2020 has also been abandoned.

The shift towards 'schoolification' is part of an international trend to frame early education within a neoliberal economic paradigm, to prepare for jobs not life. As Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, commented, in 2017, 'schools should do more to be ready for children, not make children ready for school'.[41] We need to reconceptualise the school readiness discourse, since readiness has been reduced to mechanistic, predetermined goals.[42]

The government consultation in 2019 on the proposed revisions to the curriculum framework and goals concluded that very little needed to be changed, in spite of a critical response from across the early years sector, particularly in relation to the importance of early years pedagogy, the priority to be given to personal, social and emotional development and to oral language and practical hands-on experiences, particularly in maths. In other words, the professional knowledge and expertise, and evidence from research within the sector, was sidelined again.

As Alice Bradbury argues, narrow assessment tools promote a restricted view of what constitutes a good learner and are based on a particular view of the child.[43] This disadvantages some children, yet it determines what is valued in the learning environment. We should reject the deficit model under the terms of which some children fail to be 'school ready'. It is the job of early years settings to be more sensitive to children's life experiences outside school, offering broad developmental experiences, rather than confining themselves to outcomes which are too narrowly focused on fitting children into school norms. Home culture should be the starting point of learning, not assessment scores.[44] The current data-driven assessment results in many children entering school in a deficit position, usually because their cultural experiences and languages have been different. Some children may be learning English for the first time. Yet valuing difference is very important in the early years, and no assessment process that results in any child feeling a failure at age five can be defended.

Early years pedagogy and the formalisation of the early years curriculum

The values that underpinned good early years provision have not disappeared, despite the Gradgrind approach now evident in much educational policy directed at early years settings. Many early years practitioners have done their best to reinterpret government guidelines and to hold on to good developmentally appropriate practice. However, despite much resistance, often well-organised and backed by considerable research, successive governments have refused to listen to the united voice of the profession and the concerns of many parents.[45]

However, in settings where practitioners do not have training in child development or know how to observe and build on children's interests and experiences to foster their understanding, the current curriculum can lead to inappropriate approaches, such as whole-class teaching, where knowledge is

transmitted to all, trusting that children will have the experiential hooks for it to hang on. This approach relies very much on the charisma and energy of the practitioner to motivate and enthuse the child.

Cognitive development is seen as fragmented into discrete areas such as maths and literacy; the development of isolated skills is legitimated, such as sounding out single or blended letters (phonics), reciting the alphabet song, colouring inside a predetermined line or being instructed in the formation of letters on the printed line, or low-level number work such as the filling in of worksheets that ask children how many ducks they can see, leaving a blank square for the answer. The perceived expectations of Ofsted are fulfilled by a correct answer - which appears to show that the child understands the concept of the number that is the answer. In settings with untrained staff, even where there are play resource materials available, play experiences can be aimed at little more than occupying the child when she is not being taught in a group or when the teacher-directed task has been completed.

Many teachers and early years practitioners are placed in a conflict situation and have to struggle to meet government agendas (often implemented by senior managers who have no understanding of early years practice) which often contradict their professional training and what they know about child development as they work extra hard to provide for children and families.

Literacy: an example of the formalisation of early learning and assessment

The increasingly reductive approach to early learning in the EYFS is particularly stark in the area of literacy. The move from an interpretation of early literacy as intrinsically linked to language and communication, play and pleasure to a set of reductive skills is most apparent in the Early Learning Goals (ELGs).

Studies have shown that learning to be literate is a complex process but in government documentation it has been conceptualised as linear, involving the acquisition of skills.[46] Literacy is a cognitive process, but also a social, cultural and emotional one. Literacy practices are embedded in all our lives and young children are born into them in the way that they are immersed in language long before they can talk. Reading and writing always take place in a context, in the overlapping spaces of home, school, work and community, in different languages, requiring different practices, for different purposes. Children bring their own meanings and

experiences to any early years setting, but these are often discounted in favour of an imposed, standardised view of what counts.[47]

The most recent guidance, which becomes statutory in 2021, acknowledges the role of talk with adults and the importance of sharing books, stories, rhymes and songs, but the ELGs for literacy relate exclusively to accuracy in sounding out letters and words in reading, and handwriting, spelling and forming simple sentences in writing, with no reference to spoken language, understanding or meaning-making.

Teachers and educational institutions are under pressure to show the effectiveness of their teaching, and, as a result, more pedagogical emphasis is often put on these easily assessed formal elements, disrupting teachers' principles about child-centred education and how young children learn.[48] This pressure is evident in Ofsted's report *Bold Beginnings in the Reception Year*, which recommends that schools should ensure 'that the teaching of reading including systematic synthetic phonics is the *core purpose* [our italics] of the Reception Year'.[49] On the contrary, research shows that teaching approaches should focus on surrounding children with a rich language environment and encouraging them to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings. It should include stories, songs and rhymes from a wide range of cultures, and encourage children to enjoy books and other forms of print in the environment.

Play provides a strong basis for literacy development through the creation, repetition and embodiment of stories, through composition, mark-making, graphics on paper, screen or other surfaces. All of these activities support young children's understanding of literacy through an emphasis on language and meaning, symbolic representation and awareness of the structures and purposes for literacy, and are far more powerful than direct instruction.[50] All this means that the formal teaching of reading and writing should not be enforced at this stage. In the majority of European countries these skills are not taught until at least age six, when children start formal schooling.

Studies show that an emphasis on literacy outcomes during the Foundation years may be detrimental to the longer-term attainment of those children who are not yet secure in oral language. Comparisons of children who started formal literacy learning either at age five or seven show no benefits to the former group: by age eleven there was no difference in reading level between the two groups. But the children who started at age five developed less positive attitudes to reading, and showed poorer text comprehension, than those who started later.[51]

Early entry to school

Children in England now enter the school system age four. In most countries in the world, they start formal schooling at six or even seven, when they are developmentally more able to understand social demands and to take on abstract concepts transmitted at school.[52] A worrying recent policy shift is the insistence on a single-entry point (autumn term) for all children entering Reception class (entry into this class was previously staggered according to children's birth dates). This shift has been influenced by formulae which allocate budgets on the basis of pupil numbers: senior managers want the funding that results from a full class from September. This policy is particularly serious for some summer-born children, who start school in September when they are only just four years old. The differences in children's stages of development are vast at this age. This would not be such a problem if the Reception class environment were set up to meet the needs of very young children, but increasingly, as we have shown, it is not. Longitudinal research shows that many summer-born children underperform for the rest of their school lives.[53]

Perhaps one of the most harmful consequences of the return to a more formal approach to learning is a lack of emphasis on movement and access to outdoor play space. Limited outdoor time can be viewed as interfering with teaching time. Yet learning to move and moving to learn is fundamental to a child's all-round progress, not just their physical development.[54] The environment in the Reception class and early years settings needs to give children the greatest opportunity to move when they need to move, and that means having well-planned outdoor space directly accessible from the classroom. Yet headteachers often allocate the smallest room to the smallest children; and private nursery schools and daycare settings are allowed to give upstairs rooms to the youngest children and to operate without outdoor play space

Assessment and observation

Assessment of progress at the end of the Foundation Stage is currently addressed by formulaic statements ticked off on a list. There is no statutory requirement to provide a valid and meaningful view of how a child is progressing, or pay any attention to the differences between children's backgrounds; and no evidence is sought from documentation by practitioners trained to observe children's learning in real and dynamic environments. There is a wealth of evidence of good practice in

ongoing observation and record keeping that has been cast aside in the search for a spurious objectivity.[55] The assessment of children through taking a once and for all snapshot of their progress is nonsense when viewed against our knowledge of how development actually happens.

Our second example illustrates all the different kinds of learning that may arise through adults observing individual children and their needs and working with their interests. This kind of learning cannot be assessed in terms of the box-ticking of a curriculum divided unto separate subjects.

Staff training, qualifications and pay

Insert 2: Learning with worms

A child shows interest in a worm, found when digging in the outdoor area. The teacher is able to field the child's (or group of fascinated children's) enquiries (contextual and meaningful language use), inform the children about where to find more information (literacy), support observational skills about peristalsis, the way the worm moves (science), about length, shape, size (mathematics). The teacher is able to provide a plastic tunnel through which the children can move like worms (motivating physical development), build a wormery to further investigate (experimental and research skills), represent the movement of worms not only with their bodies but in paint or clay and sing songs and compose music (expressive art). This rich learning across the curriculum and cannot easily be assessed against narrowly conceived outcomes.

As will be evident from our discussion so far, the knowledge and skills required for appropriate early years education are considerable, which means that practitioners require high levels of specialist training. However, the current emphasis on the uniformity of children's learning, and the need for practitioners to be familiar with government regulatory policies, can limit opportunities for their training to concentrate on the crucial aspects of their role we have been outlining. Moreover, there is a wide variety of qualifications, and many staff working in this sector do not have appropriate specialist training and are paid very low wages, especially those in the private sector catering to children from low-income families. Early years staff in

the private sector have no parity with those working in schools or the maintained sector, and have very little opportunity for professional development. If the early years were properly funded, the issue of training and professional development would be centre stage. But, as with so many other areas of social provision, the emphasis is on cost-cutting rather than quality care and staff training.

In her powerful review of early education and childcare qualifications in 2012, Professor Cathy Nutbrown outlined confusion in the system, and inconsistency and lack of depth and rigour in certain early years courses.[56] Among her 19 recommendations for improving the quality of children's experiences was that NVQ level 3 (equivalent to 2 A-levels) should be the minimum requirement for working with young children, including for childminders, and that this should be seen as a starting point for career development. Unfortunately the Coalition government's response to the review rejected both the spirit and substance of its recommendations.[57] The spectre of funding was apparent. Employing staff with low qualifications such as NVQ level 2 (equivalent to GCSEs) in many privately-run settings means paying lower wages. In 2016 the Educational Policy Unit concluded that enabling early years staff to gain higher qualifications was 'critical to the quality of early years education', but opportunities for further training were not being provided by employers.[58]

The main route for those wishing to gain qualifications as an early years teacher with qualified teacher status (QTS) is a one-year post graduate course (although teachers with a Primary qualification can teach this age group).This allows little time for understanding child development and for grasping the complex nature of the curriculum and assessment in the early years. Graduates can also choose to train exclusively in a school - similar to an apprenticeship - sometimes with minimum opportunity to engage with research and theory. There is also a qualification without QTS, Early Years Teacher Status, which continues to be controversial because EYTS graduates cannot teach in Reception classes and are paid less because of not having QTS. Teaching unions and early years professional bodies argue that this situation creates a hierarchy of graduate qualifications, while it also underestimates the need for teachers working with the youngest children to have QTS. A range of educational experts have joined with Professor Nutbrown in calling for a specialist early years qualification route for graduate staff which includes QTS, and a minimum starting point of NVQ level three for other staff.

The gendered nature of the early years workforce cannot be ignored: 97 per cent of staff working in the sector are women, compared with 44 per cent in tertiary education. The misguided separation of the ethics of care from education by succeeding governments, the association with the female labour force and the perceived lack of status and professionalism of those working in the sector are mutually reinforcing. In addition to reforms to the qualifications route there should be an alternative construction of early years professional identity.

There has also been insufficient recognition of the professional character of the emotional and affective aspects of work with young children and their families. Many early years settings have excelled in the development of staff teams with shared and separate responsibilities and good channels of communication and collaboration. There needs to be more recognition of the importance of having a sufficiently well qualified staff who work together as a team.

An incentive to gain higher qualifications linked to a clearly defined career structure, and pay that rewards the day-to-day demands of their work, is needed as the basis for raising the status of practitioners who work in the sector. A more confident workforce would also be better able to articulate the complexity of their work and question the political and public assumptions about it.

The way forward

The promotion of neoliberal economic policies has involved implementing austerity measures, curtailing the role of local government and expanding the role of the private sector. It has privileged the creation of opportunities for profit rather than collective creative endeavour in all areas of public life. We argue that successive governments have created a society which is operating against the interests of young children and their families.

The establishment of a fair and equal integrated education and care service cannot be separated from the social, political and economic context within which it exists. The fundamental change needed is the eradication of child poverty and the provision of adequate housing and play spaces and better support for families, particularly those struggling with disadvantage. Early years settings should be places that welcome all parents and, where necessary, provide a door into a range of support and services. The model for this already exists in the structure and

organisation of Sure Start children's centres.

State responsibility for providing and fully funding early childhood education and care from birth would bring simplification of the sector and offer universality and consistency to a confusion of provision. Crucially, it would include a variety of arrangements - recognising that families, and particularly women, have varying degrees of need for flexible childcare provision.

The current conflation of the domains of learning (social, emotional, cognitive, physical) with discipline-specific concepts (literacy, numeracy, etc), and the pressure to achieve outcomes based on the latter, has meant the youngest children are measured against a goal of school readiness, and this has distorted the curriculum, and steered children into formal learning too early.[59] The assessment outcomes underestimate children's capacities, imagination and creativity, while simultaneously introducing expectations that are completely inappropriate for this age.

The requirement for a new co-ordinated long-term policy in the early years is clear. As we have shown, this will require structural, cultural and social change, including higher levels of state funding, universal access and a return to a democratically administered education system. This policy should not be driven by political expediency; and it should not construct the child as an economic unit, or view education as a commodity to be bought and sold. Instead it must be based on principles of social justice and equality, and developed in the light of research that shows us how children develop and learn. It should be respectful of children and their curious minds, powerful imaginations and deep feelings, and recognise the needs and aspirations of their parents and families.

High quality early years education is best achieved in nursery schools and settings where education and care are integrated and play environments are used to provide the basis of learning, and where practice combines both teaching and the provision of freely chosen play activities. Children make more progress in settings that have highly qualified staff, and in which educational and social development are viewed as equally important. These significant findings should form the basis of policy.

The benefits of 'getting it right' in the early years have been shown to be lifelong, lasting through all the years of schooling and into adult life. For the sake of our children and future generations we cannot afford to get this wrong.

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Notes

1. M. Urban, 'Rethinking professionalism in early childhood: untested feasibilities and critical ecologies', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol 11 No 1, 2010.

2. 'Setting' is the term used for any institutional form of early years child care. Provision takes place within a number of different settings, as will be explored further below.

3. www.theguardian.com/money/2019/mar/31/childcare-fees-rocket-lack-of-early-years-funding-nurseries-close.

4. In this country the early year age range is defined as referring to children under the age of five. In some European countries it is recognised as referring to children until they reach the age of eight, for very good reason, but our focus in this article is largely on early years as defined in the UK.

5. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201819.

6. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty-institute/news/2019/un-rapporteur-final-report.html.

7. https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Measuring-Poverty-2020-Web.

8. A survey carried out by the National Education Union and the Child Poverty Action

Group revealed that 83 per cent of respondents saw children showing signs of hunger during the school day. Hunger not only has a negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of children, it also impairs learning by reducing children's ability to concentrate. School holiday hunger is a particular problem: https://neu.org.uk/child-poverty-facts.

9. H. Gousey, *Safe and Decent homes: Solution for a better private rented sector*, Shelter, 2014: http://england.shelter.org.uk/ data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1039530/.

10. DWP, *National Statistics. Households below average income: 1994/5 to 2018/19*, updated 2020, Assets Publishing Service 2020: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2.

11. Early Childhood Unit, National Children's Bureau, Bulletin (subscription only), July 2020.

12. See for example, L. Schweinhart et al, *Lifetime Effects: the HighScope Perry preschool study through age 40*, HighScope Press 2005.

13. The National Day Nurseries Association survey in 2019 highlighted a rise in unqualified staff from 10 per cent in 2017/18 to 26 per cent in 2018/19. 'This is mainly due to staff turnover and decisions based on reduced funding as almost one in five employers said they were taking on more apprentices due to funding pressures': www.ndna.org.uk/workforcesurvey.

14. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-providers-survey-2019, updated June 2020.

15. DFEE, *Excellence in Schools,* White Paper, 1997: http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/wp1997/excellence-in-schools.html.

16. This policy required single parents to seek work once their youngest child reached the age of five, or lose 40 per cent of their benefit.

17. K. Sylva et al, *Effective Provision for Preschool Education Project* (EPPE)*: Final report*, DfEE and Institute of Education, University of London, 2004. This project was commissioned by the Department for Education in order to establish which type of setting gave young children the best start in life and led to the most positive educational outcomes. It was the first major European longitudinal study using a national sample and looked at young children's development, initially between the ages of three and seven. Major findings concluded that quality exists across all types of early years setting but the highest quality was demonstrated in settings where care and education were integrated and in nursery schools. In the most effective centres play environments were used to provide the basis of instructive learning and the most effective pedagogy combined both teaching and providing freely chosen play activities. Settings with more highly qualified staff had higher scores and children made more progress when settings viewed educational and social development as of equal importance. Longitudinal research shows that the benefits of quality pre-school experience have been extended to children aged 16+: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23344/1/RB455_Effective_preschool_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.

18. J. Hall et al, 'Relationships between families' use of Sure Start children's centres, changes in home learning environments and preschool behavioural disorders', *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol 45 No 3, 2019.

19. https://www.nao.org.uk/report/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018/.

20. S. Cattan et al, *The Health Effects of Sure Start*, Institute of Fiscal Studies 2019: https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/R155-The-health-effects-of-Sure-Start.pdf.

21. In this article we use the term early years practitioner to encompass all people working with young children from across all sectors, as is usual in the field. There is a wide range of status, pay and training across the sector, however, and we also discuss the differences and tensions this sometimes engenders.

22. The Early Childhood Education Forum (ECEF), now renamed Early Childhood Forum, is a consortium of the major national organisations concerned with the care and education of young children, established in January 1993. Member organisations represent statutory provision in education and social services, the voluntary and private sectors, services for children with special educational needs, parents, governors, advisors, inspectors and local authorities.

23. U. Goswami and P. Bryant, *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning*, Esmée Fairbairn, University of Cambridge, 2007. J. Finnegan, *Lighting Up Young Brains: How parents, carers and nurseries support children's brain development. The first five years*, Save The Children 2016: https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/lighting-up-young-brains.pdf.

24. Payler et al, *Early Childhood Education and Care Review, 2004-2015*, BERA/TACTYC BERA Annual Conference, University of Leeds, September 2016; C. Pascal, T. Bertram and A. Cole-Alback, *The 100 Review. What Research Tells Us About Effective Pedagogic Practice and Children's Outcomes in the Reception Year,* Centre for Research in Early Childhood, 2017: http://earlyexcellence.com/wpcontent/uploads/2017/05/10_100Review_CREC_March_2017.pdf.

25. C. Edwards, L. Gandini and G. Forman, *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*, Reggio Emilia approach - Advanced Reflections.

26. New Zealand Ministry of Education, *Te Whariki: Developmentally Appropriate Programmes for Early Childhood Services*, Ministry of Education NZ 1993.

27. Early Childhood Forum, *Quality in Diversity in Early Learning: A framework for early childhood practitioners*, National Children's Bureau 1998 (revised 2003).

28. J. Robinson, *Learning Through play in the First 1000 Days*, Unicef/Lego Foundation: https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf.

29. C. Garvey, *Play: The developing child*, Harvard University Press 1990; T. Bruce, *Learning Through Play: Babies, toddlers and the foundation years*, Hodder Education 2011.

30. J. Zosh et al, *Learning Through Play: A review of the evidence*, Lego Foundation, 2017: https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1063/learning-through-play_web.pdf.

31. Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Alback, op cit.

32. This was observed by one of the authors at a nursery school in London, as was the account in extract 2.

33. See for example, J. Osgood, 'Deconstructing professionalism in early childhood

education: Resisting the regulatory gaze', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol 7 No 1, 2006; J. Skattebol, E. Adamson and C. Woodrow, 'Revisioning professionalism from the periphery', *Early Years*, Vol 36 No 2, 2016.

34. See for example, A. James & A. Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood,: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*, Routledge 2014.

35. Later government interventions - *The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000) and *Planning For Learning in the Foundation Stage* (2001) - gave emphasis to the importance of oral language, and learning through play and experimentation, and guided practitioners to observe children and plan experiences based on knowledge of their individual interests and needs. But these documents were non-statutory, unlike the *Early Learning Goals*, which were enshrined in law. In many settings the latter became the main focus and therefore shaped the curriculum.

36. There are some positive statements in the current Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, particularly in relation to the importance of positive relationships, enabling environments and partnership with parents; and its acknowledgement that young children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates, that each child is unique. However, there is no statement in relation to age appropriateness, or of anti-discriminatory practice. In the learning and development overview, skills, knowledge and attitudes are emphasised rather than understanding, enjoyment, imagination and emotional response. Adults are required to guide children's 'capabilities' and to ensure that they are ready for the opportunities ahead.

37. Teaching Schools Council. *Effective Primary Teaching*, Taunton Teaching Alliance 2016: http://www.tauntonteachingalliance.co.uk/teaching-schools-council-effective-primary-teaching-practice-report-2016/.

38. www.early-education.org.uk/news-what's-wrong-ofsteds-bold-beginnings-report.

39. S. Ball et al, 'Assessment technologies in schools: "Deliverology and the play of dominations"', *Research Papers in Education*, Vol 27 No 5, 2012.

40. See G. Roberts-Holmes and A. Bradbury, '"*They are children … not robots, not machines": The introduction of Reception baseline assessment*', UCL Institute of Education, NUT, ATL 2016: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1476041/1/baseline-assessment--final-10404.pdf.

41. OECD: www.oecd.org/education/school/starting-strong-2017.

42. See for example, L. Ang, 'Preschool or prep school? Rethinking the role of early years education', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol 15 No 2, 2014; K. Evans, 'Reconceptualising dominant discourses in early childhood education: Exploring "readiness" as an active ethical relation', *International Journal of Complexity and Education*, Vol 132 No 1, 2015.

43. A. Bradbury, *Understanding Early Years Inequality: Policy, assessment and young children's identities*, Routledge 2013.

44. See N. Derbyshire, B. Finn, S. Griggs and C. Ford, 'An unsure start for young children in English urban primary schools', *Urban Review* 46, 2014.

45. C. Pascal, T. Bertram and L. Rouse, *Getting It Right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: A Review of the Evidence*, Centre for Research in Early Childhood 2019.

46. See, for example, B. Street, *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development Ethnography and Education*, Longman 1995; C. Kelly, E. Gregory and A. Williams, 'Home to school and school to home; syncretised literacies in linguistic minority communities', *Language, Culture & Curriculum*, 2001; R. Levy, *Young Children Reading at Home and at School*, Sage 2011.

47. See for example, A.H. Dyson, *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write, Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures*, Teachers College Press 2003; M. Worthington and B. van Oers, 'Children's social literacies: meaning making and the emergence of graphical signs and texts in pretence', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, pub online, 2015.

48. A. Bradbury, '"I feel absolutely incompetent": Professionalism, policy and early childhood teachers', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol 13 No 3, 2013.

49. *Bold Beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools*, Ofsted 2017, p7.

50. K.E. Wohlwend, *Playing their way into Literacies: Reading, Writing and Belonging in the Early Childhood Classroom*, Teachers College Press 2011.

51. D. Whitebread, 2013: https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence; Pascal, Bertram and Rouse, op cit.

52. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/Primary_school_starting_age /.

53. See C. Crawford, L. Dearden and E. Greaves, *When you are born matters: evidence for England*, Institute for Fiscal Studies Report R80, IFS 2013: https://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/r80.pdf.

54. See M. Ouvry, *Exercising Muscles and Minds: Outdoor Play in the Early Years*, National Children's Bureau 2008; F. Brooks, *The Link Between Pupil Health and Well-Being and Attainment: A briefing for headteachers, governors and staff in educational settings*, Public Health England 2014; M. McPhillips, P. Hepper and G. Mulhern, 'Effects of replicating primary reflex movements on specific reading difficulties in children', *The Lancet*, Vol 355 No 12, 2000.

55. M.J. Drummond, *Assessing Children's Learning*, David Fulton 2003.

56. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nutbrown-review-foundations-for-quality.

57. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/more-great-childcare-raising-quality-and-giving-parents-more-choice. The proposal in this document to increase staff/child ratios was withdrawn following a campaign by parents, unions, practitioners and early years professional bodies.

58. https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-early-years-workforce-in-england/.

59. See E. Wood, 'Contested concepts in educational play; a comparative analysis of early childhood frameworks in New Zealand and in England', in J. Nuttall (ed), *Weaving Te Whariki: Aotearoa New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Theory and Practice*, NZCER 2013.