

What are we really preparing children for?

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Early childhood and care is continuously influenced by society, culture and the contemporary issues within these (Marsh, 2007). Pedagogy itself is always transforming and adapting, it looks different depending on the ethos of a setting and the morals of its practitioners (James and James, 2008). At its core, pedagogy is comprised of values, principles and the teaching practices that are found within the setting (Barblett, Knaus and Barratt-Pugh, 2016). However, MacBeath and Mortimore (2001) indicates that the principles underpinning each setting often remain the same; it is how pedagogy is presented in practice that is influential to children. Pedagogy informs everything within early years explain Cameron and Moss (2011), particularly in how the setting approaches contemporary issues and portrays them to the children. This paper will consider the inclusion of contemporary issues within early years and how this is incorporated into pedagogy, how current society and the government agenda is conflicting with the morals and ethos found within settings and the place of early years within modern society, for both children and practitioners. Ultimately it will consider what early years settings are actually preparing children for and why the sector is in this position.

The meaning and aim of education is of paramount importance to pedagogy and early years curriculum (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In theory, the various perspectives on education unite to create an environment in which children learn and thrive (LeVoguer and Pasch, 2014). However, Freire (1972) suggested that these different perspectives do not serve the needs of the children; pedagogy is designed and influenced by society in order to encourage conformity and normalisation. As it stands, education is preparing children to become integrated into current society, rather than equipping them with critical and creative thinking for the future (Craft, 2015). The construction of childhood within this, subjects children to a version of themselves in which they are

becoming rather than being, placing early years into a performance based pedagogy (Guarnera, Faraci, Commodari and Buccheri, 2017).

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) recognise that a child led ethos is diminishing and practitioners are struggling to hold on to this pedagogy. The rise of school readiness has seen minorities such as the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities be oppressed by the education system due to their alternative culture and way of life (Klaus and Marsh, 2014). However, pedagogy should not be invariable, it should be inclusive to all cultures and transform depending on the children and contemporary issues it is incorporating. Instead, the dominant discourse is promoting a specific culture of learning where conformity is necessary for success. The perspectives of contemporary issues within early years can be linked to government rhetoric and social policy (Grotewell and Burton, 2008). The current government firmly believe in the strength of the individual, while this develops the child as a unique being, it promotes conformity and normalisation within this. Grimmer (2018) suggests the government lack the insight into current day childhood, the performative culture that is pushed into early years settings has become the norm within education.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system outlines that there is a significant variety of factors that can influence a practitioner's pedagogical stance. Essentially, an identity is social constructed from norms and values, it is created by the interactions and engagements with the wider world (Phillips and Furlong, 2001). In contrast, social policy does not always reflect this (Barblett, Knaus and Barratt-Pugh, 2016). Recent early years policy has been controlled by a neo-liberal belief that children's success depends on school readiness (Ball, 2013). Pugh and Duffy (2014) maintain the interpretation of school readiness should be down to the individual setting and the needs of the children within it, they recognise that the government promote a very formalised and structured approach to starting school. This results in early years pedagogy belonging to an alternative discourse which Gooch and Powell (2013) indicates is devaluing contemporary issues within the curriculum and is promoting normalisation and conformity within children's lives.

Ultimately, giving children equal opportunities and encouraging reflection from both practitioners and children is the key to promoting a diverse environment and remaining inclusive of contemporary issues (Price and Tayler, 2015). The focus on academia is pressuring children to conform to one singular belief about their future and what success looks like within this (Richards, 2011). It does not allow them freedom within their own learning and is lacking belief in providing children with the skills for life so they can make their own decisions and adapt to the demands of the future (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007). Adams (2014) suggests this is due to the lack of engagement in long term goals, of which children would have the opportunity to become critically aware of the society they are living in. The emphasis placed on children to be school ready is further promoted by standardised testing and achieving the desired results in global league tables. The globalisation of education is evident here as the government put quantitative measurable data above the wellbeing of their children in order to compete at an international level (Blossing, Imsen and Moss, 2014).

Ultimately, Craft (2011) suggests children's happiness is not the key priority within the government agenda. The Bold Beginnings report (Ofsted, 2017) emphasised that children are being failed as they are not ready for school, however they fail to recognise that there is much more to education, and childhood, than formal learning (Craft, 2015). The report does not comment on aspects of wellbeing and happiness within early years, only the future of academic and economic success (TACTYC, 2017). Edwards (2017) suggests that everything within social policy is geared towards the political agenda of preparing children to become economically viable; this encourages practitioners to conform to government ideals. Ultimately, it has created a sector in which practitioners feel they have no voice and are powerless in creating their own pedagogy that confronts and reviews contemporary issues (Jones, 2009).

The position of early years within society is highly debated. Kassem, Murphy, and Taylor (2009) discuss whether early years is designed to be a significant part of society or stand alongside it while never truly integrating with the wider community. They suggest early years is often seen as an anomaly within education, it stands alone from formalised schooling and because of this it has its own specific set of values. Ward

and Eden (2009) explore this further schooling. and suggests that parents and the public have a very different view on early years. They emphasise that because there is more play and less academic work, there is a consensus that is it not as important as formal compulsory education. Montgomery (2013) also suggests this can be seen throughout society as early years children are not given a voice and are constructed by the government and media as an empty vessel that needs filling with predetermined knowledge (Jones, 2009).

Pedagogy and politics will always be intertwined (Edwards, 2017). Social policy subtly drives pedagogy within early years towards the government's agenda. However, Georgeson and Payler (2013) maintain that there should be no room for politics within education, while there is also suggestion that it is demeaning to practitioners to follow policy that research implies is incorrect or ineffective Ward and Eden (2009) suggest the requirements to become an early years practitioner reflects this in itself. They recommend that if practitioners have encouragement to further their education within the field, there would be a greater respect for the sector in general. Having a highly qualified workforce that can demonstrate these qualifications allows the sector a respected, knowledgeable voice as well as the opportunity to improve provision and quality. However, when this was recommended by Nutbrown (2012) the government were reluctant to consider the idea, regardless of the argument for higher quality and a deeper understanding of children's learning. When a policy like this is set by the government, it denies the sector public respect as there is a negative generalisation of an under qualified profession (Craft, 2015).

Contemporary issues surround the early years sector; they are not always recognised as such and issues including, but not limited to rainbow families, the way we approach popular culture and children's mental health can be complex to confront (Rix et al, 2010). The pedagogy within a setting should be understanding of this and encourage critical discussion around such issues (Gammage, 2006). However, Adams (2014) suggests that the early years sector lacks support in approaching complex topics that include, but are not limited to, rainbow families, gender stereotyping and healthy eating. The variety of roles early years practitioners are required to take on is always

expanding and evolving (Mortimore, 2013). Adams (2014) suggests the majority of practitioners lack understanding and experience within the things they are trying to promote. To elaborate, settings promote healthy eating without the support or training from a professional in that field, these contemporary issues are approached within the practitioner's own individual understandings (Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton, 2010). This suggests there is not an emphasis on preparing children for life. According to government rhetoric early years settings primary function is to prepare children for school, so much so that encouraging critical thought around contemporary issues is discounted.

Professionalism in early years can be linked closely to settings operating in isolation from their communities, occasionally this has the ability to lead to an avoidance of contemporary issues and a lack of critical engagement. Due to the high level of accountability and the current risk averse society, professionalism has become something that can be damaging to children and practitioner's identity. Gooch and Powell (2013) suggest that the relationship between practitioner and child has evolved from being a link between pupil and teacher to client and provider. This suggests that while positive relationships are formed between adult and child, current policy is ignorant to the professional love that is nurtured and flourishing within these relationships (Page, 2018) To deny children and practitioners a true relationship built upon personality and compatibility is demeaning to both parties. Lenz Taguchi (2010) suggests this also prevents more sensitive contemporary issues from being broached within settings, as practitioners do not feel it is appropriate and instead focus on preparing for formal schooling.

Ultimately, many contemporary issues are dependent on the role the practitioner takes within them (David, 2016). Practitioners values are rooted within their socio-cultural context, these are then reflected on to practice and their interactions with the children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, their pedagogy has to be taken into account as well as the expectations on them and the children (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). These expectations are not always in line with an early years ethos. Hall and Thompson, (2017) suggests practitioners are solely required to have children ready for

school, this is further supported by the bold beginnings (Ofsted, 2017) recommendations. The report goes as far as implying quality provision will take elements of key stage 1 in order to ensure children are ready for formal schooling, as well as stating that phonics should be the key purpose of the reception year which is both ethically and developmentally questionable (TACTYC, 2017). Furthermore, the recent proposed changes to the early learning goals (Mulholland, 2018) show a new focus on 'performing children' rather than 'being imaginative' as well as a focus within personal, social and emotional development for following instructions within self regulation. A performing child is not always an imaginative child, there are distinctive differences within that which change depending on the agenda being followed. Primarily, it is taking the emphasis away from children making their own discoveries through creative and imaginative exploration and giving them a predetermined outcome to perform. These proposed changes show an emphasis for conformity, while discouraging originality and alternative discourses.

To conclude, there is worry as to the direction that childhood is heading, however practitioners cannot approach this without support from the government. Early years and social policy are currently operating within different perspectives, encouraging critical thinking around political rhetoric will support practitioners in providing for the children in their care. While it is essential that policy makers begin to engage with the sector to truly understand it, realistically this also begins with encouraging practitioners to develop an awareness of the contemporary issues that surround childhood, they need to ensure they are addressed so early years breaks free from operating within its own parameters without any connection to a wider society. As a sector it is necessary to consider what children are being prepared for. As it stands there is a powerful amount of evidence that points towards a significant focus on conformity and normalisation. Children need to be prepared for life, not school. To prepare children only for formalised schooling is sacrificial to their wellbeing, the world is changing daily and children should be equipped to adapt to this.

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