

# Under 5

Magazine of the Pre-school Learning Alliance

February 2014

## Leaps and bounds

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## Cause for concern?

What does 'teaching' in an early years context really mean?

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# Moving in the WRONG DIRECTION?

The growing emphasis on 'teaching' in the early years is yet further evidence of the drive to schoolify the sector, argues early years expert Dr Richard House

In an interview with the *Daily Mail* published in April last year, minister Elizabeth Truss referred to “a generation of unruly toddlers” in our settings “running around with no sense of purpose”, condemning “chaotic” pre-schools that leave children unable to sit still and listen when reaching primary school. Truss later defended her remarks in Parliament, telling MPs: “It is a very sad fact that 33% of children arrive at school without the requisite communication and language skills that

they need to take part in school education”, adding: “We want children to learn to listen to a teacher, learn to respect an instruction, so that they are ready for school...”. So the schoolifying ‘cat’ is comprehensively out of the bag in these carefully orchestrated ministerial pronouncements, with their unmistakable underpinning ‘agenda’, to which I return later.

The next piece in this emerging schoolification mosaic comes from the new early years teacher (EYT) qualification. In

February 2013, ministers were reported as wanting more high-quality graduates to work in early years, with EYTs building on the strengths of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). In March, Ms Truss was further quoted as saying that “Graduate leadership is the best way to give young children the best start in life”, with the eight proposed Teachers’ Standards (Early Years) being “seen as intended to boost the role of teaching in the early years”. The minister also said: “We want to see more

flexibility between early years teachers and primary teachers and we want to see more primary teachers in early years and vice versa.” But as one nursery manager, Alexandra Skvortsov, poignantly commented: “A lot of parents don’t want us to be teachers – what we do as EYPs implies a more caring and holistic role’.

Aligning with the Teachers’ Standards for classroom teachers, the new EYT standards include: set high expectations; promote good progress and outcomes; plan *education* and care; adapt *education* and care to respond to the strengths and needs of all children; make accurate and productive use of assessment. Note the use of the term ‘education’ here – and are these the kinds of descriptors that professionals working with very young children think appropriate?

The next piece in this schoolification jigsaw comes from Ofsted. In November, following the publication of Ofsted’s new ‘tougher’ inspection framework, we read that a number of references to ‘practice’ had been replaced by references to teaching, with references to *Development Matters* being replaced in some cases by references to *Early Years Outcomes*. Sue Gregory, national director for early childhood at Ofsted, said the new framework would have a strong emphasis on teaching, ominously adding, “I’m not making any apologies for this. All people working in early years are teachers in one way or another.”

We were further told that “settings must... be prepared to provide ‘structure and routine’”; that “Ofsted will also shortly be carrying out surveys... to look at the *best examples of teaching*” and that “the new framework will also assess settings on *children’s readiness to start school*”.

All this provides a useful background to the question of the place of ‘teaching’ in early years settings. In retrospect, it seems clear that the ministerial outburst about ‘unruly toddlers’ was part of a wider, carefully orchestrated drive to ‘schoolify’ England’s early years sector – something that early years campaigners have been predicting for many years, subsequent to the introduction of the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage in 2008.

A long-standing debate has considered whether children’s learning should be teacher-directed (‘didactic’) or child-led (‘experiential’). Until quite recently,

the issue of ‘teaching’ in the early years hardly ever came up, for in practice, England’s Foundation Stage curricula have been more orientated towards comparatively free-flow play and experiential learning, rather than to quasi-formal teaching. But all this has now changed under the present government, and quite dramatically. The vast majority of early years practitioners believe that young children learn best experientially through free play within a ‘creative space’ appropriately ‘held’ by adults; however, it is clear that this understanding is now at severe risk from ideologically-driven, politicised agendas.

The wider context of England’s unconscionably early school starting age is crucial in all this, for this is what is driving the government’s aggressive assertion of this new ‘teacher’ discourse, with its ultimate aim of schoolifying early childhood. For many, England has a school starting age that, at four, is far too young – that is, many children are just not ready for institutional, ‘teacher-led’ schooling at that age.

Moreover, those who do seem to be ‘school-ready’ are only ready because they have been conditioned to be so because of the inexorable logic of the system that is determined that children start school at four. Yet rather than getting the message that four is developmentally too young for institutional schooling, the Department for Education’s (DfE’s) response is to continue digging all the more furiously in the wrong hole, concluding that the answer to the problem of young children not being ready for school at four is to schoolify early childhood at ever younger ages. For this reason they are now ratcheting up the status of the ‘teacher’ and ‘teacher-led’ group activities, and relatively downgrading the place of free play – for according to the DfE, play is now only acceptable if it is “planned and purposeful”.

The government’s obsession with schoolifying early childhood, and its accompanying refusal to understand that it’s the school starting age that needs to be changed, will be catastrophic for the well-being of our youngest children. This is especially of those from relatively deprived backgrounds, whose foundations for learning often lag well behind the children of more affluent

families – those the government claim to be wanting to help most.

To condition these children institutionally (and behaviourally) with more quasi-formal, ‘teacher-led’ learning behaviours before they’ve developed the crucial socio-emotional foundations of learning, in order to insert them expediently into England’s inflexible schooling system, can only lead to unbalanced and distorted child development and learning. This will in turn inevitably generate a surge in the number of children labelled as being ‘lesser’ or ‘slow’, when in reality the problem lies not with the child, but with the rigid, historically anachronistic schooling institution into which they are being indiscriminately shoe-horned.

Politicians seem incapable of understanding the subtle complexity and commonly paradoxical nature of early childhood, in which more is so often less. A cognitive, control-fixated way of ‘planning’ young children’s ‘outcomes’ fundamentally misunderstands the nature of early child development. The very nature of political activity is presaged on the assumption of making policies that proactively achieve definable outcomes; yet this is the very mentality that is entirely inappropriate in the delicate, subtle realm of early childhood.

There have been ample recent signs that our sector has found the courage to talk back robustly to government, when their policies are antithetical to young children’s well-being. Back in July 2013, Alliance chief executive Neil Leitch said: “We are concerned that early years and childcare appears to be coming increasingly under top-down pressure from a schools-driven formal education agenda around getting children ready for school. Such “schoolification” is inappropriate for young children... .” Amen to that – this should be a clarion-call to everyone in the sector to actively oppose these pernicious schoolifying developments.

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