

Education Committee
DfE use of Evidence

Wendy Ellyatt
On behalf of the Save Childhood Movement
Early Years Education (EYE) Academic Advisory Group
www.savechildhood.net

What young children need

**An integrated, holistic and appropriately financed system built upon
An evidence-based understanding of the child as
A citizen with developmental rights and freedoms**

Lack of clarity re outcomes

We support the DfE's expressed desire to base its policies on evidence and to develop 'a new vision for evidence-based practice in education and teaching' with new "What works centres" along the lines of NICE.¹ We agree with Janet Grauberg that over the last twenty years there has been a worrying lack of clarity and consistency about the outcomes of government policy and state intervention, with different political parties and different Ministers giving priority to different issues and policymakers constantly having to make trade-offs that "confuse parents and providers, increase costs and jeopardise the achievement of the desired outcomes." (ibid)

Too many policies - too little evidence

According to Action for Children's 2008 'As Long as it Takes' report, there have been over 400 different initiatives, strategies, funding streams, legislative acts and structural changes to services affecting children and young people over the past 21 years. This is equivalent to over 20 different changes faced by children's services for every year since 1987. What is more, "the 'churn' was increasing rapidly" with half of the developments identified begun in the previous six years.²

Over the last fifteen years there has been enormous investment in the early years and with this has come a confusing, and what we believe is an inappropriately-evidenced, succession of new policies together with accompanying systems of monitoring and accountability. There have also been a series of policy changes that have impacted on the nature of family life and the time that parents spend with their children. At the heart of all these changes sits the child whose own needs have not changed, but who has been exposed to an increasingly complex range of politically led cultural pressures.

With recent advances in brain development and the cognitive sciences we have never known more about how and why children learn – and we are also beginning to better understand what puts children off learning and makes them risk-averse. We would question whether current policy documents reflect an appropriate recognition of such research.

Lack of transparency and openness

We join with others in expressing deep concern at the DfE's recent lack of openness to challenge and negation of academic and expert opinion. In our opinion Ministers have not looked at the veracity of the evidence presented, but have, instead responded only to the degree that it supported their own political narrative. When we launched our Open Letter in September 2012, the 127 eminent signatories (including 17 emeritus professors) were summarily dismissed as 'The Blob', with a subsequent denial of legitimacy of the concerns raised and a denigration of the

credibility of those involved. We fail to see how this is in any way democratic or conducive to open and balanced dialogue that has the best interests of the child at heart.

We have similar concerns about the dismissal of consultation recommendations such as that of Cathy Nutbrown's Review³ and more recently the Primary Assessment and Accountability Consultation. Warwick Mansell provided the following evaluation of the latter⁴

"Of 1,063 responses to the DfE's question, in its July "consultation" as to whether the principles of that paper were right, 57 per cent said no, with only 18 per cent in favour. Yet the thrust of the proposals are unchanged.

Some 51 per cent replied that there should not be a baseline check at the start of reception, against 34 per cent in favour, with the detailed concerns of expert groups not even mentioned. Yet it is happening.

Similarly, 73 per cent of consultees came out against allowing schools to choose from commercially available baseline assessments, compared to 12 per cent in favour. Again, it is happening. And 68 per cent said that if the baseline assessments were to happen, they should not be made optional, against 19 per cent who said they should. They are being made optional.

We also highlight the dismissal of the highly evidenced Cambridge Primary Review and draw the committee's attention to the comparison of the Rose and Cambridge Reviews which revealed a profound difference in quality and approach.⁵

One of the key areas of concern has been the lack of transparency of process with closed remits and unclear authorship and consultation processes. Robin Alexander had this to say in the final report⁶

"The review and its witnesses have highlighted variations on this theme of democratic deficit, many of the centring on the nature and quality of the information on which both sound decision-making and effective education depend: the less than complete reliability of official information, particularly in the crucial domain of standards; its lack of independence, the creation and/or dogged perpetuation of educational myths in order to underwrite and exaggerated account of political progress; the key role of the media in shaping the information that reaches government as well as the information that flows from it; the reluctance of decision-makers to countenance or come to grips with alternative information on which better policies could be founded; the use of misinformation to marginalize or discredit idea running on other than approved lines, and evidence from other than approved sources...

This, surely, is not the way that education policy should be made."

The need for balanced debate and political accountability

The movement believes that children are citizens with developmental rights that have to be protected and that governments have a duty of care to ensure that this is the case. In fact this is clearly stipulated in Article 29 of the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that states that "The education of the child shall be directed to..the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential".⁷ It is vitally important that those in power engage in serious and informed debate about the quality of the evidence that is available to them and how they can avoid political prejudice in areas that are so fundamental to societal wellbeing. As stated by Robert Coe⁸

"Politicians want schools to be accountable for their performance, but they in turn must be accountable for the decisions that they make – in the sense that they must be able to justify and account for them in terms of sound evidence".

Policy and practice should be capable of being justified in terms of sound evidence about their likely effects and we feel that considerably more attention should be paid to the kind of outcomes that we really want to see. For example is it acceptable that more children are in childcare if a lack of investment in quality then compromises child wellbeing? Or is it ok to introduce baseline assessment if it compromises the vital settling-in period or, with children varying so much in age at the time of the test, runs the risk of stressing both parents and children? Only a year ago the department tried to push through the ratio change, which would have clearly compromised child wellbeing, and we are now seeing a move towards two year-olds in schools with a worrying lack of support for family life or an appropriate appreciation of the importance of early nurture.

We understand that most people in power are genuinely trying to do what's right for children and families, but all too often decisions seem to be being taken in ways that are 1) clearly uninformed 2) biased towards party political objectives 3) dismissive of expert opinion and advice and 4) overly influenced by the media, and this is a highly dangerous situation.

Prioritising Societal Wellbeing

There is world-wide recognition of the importance of the early years as the single most important period of life that lays the foundation for all that is to come. There is general expert consensus that it is both economically worthwhile and societally imperative with returns not merely financial but reflected in the strikingly improved wellbeing of whole populations. There is, therefore, a significant argument that the current funding curve should be reversed to accommodate this and we need leaders that have the power and vision to take the necessary decisions.

Within a world that has seen economic and societal breakdown on a vast scale there is a growing interest in what underpins societal values and wellbeing and creates lives that have real meaning and purpose. We question whether this is in any way reflected in current English policymaking when outcomes are all about personal attainment and the word wellbeing is all but absent. This is clearly reflected through England's consistently poor showings in the Children's Society 'Good Childhood' Reports and the UNICEF Reports of both 2007 and 2013. With the focus on universal childcare we currently even have the extraordinary situation when 'mothering' itself is being written out of policy documents – for example the Department for Work and Pensions has put together a Guidance document for government departments entitled The Family Test without mentioning the word 'mother' even once⁹

A New Guidance Body

Our own opinion is that this is an issue that is just too important to be exposed to the manipulations of the political system and that we urgently need a new multi-disciplinary guidance body, focused on optimizing human learning and development, that can oversee and evaluate policy and inform best practice. In that way we can cultivate leaders who understand that learning is a life-long process that starts pre-birth, with schools are only one element in the process. We can help them appreciate that education should be more than just getting children to pass exams, but also how they can become fully functioning and thriving adults. And we can support them in better balancing the demands for economic wellbeing within the boundaries of social and ecological sustainability.

We need to urgently challenge policies and practices that are narrowly predicated upon human beings as 'capital' in a world driven by commerce and consumption, and instead focus upon the human need for meaning and contribution where home, extended family, school and community are increasingly seen as one cohesive and mutually supportive system.

¹ Gauberg, Janet, Valuable Ends and Effective Means, CentreForum, 2014

² As Long as it Takes – A new Politics for Children, Action for Children, 2008

³ Nutbrown, Cathy, Foundations for Quality, 2012

⁴ Mansell, Warwick, NAHT Blog, 2014

⁵ Comparison of the remit and recommendations of the Rose and the Cambridge Reviews of the primary curriculum - Taken from Cambridge Primary Review (2009), draft of part of the Review's final report, submitted to the Committee prior to publication

⁶ Alexander, Robin, Children, their World, their Education – Final Report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review

⁷ Article 29, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

⁸ Coe, Robert, Manifesto for Evidence-Based Education, 1999

⁹ Mothers at Home Matter Blog 'Mum's the missing word!'