

Early Years 2008 Sharing Visions for Early Childhood

For the second year running, the MA Education Ltd early years team welcomed delegates and exhibitors from all over the UK to Parkstead House, in the grounds of Whitelands College, Roehampton University, for their annual conference, exhibition and awards – Early Years 2008.

We were confident that this year's programme would be the best yet, and so it proved having received excellent feedback from our delegates. The depth and scope of the conference, and the quality of speakers is unrivalled in the early years sector, and we are confident that the event will go from strength to strength in future years.

Early Years 2008 focused on Sharing Visions for Early Childhood. With the advent of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), it provided a timely look not only at the challenges ahead for the workforce in England, but also at the challenges and developments in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and Jersey, where early years frameworks are being developed as we speak.

Just as we can learn from practice in other countries around the world, we can also learn from our close neighbours and many eyes will be on the EYFS and the *Foundation Phase* in Wales, just as those in England and Wales should be watching with interest how new ways of working are developed and implemented in other parts of the UK.

Friday opened with Margaret Edgington reasserting that there are many diverse ways of offering and developing early education, and that we can learn from each one. What remains constant are the needs of young children and our responsibility to offer them freedom and risk, as well as learning and care. We need to remember that the challenges and opportunities offered by today's frameworks will be different from those we work to in 10 and 20 years time, which means that regardless of the initiatives imposed upon us, we have to keep in mind what is best for the children and fight to keep that at the top of the agenda and at the heart of early education. This was not the last time during the event that time was raised as an issue, with 10-year initiatives and funding being introduced with great fanfare only for wholesale change to be introduced if there is no immediate and noticeable effect. This is short-termism, and shows how hard we must fight to change attitudes and knowledge about early education and child development in political circles.

Sue Palmer, who will need no introduction, began Friday's keynote speech by telling the delegates that she wrote *Toxic Childhood*, because of her work with the National Literacy Strategy. She started to see children merely as people she was teaching to read and write, not as young people with bigger needs. This needed to change. We have a responsibility to look after the most vulnerable, which starts with children. We need to get back to offering real food and real play experiences. The consequence of not doing this are already being seen; attention is poorer, listening skills are worse, developmental disorders are increasing. Brain development is suffering.

These are culture-based developmental hindrances that, as a generation of parents and carers, we are contributing to. Children learn from first-hand experiences, something they are not getting by being stuck indoors and in bedrooms, spending hours in front of televisions and games consoles.

An old African proverb states that it takes a village to raise a child, well, this is the first generation to be raised in the electronic village. Child development happens at a steady rate, it cannot be fast-forwarded. Certain factors need to be present to aid this progress - first-hand experiences, interactions, communication, imitation and so on. This is happening less and less as children grow up staring at screens in isolation. Electronic development happens according to Moore's Law, where what is new today will be superseded by something smaller, quicker, more powerful and more absorbing within a few months. Think about what technology we would be talking about last year, and how that has changed now. We can keep up as adults, but children need to grow and develop according to natural cycles.

Children are born wanting to learn, wanting to find out about the material world and about the personal/social world - these are their 'quests'. There are natural developmental stages that children follow by using data and feedback, which adults can help with. Anything that disrupts this progress leads to problems. The type of problems listed above.

These problems are compounded by society's portrayal of what constitutes success in life. Simon Baron-Cohen from Cambridge University believed that the above quests led to the development of two personality traits: S-type (Systemiser) and E-type (Empathic). Historically, boys are more inclined toward being S-types, which is associated with power and wealth, reinforced by millennia of social rules. Girls are more inclined to being E-types, again, reinforced by social roles. In recent years, the media has reinforced a social stereotype of success being linked to wealth, power and status and to material 'stuff'. This is what we are told to strive towards. In the mid-80s there was a big drive towards women entering non-traditional workplaces and the balance starting swinging toward a society where more and more people strived toward the S-type trait.

This has led to a society out-of-balance, with empathic skills being de-valued and neglected. Personal relationships need

E-type traits. Interactions and social responsibility cannot function properly without them. E-type roles, such as childcare workers and teachers are not valued as highly as S-type roles, such as financiers, politicians, bankers and celebrities.

While children are growing and developing they need E-type, personal interactions and experiences. However, if we look at the difference between childcare and education we will see that this is not the case. Childcare is characterized by being personal, home-based, nurturing, unstructured and loosely supervised. Education, on the other hand, involves structured, highly supervised play, competition with other children, formal school structures and increasing institutionalisation.

Modern society teaches children that using their imagination and being a child is babyish. It tries to fast forward development, and pressurises parents into expecting too much, too young for their children. Thus a vicious cycle is reinforced and ingrained.

The government being filled with S-type people exacerbates the problem; they do not understand E-type traits or the vital necessity that they play in development. Therefore, the EYFS looks clever on paper, but it is not personal. It still does not value play highly enough - play provides the underlying and fundamental love of learning and discovery that is vital for both cognitive skills and personal and social skills.

The state cannot raise children. Our current culture de-skills people and their ability. Teachers need to be trained and then trusted because they know what is best for children. They are part of the social village that needs to replace the electronic village - where parents' reliance on DVDs and televisions takes the one-to-one personal interactions out of the hands of parents, families and peers, and places it firmly into the hands of big business, television stations, advertisers and marketing. These people do not have children's best interests at heart, yet they are taking over the personal care of children in the electronic village.

However, all is not doom and gloom, it is not an irreversible state of affairs. Change can be made and childhood can be reclaimed, after all it has happened before. Following the industrial revolution, a time of big industry controlled by greed and S-type people, where children were seen as an expendable part of the workforce, with thousands suffering horrific lives, there were people who started questioning the effects this environment had on children and their future. Out of this time of darkness came the first early childhood movements and what we now know as nursery education, which has led directly to the care and education we now provide - Robert Owen is a prime example.

So it can happen, we can make a change. Our children's futures are worth fighting for, it is a fight we have the ability to fight and it is a fight we can and must win. As John Schaar once said: 'The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them, changes both the maker and the destination.'

Lesley Staggs has a unique perspective on the early years. Having been appointed as the first National Director for the Foundation Stage, a post she left in 2006, Lesley was involved in the policy development that led to the EYFS. More than anyone she knows what is right with the EYFS and what opportunities were missed. Too much has happened too quickly and policies have been conflicting. There is still too much short-termism in policy development, and whereas the huge investment made by Labour in developing early years practice should be celebrated, it is still not nearly enough - high class provision is very expensive. There have been too many policy initiatives for practitioners to make sense of - we can cope with losing one plot, but there are so many plots to lose! It is vital that we get the early years right, there are no quick fixes. We have tried to develop a policy that is all things to all people. This is not socially responsible, after all, how can the learning goals be expected to lead to an end to child poverty. Too much is still being taken for granted.

We currently work in a system that says 'how hard can it be', and 'if you can work with one child, you can watch over 15'. How much does our society really value children?

There are many things that are worse now than they were a few years ago. Nursery schools are still closing and we are losing the quality practice they provide. Practitioners are not trained sufficiently in all areas of child development and learning, they are not as knowledgeable about these things and are not able to evaluate the training they are offered. At the same time they are not as vocal in supporting their principles and convictions. It should not be an 'aim' to get children outdoors it should be a 'right'.

Ultimately, we need highly qualified teachers leading multi-disciplinary teams and we need to speak out about bad policy and practice. For example, there is absolutely no reason to let the Primary Review dictate what early years staff do with literacy - none at all. They do not understand the early years and they have no right to put pressure on development and learning. There has been a huge push for *Letters and Sounds*, above and beyond other areas of learning. This is systematic of the increasingly national and narrow control of the early years and education as a whole.

However, the EYFS does have it plus points. The investment in children's centres is developing an holistic approach to childhood, the move to 'birth to five' is the right approach and it is clearer and stronger on the principles and commitments. In many respects the principles are right, but the practice is still lacking.

We must remember that there was never a golden time for early education. If the problems inherent in the EYFS can be ironed out it has the potential to move practice forward. Short-termism does not help anyone. We need to re-educate society and government, to let them know that the early years are not a precursor to anything, and that a child has the right to be two, or three, or four-years-old and so on. Overall, the jury is still out.

The next three speakers gave accounts of what is happening in other parts of the UK. Marilyn Warren told the delegates how the current Northern Ireland education minister wants nothing to do with what is going on in England! However, there are many problems to overcome in Northern Ireland. Childcare has not been the centre of society for the past 25-30 years, or arguably for even longer. Children are still being raised with sectarian issues and there is still a high level of poverty, and high numbers of children with special educational needs. There is also the problem of raising the educational levels of parents and carers so that they can help their children learn and develop - 26 percent of the adult population is at Level 1 in literacy. Any investment in children, therefore, needs to be matched by an equal investment in parents.

However, change is coming. Policy in Northern Ireland will now be based on the *UN Rights for the Child*, on OECD reports - USA and UK spend more than any other countries on working with children, but are worse off in terms of outcomes - and on EPPE and EPPNI research. This has led to the basis of a 0-6 policy, which seeks to address 16 major issues. These issues are being tackled by working groups that link different policy and stakeholder groups together, with major consultations now underway.

Four priority themes have been identified: Children and development; parents; services; and quality. There is still a huge fight to get the importance of play recognised, and just as in England, there are major issues surrounding funding, training - it has been suggested that all work experience occurs only in those settings graded as being of high quality - flexibility of funded places and so on. The consultations that are now taking place aim to tackle all of these issues and more, and, as Marilyn said, will try and 'close the gaps in the jigsaw'. It is expected that the policy will be put to a public consultation in February or March 2009.

Wales, like England, is already working under a new framework. The *Foundation Phase*, for children aged between three and seven-years-old, is the culmination of the devolution of education from England that happened 18 years ago. Owenna Davies told delegates that it forms just part of an education system that re-aligns its age groups and forms a national skills framework from three to 19-years-old: Flying Start (0-3), Foundation Phase (3-7), Revised National Curriculum (7-14) and a 14-19 curriculum.

The educational model is built on a bottom-up basis, based on what a child can do, rather than what goals they meet. It is also based on skills rather than on content, with a strong emphasis on development. It has the full backing of the Welsh Assembly. Everything is child-led, with children fully involved in planning and with an emphasis on assessment for learning. The learning environment is fully inclusive with equal importance given to both outdoor and indoor learning. All SATS have been scrapped.

Although the *Foundation Phase* sounds idyllic, there are problems to overcome. There needs to be a concerted effort to change parental and educator attitudes to learning and teaching. There have been fears that there is nothing to grasp onto, to teach and to show for learning. Similarly, parents have been concerned that 'skills over content-based' learning will not allow children to develop basic skills. As with all countries there is a battle to have the fundamental importance of play understood and appreciated by the public and parents, and even those in the education sector. There is an extra emphasis on practitioners developing children's thinking skills and ensuring they are motivated to learn. The *Foundation Phase* also places a huge burden of responsibility on local authorities to ensure that good practice is both adhered to in settings and appropriately funded. Owenna ended by saying that the eyes of the world are on Wales and there will certainly be many in the UK and England who will be envious of including children of six and seven-years-old in early years education.

Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland, then explained how, under the SNP, an early years framework is being developed according to Nordic models of early education. Ministers have been taken to other countries to see how provision compares with a focus on early intervention and prevention issues for children from birth to eight-years-old.

There has been wide engagement for change with different organisations and sectors, to ensure the fundamentals are right. However, this is proving a slow process with many obstacles to overcome.

Bronwen then put early education into a European context. Many Scandinavian countries travel across Europe,

especially to Reggio Emilia in Italy to study early education. In Norway, which has a similar population and mixed economy to Scotland, there is a long-standing commitment to the rights of the child. The delegates were fascinated to hear that a third of all kindergartens are 'nature-based', that all children from one to six-years-old are entitled to full-time subsidised pre-school places and that Norway spends 1.7 percent of its GDP on early years services, compared to the 'pathetic' 0.5-0.8 percent in the UK.

In parts of Italy, such as Verona and San Miniato, great emphasis is placed on putting the child at the centre of services, communities and families. Children are given opportunities, not outcomes, and are seen as protagonists in their own learning, which immediately opposes the nature of a curriculum that tells a child what to do.

Bronwen ended by reminding us that those countries that have excellent early years education and childcare, traditionally have a great passion for childhood, and that most of their approaches were developed from the remnants of societies ravaged by the second world war by mothers who were determined to do more for their children - not by governments and politicians.

The afternoon's master classes provided an excellent opportunity to break into smaller, more interactive groups. Janet Cooper from Stoke Speaks Out, demonstrated what it must be like for a child to be confronted with a world they cannot communicate with. She demonstrated the gaps in knowledge of parents, and also in the training provided to midwives (no attachment training) and teachers (no child development training) and how overcoming education problems requires a truly multi-disciplinary approach.

Elizabeth Jarman also dealt with language development, this time focusing on engaging parents and carers and how to promote the right environment using the Communication Friendly Spaces™ approach. Delegates were given the chance to discuss ways of changing the learning environment to effectively support the development of speaking and listening skills.

Vicki Charlesworth had people up and dancing and singing as she explained the Critical Skills Programme that is being used to great effect on Jersey. Critical Skills has much to offer in terms of developing problem solving, decision making and collaborative skills in young children.

Day two kicked off in fine style with Tim Gill discussing how we have become a risk-averse society and how this is damaging children. Tim started by asking the delegates to stand up if their favourite place to play when young was outdoors, and again if this place was not closely supervised by adults. The majority of delegates stood up on both occasions - the same response is seen around the world, except when the majority of people are under-25; this tells its own story. Tim then proceeded to give some examples from the past two years of how children's play is being curtailed, or 'colonised' by adults' anxieties and fears. Normal experiences are being recast as something more sinister.

Childhood needs and experiences are universal because of our need to get to grips with the world and to understand it. Adult anxieties are taking children's experiences away from where they need them to be, and from where we need them to be. We are falling foul of a no-risk approach - we have a philosophy of protection, when we should have one of resilience.

Unrestricted free time is becoming eliminated in schools, and now only eight percent of children walk to school without an adult, compared to 80 percent in 1981. Childhood is a journey from being helpless and dependant to being autonomous and independent. They have to eventually take control of their lives from their parents. This transfer becomes more difficult the more risk-averse our society becomes.

But why are the adults and politicians creating a risk-free world? The reason is to cover their backs should anything go wrong. However, by creating a zero-tolerance culture to childhood games and experiences and by branding them anti-social they are closing down an important part of childhood development, which leads to dissatisfaction, which leads to frustration, which leads to the problems in communities that blight people's lives. The government and local councils are, in effect, creating their own problems.

Play is about being in control, while being out of control. It is about maintaining a managed disequilibrium. Ed Balls has even warned of wrapping children in cotton wool. But how do we tackle the risk-averse society? Even playgrounds have become stale and safe, with up to 40 percent of spend relating to safety surfacing. Dangers that are accepted when playing football, such as bruises, cuts and broken bones, are causes of outcry when they occur in playgrounds. £300 million has been spent over 10 years to make playgrounds safer. Yet the number of fatal accidents in these areas pale into insignificance compared to the number of deaths that happen when children cross the road. Where would the money be better spent? Better city planning, that encourages walking, cycling and public transport over car use would protect children much better than eliminating all chance of risk during play. Neighbourhoods that allow children to explore beyond the boundaries of home and school and that encourage interactions between ages would benefit the whole of society. We need to value children and take a more sympathetic view of childhood experiences.

Unfortunately, in the current climate of fear, the parenting style of 20 years ago would today be seen as neglect. But it is not. In many ways we need to re-find the lost art of 'benign neglect' and in our practice we need to move from risk assessments, to 'risk-benefit assessments'.

Next up, Yasmine Thebault, provided an insight into how the States of Jersey aspire to building lifelong learning on the island. By taking a bottom-up approach and by putting both children and parents at the heart of everything that happens Jersey is building a learning community. Central to this aspiration is the need to give children a broad range of experiences in order to build strong foundations for creativity. However, children still need to be allowed to be children, and should be allowed to be bored, if necessary!

Jersey has taken a long-term, consistent approach to achieving its aims. Since 2001, Critical Skills training has been given to all educators, and the programme, along with assessment for learning, have been embedded in the education system. No other initiatives have superseded them. In Jersey, they concentrate on the 'how' of learning, not the 'what'.

Education on Jersey shares many aspects with other countries. There is a belief that learning is a collaborative process and that children are co-constructors of knowledge. There is a belief that the quality of relationships between all of the stakeholders in a child's education, including politicians, is vital to ensure success. Also present is the realisation that parents and headteachers still need to be educated to enable them to understand that by looking after wellbeing and by full stakeholder involvement, achievement will follow. Yasmine left us with the instruction to choose passion over reason - 'light some fires!'

We then heard from Carla Macgregor about a different approach to education, that of the home educator. Under the 1996 Education Act, a parent has a right to decide where their child is educated, and parents in increasing numbers and for a wide variety of reasons, are choosing a system that involves no curriculum, no testing, no criteria and no tick boxes. Indeed, such is the detachment from the state education system that Carla asked the pertinent question: 'Why aren't home educated children used as control groups in early years research studies?'

But why do parents choose to take their children out of the education system? Many feel it better meets the needs of the children. In school, children are taught to assessments and criteria, whereas at home the education is mainly child-led, follows the interests and needs of the child and trusts their innate desire to learn. In short, they are being 'educated', not 'schooled'. Home education also helps to restore the family bonds and paths of communication that are being eroded and lost in the modern world, as noted by many of the speakers during the conference. Those in the state system need to view home education as a valid option and to work in collaboration to meet the needs of all children and families, after all, there is plenty of evidence that points to home educated children performing excellently in terms of development and later qualification attainment.

Day two's workshops continued the excellent quality established through the rest of the programme. Jani Nicol introduced the Steiner Waldorf early education approach, which is based around the idea that is important to educate the whole child. This is seen in three parts: The education of the head for thinking, the hands for feeling and the heart for emotion. An understanding of child development is crucial for this. During the first seven years the children are provided with an environment full of quality sensory experience. These experiences are manifested in the use of natural materials and items to produce imaginative play. Everything starts from the child and adults teach by example rather than by instruction or by direction. However, for this to work the adults must be worthy of imitation.

Julia Sargeant and her team introduced the concept of Forest School before inviting everyone outside to sample and take part in some of many activities children experience in that environment. From toasting bread on an open fire to wood whittling, delegates got active, got involved and got inspired.

Delegates in Kay O'Brien's workshop on inclusive practice were up and moving, exploring the difference between integration and real inclusion through games and activities. There was certainly plenty of activity as well as discussion and by the end of the allotted time the lunch break was well earned.

Saturday afternoon began with Heather Marsland exhorting early years practitioners to take the initiative for early education, now that the EYFS had placed it in the national spotlight. The EYFS has forced practitioners to come out of their 'silos', to work together in partnerships and to speak the same language as other professionals working with the best interests of children at heart. Heather reminded us that as practitioners we are part of a wider, bigger team and that we must work together to do what is right for children and families, not simply what meets targets and policies. Any fragmentation of services is bad for children. The EYFS offers everyone a common base from which to move practice forward, and from which to make a stand against unhelpful legislation.

The EYFS also shows how far we have come from the old days. The need to work in partnerships is not new to some, but to others it is completely new – some will not even know who their partners are. In some cases the biggest barrier to

people working together is fear, in others it is because they do not speak the same professional language. Heather finished by echoing a concept that had been mentioned earlier, that children should be educated in 'villages' not schooled and institutionalised.

Then, now and next was theme for the last talk of the conference. Marion Dowling has extensive experience of the early years and is well placed to show how the lessons of the past can inform and ensure a better future. Marion asked us to think about what practice was like when we first started our early years careers and how it compares to now. Between the 1960s and 1990s there was little call for childcare and low status accorded to the profession. However, nursery schools were beacons of hope with highly qualified teachers and nursery nurses. Morale was high and provision excellent. Under Thatcher's government, things changed and standards slipped - the less said about the voucher system, the better! The government were largely interested in the early years as a means of reducing crime later in life, rather than for the offering children the best start in life.

Policy at this time was characterised by the Columbus principle: Set off not knowing where you are going; when you get there not knowing where it is; when you get back not knowing where you have been.

Demand for places in settings has more than tripled in recent years and knowledge about early learning has improved dramatically. The EYFS is based on the right principles and supports the continuity of learning, but it has a long way to go. There are still many problems caused by the government. They have poured a great deal of money into the early years, but as politicians they expect an instant return. Again, we are looking at short-term goals when we should be looking at long-term development. Children need time to make learning their own, and constant top-down pressure is putting strain on practitioners, which is then filtered down to the children. This is very wrong. Practitioner confidence is being eroded, a problem exacerbated by Ofsted regulation being carried out by those with little experience or knowledge of the early years and who spend little time in settings. How can a practitioner have confidence that an inspector will 'get under the skin of provision and make sound judgements on complex practice?' Early years staff are now commonly heard saying 'Are we allowed to do that?' We are breeding a culture of permission instead of one of trust.

Early years provision can go one of three ways: First, the funding runs out and we are left with what we have now, something fragile and new, but with no money to maintain and advance it. Second, funding continues but at the expense of autonomy being replaced by increased centralised governmental control. This will not only breed resentment in the older generation of practitioners, but create a new class of non-thinking, homogenous factory-produced practitioners leading children's learning with pre-programmed and packaged learning. This will lead to a curriculum of content, and greater learning by rote.

The third option, and hopefully the way forward, is that we cherish our best practice and use it as a basis for future provision. Highly trained staff are given time to reflect upon and consolidate practice. Research messages continue to feed policy. We need to get children to fall in love with ideas and we need to offer the benign neglect that Tim Gill spoke about. There must be attachment between staff and children - professional love - we must get to know them and find out how they tick. We cannot let the first two scenarios happen.

After two fantastic and highly informative days it was left to Margaret Edgington and Ros Bayley to sum up the key messages from the conference. They highlighted six points: We must respect children (moving to reverence); we must trust ourselves; we must take personal responsibility for ensuring our work is always done in the best interests of children - no-one else; we must build networks of correspondence and networks of partnerships; and we must, more than anything, have passion for what we do. If we work to these six points we can ensure the EYFS sticks to its four main principles and that it never gets swamped by other agendas.