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19. Initial teacher education - a sabre tooth tiger curriculum? The evolving role of the teacher in Children's Centres: implications for changes in initial teacher education

Anne Renwick and Lin Savage, University of Cumbria

Summary

The aim is to inspire educators to instigate change in initial teacher education for students working with children from birth to eight. Initial teacher education needs to reflect the developing role of Early Years teachers and prepare them for the complexities of leading pedagogy in multi-agency teams within Children's Centres. This paper will include a critical review of recent developments concerning the role of the teacher in Children's Centres, based on knowledge and experience of working with children's centre practitioners across the north west of England. We will encourage reflection on the key issues related to leading pedagogy in the context of Children's Centres. We will consider the implications for teacher educators in preparing their own students to: lead pedagogy with children aged birth to eight; work with families; influence, manage and support a range of practitioners involved in curriculum delivery and extended services; and work effectively in a multi-agency team. Finally, we will touch upon how to prepare students for the emotional issues they may face, such as isolation and retention of their professional identity.

Keywords

Children's Centre Teachers / Multi-agency teams / Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) / Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) / Sure Start / outcomes for children

Context

Children's Centres have evolved from the recognised benefits of developing community based provision that brings together care, education and a range of other services for families with young children, such as health and social services, all provided in the 'one stop shop'. The findings of Sir Christopher Ball's 'Start Right' report (1994:7) emphasised the need for 'political will' to commit to the provision of high quality Early Years provision that integrated care and education, incorporated within a community focus. A range of initiatives preceded the introduction of the children's centre agenda in 2003, such as early excellence centres, neighbourhood nurseries and Sure Start⁷ local programmes. These

programmes were all intended to provide high quality care and education for young children, along with extended, family focused services. Sure Start provision came under close scrutiny, with outcome focused research in the period from 2005 onwards, from the national evaluation of Sure Start. There was some political criticism that there was little evidence of value for the considerable funding that had been allocated to the programmes.

The children's centre agenda rose from the evaluations of the various programmes previously mentioned, combining the community based, interagency ethos with a more structured and specific remit expressed in the 'core offer'. Clearly linked to the five

⁷ <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/> (accessed 31.10.08)

outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda, the core offer demanded that Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged wards must provide the following services:

- Good quality early learning combined with full day care provision for children ten hours a day, five days a week, 48 weeks a year;
- Good quality teacher input to lead the development of learning within the centre;
- Child and family health services including ante-natal services;
- Parental outreach;
- Family support services;
- Base for childminder network;
- Support for children and parents with special needs;
- Effective links with jobcentre plus to support parents/carers who wish to consider training or employment. (DfES)⁸

There is a clear expectation that Children's Centres will target services to motivate and engage the 'hard to reach' families in the communities they serve.

Children's Centres have grown from a variety of beginnings; nursery schools, primary schools, community based Early Years provision, Sure Start programmes, primary care trust provision, are some examples of settings that have evolved into Children's Centres. This range of histories, coupled with the emphasis on responding to local needs has resulted in many different models of children's centre provision, with centres developing distinctive characters reflecting local needs.

Background: research and policy

In 1997, the newly elected Labour government undertook a review of services

for children and young people as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.⁹ The DfES also commissioned several research projects related to Early Years provision. Significant investment in services for children and their families followed, through the National Childcare Strategy and Sure Start programmes 'aimed at improving the health and well being of children from birth to four and their families in the most deprived areas' (DCSF, 2008a:5). The Effective Provision of Preschool Education research project (EPPE) (Sylva et al., 2003) confirmed the benefits of early attendance at high quality pre-school provision, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in centres where they mix with children from a range of social backgrounds. Integrated centres were found to be among the most effective type of setting. These findings led to the publication in December 2004 of 'Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy' (DfES, 2004a).

Underpinned by 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' (DfES, 2004b) and the Children Act (HMSO, 2004) the ten year strategy outlined the governments goals and vision for children and their families to be developed over the next ten years and identified three key principles:

- Ensuring every child has the best start in life;
- The need to respond to changing patterns of employment and ensure that parents, particularly mothers, can work and progress their careers; and
- The legitimate expectations of families that they should be in control of the choices they make in balancing work and family life. (DfES, 2004a:5)

⁸ <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/earlyyears/surestart/centres> (accessed 31.11.08)

⁹ <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/car> (accessed 31.11.08)

The vision included 'a Sure Start Children's Centre in every community by 2010, co-ordinating a range of services for pre-school children' (ibid:33) seen as key to improving the outcomes of all children under five and closing the gap between the most disadvantaged and their peers. Children's Centres were seen as the way forward to ensure that services for children and their families were co-ordinated to meet their needs and appropriately integrated by all the agencies involved, whether health, social care or education. Removing child poverty by enabling parents to work is key to driving this agenda.

The Children Act (HMSO, 2004) had focused on the needs of children and young people and the Childcare Act (HMSO, 2006) which followed in 2006 sought to ensure that childcare provision was integrated, removing the distinction between care and education, and of good quality. It focused on sustainable, good quality care and education provided by a well qualified workforce, taking into account the needs of parents to balance work and family life.

The national evaluation of Sure Start reports (NESS) (DfES, 2005) and (DfES, 2008) would seem to signify that the move towards Children's Centres, and the introduction of the core offer, has improved the impact that provision is making on the lives of families with children under three. The research revealed significant variations in effectiveness of different centres with services provided by health agencies seeming to have a particularly favourable impact. It is likely that Children's Centres are here to stay for the foreseeable future and providers of Higher Education are beginning to consider the range of education and training they can offer to support centre development.

The Role of the Teacher in Children's Centres

The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years report (REPEY) (Blatchford, 2002), analysed the pedagogical strategies used in the most effective settings, the following finding corroborates the EPPE research:

We found in both interviews and observations that trained teachers used the most sophisticated pedagogy, including shared sustained thinking. When less qualified staff were working with qualified teachers we found significantly more sustained shared thinking interactions than when they worked alone or with other less qualified staff. (Blatchford, 2002:14)

Research, has also focused on analysing the constituents of high quality Early Years provision and its benefits for children. The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyle, 2002) project resulted in a proposed framework for effective practice; knowledge of child development, commitment to Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and an ability to reflect and think deeply about the complex nature of pedagogy were among factors highlighted as requirements for the effective practitioner, and the presence of qualified teachers was indicated as having an impact on children's progress and the quality of settings. Specific findings from EPPE reported that:

Settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress.

Quality indicators include warm interactive relationships with children, having a trained teacher as manager and a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff.'

(Blatchford, 2002)

The Children's Centre practice guidance (DfES, 2006) draws on these findings to explain and justify the requirement for the employment of a qualified teacher in every children's centre. But what is the role of the teacher employed in this way? According to the Children's Centre practice guidance, teachers working in a Children's Centre will be expected to have knowledge of child development, working with young children and leadership. They will have to apply skills in teaching and learning methods, developing colleagues and working with other professionals. It goes on to clarify that 'teachers will work closely with other Early Years staff in observing, supporting and extending children's learning':

They will have substantial input into the planning of the integrated day, although their support may be offered in a number of different ways.

For example:

- by leading a team of key workers in working with children as well as offering support in planning and assessing, including the training and support of childminders;
- by taking a coordinating lead for an area of learning or aspect of Birth to Three Matters or the Foundation Stage across age groups;
- by leading curriculum projects across the centre reflecting the needs of children as they grow and develop.'
DfES (2006:27)

Current practice varies between local authorities but also from centre to centre, depending on local arrangements, as well as the size and make up of the individual centre's workforce. The DCSF Standards Site¹⁰ goes into further detail about the specific requirements teachers will need in order to lead practice in these multi-agency, integrated centres. Researching advertised

vacancies for children's centre teachers confirms that teachers are being expected to not only model good practice, but also to provide professional development to staff and other providers of care and learning within the local area. The traditional role of the qualified teacher is being extended and now includes: the necessity for knowledge and experience of working with children from birth; leading, managing, supporting and developing practitioners from integrated teams; closer working relationships with parents and carers; and the ability to lead and influence the practice of a wide variety of professionals including childminders. Maintaining their professional identity may become an issue for those who find themselves in this role. The support that they might expect from colleagues will necessarily be different in a children's centre. They may have different terms and conditions, hours of work and holiday arrangements from those teachers who work in schools and perhaps have support staff on a range of contracts and with a range of qualifications. They will need to access professional development opportunities and support specifically geared to their role. The changing and developing needs of the Children's Centre teacher has significant implications for their initial preparation and continuing professional development.

The current position

A combination of factors has led to a complex and confusing position within current Early Years provision. Many Children's Centres follow the pattern of a single site on which all the services are delivered, while others are based on a satellite model with services delivered from a variety of sites around a central core. Whatever the pattern, it is a requirement, as outlined in the current Children's Centre practice guidance that:

¹⁰<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/> (accessed 1.11.08)

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all Children's Centres offering Early Years provision must have a minimum 0.5 of a qualified teacher involved in planning and delivering the service before designation. Centres should aim to increase this to be a full time post within 18 months. (DFES, 2006:27)

Qualified teachers are being employed in this role throughout the country; some are employed directly by the children's centre and are part of the staffing structure of the centre itself; others are employed by local authorities (LAs) and may be part of the LA advisory support for settings delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCFS, 2008b). Since September 2008, the EYFS is the statutory framework for all those Ofsted registered settings delivering integrated care and education to children from birth to five. Its introduction confirms the integration of care and learning and will be a requirement for the full range of settings including Children's Centres. There are also a wide variety of qualifications within the children's workforce. Staff recruited to Children's Centres will come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including education, health and social care. They will also have a range of qualifications in care and education at a variety of levels, many at level two and three, but others with level six qualifications in a range of specialist areas.

The introduction of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), that is to say practitioners with level six qualifications who have evidenced a group of 39 standards, specific to working with children aged birth to five and their families, adds further confusion to the picture. The government has targets for the numbers of Early Years Professionals (EYP) to be employed in the children's workforce and the Children's Centre practice guidance outlines the target for Children's Centres:

By 2010 all Children's Centres offering Early Years provision are expected to employ an Early Years Professional (EYP) to plan and lead the delivery of the integrated day care and early learning provision. (DfES, 2006:27)

The relationship between the teacher and EYP has not, as yet, been clarified but the guidance goes on to acknowledge that some EYPs will also be qualified teachers. There are also fast track routes for qualified teachers to gain EYPS. If the QTS and EYP are not one and the same person it is very unclear as to how the professional relationship will develop and exactly who will be the lead responsible for the planning and delivery of the provision.

Given the confirmation of the benefits of the presence of qualified teachers from the EPPE and REPEY research, some have queried the need to introduce another graduate professional - the EYP. Sceptics would cite funding as the major motivation since EYPs have no guaranteed salary structure, however, an alternative argument points to the significance of experience with under threes as determining a distinct profession. As yet there is no research that establishes the effect of the EYP who is not a qualified teacher on quality of practice.

At present teachers employed within Children's Centres may have been employed in the setting's previous context as a nursery, their role having changed when the setting evolved into an integrated centre. They may not have applied for a Children's centre teacher post. Increasingly 'Children's Centre teacher' is named in the job description for newly appointed staff and the implications of this for teachers and in particular newly qualified teachers, their initial teacher educators, as well as those responsible for

their continuing professional development is considerable. Teachers are working with an increasing range of professionals. In some cases they may be responsible for leading colleagues from a range of professional backgrounds and in others, a health visitor, social worker or midwife may lead them.

The future and recommendations for possible ways forward

The development of the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage strengthens the commitment to a graduate profession for children from birth to five.

The changing face of Early Years provision and the consequent developments in the Early Years workforce need to be addressed by the providers of higher education, including initial Early Years teacher education.

While many tutors with an Early Years specialism have been actively involved in shaping new developments and reflecting new initiatives in course design, primary colleagues have not always had the same opportunities. A new language is developing among Early Years settings, and practitioners and tutors with a primary background contributing to Early Years courses will need to be supported in developing their understanding of the widening profile of the Early Years teacher's work and all tutors will need to keep up to date with new developments.

Recommendations:

- Inform colleagues within ITE of the changing nature of Early Years and offer support
- Early Years tutors need to keep up to date with new initiatives

The introduction of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) working alongside the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) has split responsibilities of quality assurance issues related to the Early Years and provided two

co-existing systems related to the two graduate career pathways in Early Years - Early Years Professional status and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The closer these two agencies can work together, the more chance there will be of a cohesive approach to high quality training for Early Years graduates, this is an area in which the TDA holds a proven track record, with its close scrutiny of initial teacher education through initial teacher education Ofsted procedures.

Recommendations:

- Advocate for closer working between the TDA and CWDC
- Advocate for parity of rigour in training and quality assurance practice across graduate Early Years career training
- Seek further clarification of EYP and QTS roles
- Encourage research to clarify the impact on practice of non QTS EYPs
- Advocate for parity of salaries for the workforce across sectors.

Working with children in the birth to three age group is a new aspect of work for many qualified teachers in Children's Centres. The necessity to develop this aspect of initial teacher education programmes, and support the academic study of care and development of babies and toddlers is becoming central to new course design in the Early Years. There is an established culture of academic knowledge based on very young children from psychology and health based courses and education staff have much to learn from other disciplines in this area.

Recommendations:

- Raise the academic status of working with children under three and reflect this in course design for Early Years initial teacher education
- Further develop the academic research base focused on working with children under three

The issue of placement experience with babies for initial teaching students is currently fraught with complexities, not recognised as an area for assessed placement by the TDA, and therefore relegated to 'additional' rather than central placement requirements. The current climate also raises challenges in finding sufficient placements with suitably qualified work based mentors, funding issues and the development of appropriate baby and toddler placement guidelines which reflect graduate level engagement.

Recommendations:

- Advocate for assessed placement opportunities for Early Years student teachers with children under three, reflecting the age range covered by the statutory EYFS
- During the transition period to a graduate profession, HEIs may need to provide suitably qualified mentors where there are no suitable work based mentors
- Develop research based guidelines for effective practice with children under three

The multi-agency ethos of the Children's Centre requires the Children's Centre teacher to work in a very different team than the primary school setting. Often there will be only one teacher in a centre, or working across a number of centres, and the planning and weekly meeting and work schedule will bring the Children's Centre teacher into close working relationships with colleagues from very different professional backgrounds and with different perspectives on provision. While the ECM agenda has resulted in the inclusion of multi-agency working in new course designs, this is often delivered solely by education staff and fails to result in the deeper learning inspired by working with colleagues from alternative viewpoints. The earlier students training to work in the Early Years workforce can benefit from co-

training with students and tutors from other professional heritages, the more able they will be to deepen their knowledge of the broader issues in multi-agency working.

Recommendation:

- Shared modules taught to a range of students from different courses, across agencies, by a tutor team from a range of professional backgrounds

The trend for a growing Early Years workforce with level two and three qualifications has led to the graduate Early Years Professional and Early Years teacher being defined as 'Early Years leaders'. This has resulted in Early Years graduates taking on leadership roles early in their career. In order to prepare students for this role, there is a need to embed leadership and the explicit teaching of interpersonal skills in initial training courses. Students need to develop the ability and confidence to develop a personal philosophy and vision, learn about decision making and teamwork, as well as having a secure understanding of the curriculum and effective practice they are charged with leading. Opportunities to rehearse and receive feedback on aspects of leadership need to be established within graduate courses.

Recommendation:

- Embed opportunities to rehearse and receive feedback on leadership skills, including interpersonal skills within Early Years graduate courses.

One of the biggest resources available to HEIs is the experience of those previous students who are currently at the forefront of working in new ways in the changing Early Years world. Harnessing the experience of these ex-students and developing communities of practice, which enable CPD training, at Masters level, and support practitioners in a way that prevents isolation in the field, is one way of sharing information

and developing potential which could impact practice at varying levels within the Early Years workforce.

Recommendation:

- Develop learning communities with graduate practitioners working in the Early Years to promote a culture of shared learning and continuing professional development

Biographies

Anne Renwick is a Senior Early Years Advisory Teacher for Cumbria Children's Services, currently seconded as a teacher fellow in Early Years education to the University of Cumbria. Anne has worked in an Early Years advisory capacity for six years, supporting practitioners in a range of settings including Children's Centres. She has been involved in Children's Centre development in Cumbria and particularly the role of the qualified teacher in Children's Centres. Anne has recently become an assessor and mentor for Early Years Professional Status and is currently preparing a research proposal for her MA on teachers in Children's Centres.

Lin Savage is a senior lecturer in Early Years education at the University of Cumbria and previously worked for the advisory teacher team. In the last three years Lin has been involved in teaching, mentoring and assessing on the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leaders, visiting a range of Children's Centres in the northwest to support leaders from a variety of professional backgrounds. Lin has recently become an assessor for the Early Years Professional Status. Lin's Masters research was focused on the employment experiences of newly qualified Early Years teachers.

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