Problematising the 'school ready' curriculum in the EYFS

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Policy frameworks are seen as 'systems of ideas' or 'policyscapes'. (Ball, Popkewitz, Rizvi and Lingard, Bacchi), meaning-laden architectures (Fairclough et al, 2004).

Policy assemblages (Savage and Lewis, 2018), ensembles (Ball, 1993).

International circulation of neo-liberal discourses: standards, accountability, performance, regulation, inspection.

Performative nature of policy texts (Gottweiss, 2006), texts as material objects (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010), power effects of texts and discourses (Kay, Wood, Nuttall and Henderson, 2019; Wood, 2019).

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OFSTED (2011) Getting them ready early: distance learning materials for inspecting reading within the new framework.

OFSTED (2014) Are you ready? Good practice in school readiness.

OFSTED (2015) 'Teaching and play in the early years - a balancing act? A good practice survey to explore perceptions of teaching and play in the early years'

OFSTED (2017) Bold Beginnings: the Reception Curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools.

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/Ofsted

Increasing intervention of OFSTED in matters of quality, curriculum, play, pedagogy, assessment, school readiness, professionalism, professional knowledge, reading

OFSTED draw on limited sources of evidence – policy-led evidence

These reports construct an authoritative discourse that carry power effects for children, practitioners and families

Policies followed into enactment via OFSTED inspection regime.

OFSTED is the sole arbiter of quality

Critical Policy Analysis in ECE

Looking within and across texts (intertextuality) to trace discourse and language, power and their effects.

Who is making the policy and for what audiences?

Who is creating the 'problem', and on what evidence?

Authorisation, rationalisation,
moral evaluation, mythopoesis
(Fairclough, 2003)

EYFS + OFSTED = policy 'truths'

Bold Beginnings
What is the problem represented to be?

- What are the problems that OFSTED is addressing in Bold Beginnings? *'fresh insight' 'curricular gap – EYFS-Year 1' 'reducing attainment gap' 'painful consequences of falling behind their peers'* *(pathos – appeal to emotions)*

- What and who are the proposed reasons for the problems? *'whether EYFS is appropriately designed to prepare pupils for Year 1' 'Reception year is …beginning of a child's formal education' children must be 'equipped' to meet the demands and challenges* *(logos – rationale)*

- What are the proposed solutions, and on what evidence are these based?
- *Direct teaching in Literacy and Mathematics, systematic, structured, sufficient time, effective teaching, formal outcomes,* *(Ethos – moral basis of the argument)*

- What is absent and what/who has been silenced? *Notions of 'free play' are 'too rosy', 'unrealistic view of childhood'. Differences and diversities??*

(Kay, 2018; Kay, Wood, Nuttall and Henderson, 2019)

Discourses of vulnerability and resilience

Children who are 'not ready' – vulnerable, anxious, may experience transition as negative. This may impact on their well-being and attainment, sense of belonging. Feelings of difficulty, anxiety, confusion, fear of getting it wrong.

Children who are 'ready' are capable of adapting, resilient to changes, aware of what changes and adaptations need to be made. They may experience transition as mostly positive, welcoming new challenges.

Changes in the child – they need to become 'school ready'.

Changes in the pre-school curriculum – preparing children for the next stage, Reception as the 'transition' year. New assemblage of desired practices will produce the desired 'school ready' child.

Changes in family practices - helping the child to become 'school ready'. Interventions – 'putting children on the path to SR' (Allen Report, 2011)

'Blame culture'

Initial Teacher Education is part of the problem - seen as promoting one view of Early Years practice, which 'downplayed the importance of reading, writing and mathematics for the under-fives in favour of play-based pedagogy and child-initiated learning'.

Ultimately it was considered that this prevented 'effective progression into Year 1' (p.29).

What solutions are offered, recommended or required?

Conduct and expectations – responsibilisation of the ECE workforce – school readiness, 'effective' practice/practitioners, planned and purposeful play with transition to direct, formal teaching.

EYFS determines content, coherence and control (Wood and Hedges, 2016)

Linear and hierarchical goals – (normative) development leads learning.

'Educational programme' (not a curriculum)

Writing Typical behaviour (EYFS, DfE, 2013)
40-60 months

Gives meaning to marks they make as they draw, write and paint.

Begins to break the flow of speech into words.

Continues a rhyming string.

Hears and says the initial sound in words.

Can segment the sounds in simple words and blend them together.

Links sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet.

Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning, representing some sounds correctly and in sequence.

Writes own name and other things such as labels, captions.

Attempts to write short sentences in meaningful contexts.

Early learning goal – Writing

Children use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds. They also write some irregular common words.

They write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible.

EYFS DfE (2017)

So… are practitioners assessing learning outcomes or are they assessing development?

*Practitioners must indicate whether children are **meeting expected levels** of development, or if they are **exceeding expected levels**, or **not yet reaching expected levels** ('emerging'). This is the EYFS Profile.* Statutory Framework for the EYFS, DfE. 2017

What is the evidence base for the atomisation of the complex skills needed for literacy, and for this assumed linear development?

What about emergent literacy, multi-literacies, multi-modality, trans-languaging, digital literacies, learning as transformative?

In the EYFS 'development leading learning' is understood at an individual level and foregrounds individual attainment. This draws on discourses of development as autonomous and individual processes.

This orientation does not account for how learning takes place in social contexts and as shared, collective processes, or how children may lead learning through collective activities such as play (learning leading development). 'Autonomy', 'independence' and 'agency' are always relational.

Both perspectives need to be seen in dialectical relationship – children and adults participating in learning communities with a range of social practices, knowledge and goals.

Dominant discourses - standards, outcomes and accountability.

Flawed and biased research to construct a version of SR that OFSTED will expect to see in inspections.

Circular discourses constructed through policy-led evidence (Kay, 2018; Kay, Wood, Nuttall & Henderson, 2019)

Does not engage with the problems of practice created by the policies. (Wood, 2019)

Inspection as surveillance. (Perryman, Maguire, Braun & Ball, 2018)

Normalisation – constructs differences and diversities as problematic.

What are the power effects of OFSTED being the 'sole arbiter of quality, and their biased use of policy-based evidence?

Reliability, credibility and trustworthiness of these reports.

Evidence on which they are based – circular discourses

Persuasion – coercion

(How) Can the ECE community act with, act back, and act against this circular policy logic? Alternative research reviews – e.g. BERA/TACTYC (2017) – diversities, complexities and uncertainties.

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