
Preschool or Prep School? Rethinking the Role of Early Years Education

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ABSTRACT Governments around the world continue to grapple with issues relating to how preschool services should be delivered, what type of provision is most appropriate, and for what purpose. These issues are particularly pertinent in a fast evolving early years sector such as the United Kingdom and many parts of the world where early years education has become a highly political topic. This article argues that given current emphasis on 'school readiness' and the formalisation of children's learning in England and internationally, tensions remain about the role of early years education and what it entails – as a nexus for enriching children's lives and learning experiences, or simply preparing children for schooling. Building on Genishi's work on rethinking dominant values of early years education and respecting the importance of inclusion and diversity, the discussion explores debates around assessment, pedagogy and the curriculum in supporting children's learning and how these are deeply embedded in wider societal values. The article calls for a rethinking of the role of early years education – the values, choices, and judgements that societies make which inform children's learning and the contexts in which they learn.

Introduction

This article has two aims. First, it discusses current debates around the role of early years education and emerging concerns about the increasing formalisation of preschool education, not least because of the 'top-down' nature of educational policies and growing societal pressures to improve educational outcomes at a global level. The article contends that these debates have relevance to the context of early years education in the United Kingdom (UK) and many parts of the world. Second, the article discusses the implications of these emerging debates on the role of early years education in supporting children's learning, with a focus on assessment, the curriculum, and how these impact on the role of early years professionals. The discussion argues for the importance of recognising the diverse contexts that shape children's learning, which are at times at odds with the prescriptive nature of government policies and curricular expectations. The article engages with the work of Celia Genishi and other major scholars in exploring the need to construct and negotiate pedagogical spaces for teaching and learning, especially when supporting children from diverse backgrounds (Genishi, 1992; Genishi & Goodwin, 2008; Genishi & Dyson, 2009, 2012). It calls for a rethinking of the role of early years education and proposes new considerations for early years practice.

A Starting Discussion: preschool or prep school?

Preschool education is, arguably, one of the most intensively debated topics in many societies. Public debates in various countries reveal the contentious nature of the subject particularly for the local community and society. Depicted in Figure 1 is the headline of a report featured in 28

September 2013 of *The Times*, a national newspaper in the UK. The title states, 'Tutors for tots as three-year-olds compete for places at private schools', with an accompanying sub-title 'Competition is fierce as demand booms'. The article reports a growing trend of parents hiring the services of private tutors for their children as young as aged three and four in order to 'prep' or prepare them for admissions tests to coveted places at preschools affiliated to highly selective primary and senior schools. These preschools are inadvertently exclusive, operating in the independent or private sector and accessible only to parents who are able to afford the annual fees and where the cost of the entry assessment alone varies from £50 to more than £100 (*The Times*, 2013).



Figure 1. 'Tutors for tots as three-year-olds compete for places at private school' (*The Times*, 28 September 2013).

In another newspaper report across the world, *The Straits Times*, a national newspaper of Singapore, reports a growing trend in the preschool sector where parents enroll their four to six year olds to two different preschools in a bid to prepare them for schooling (*The Straits Times*, 8 July 2012). With the featured headlines 'One child, two schools to attend', the article describes the daily routine of a local child:

At five years old, [Tom] has a school schedule that rivals that of his brother in Primary 1. He attends [Napin] kindergarten from 8am to 11.15am, and is then whisked off to his mother's car to a second kindergarten. Lessons at [Strand] kindergarten start at 11.30am so he changes uniform during the 15-minute car ride. ... While there are no national figures on the number of children who go to two kindergartens, parents and principals of preschools interviewed say it is not unusual these days for tots like Tom to attend two kindergartens a day. Principals said parents are becoming more kiasu, a colloquialism for 'afraid to lose out', and want their children to be well prepared for primary school.

The report highlights increasing pressures faced by parents in preparing their children to meet the demands of a competitive primary school system, with children attending up to two different preschools in the hope that extending the preschool experience will place them on the right track to a successful education.

The newspaper headlines are useful in encapsulating current debates about the role of early years education. Albeit from different parts of the world, the reports illustrate the tensions that surround early years education where a highly developed 'hot-house' environment, fuelled by parental and societal demands is being sustained. The reports highlight a number of issues. First, the dominance of neoliberal principles of choice and competition in a system where early years education is governed by a free (or semi-free) mixed economy as in the case of the UK, and parents are prolific consumers of the services in a market-led sector. The parents in the reports epitomise

the 'parents as consumers' profile described by Moss (2006), who contends that early years services are 'treated as private commodities for parents to purchase as consumers (the prevailing model in most of the English-language world)' (p. 33). The report from Singapore underscores a stratum of parents perpetuating a new mode of capitalism. These are parents who have the economic means to purchase more than one preschool service, and have a choice of which service to partake, an option that is available only to a select privileged few. The socio-economic discourse that the parents and families adhere to is a stark reminder of the impact of neoliberal values on the 'consumerist state' pervading the early childhood sector.

Second, the reports highlight the hallmarks of an education system driven by academic targets and attainment where children as young as three are being primed and tested for their academic abilities in preparation for the next stage of schooling. As both reports suggest, such a competitive and attainment-driven education system has inevitably influenced parental views of preschool education as a way of 'prepping' their children for schooling, even as far ahead as senior or secondary level. Gripped by the pressures of academic attainment, the parents in the reports fail to realise that education is much more than just pursuing stellar academic outcomes. The reports compel us to question and rethink our own beliefs and values of early years education. As this article argues, these pertinent philosophical, political and ethical questions need to be raised as crucial points of discussion not just nationally within the UK but internationally, in the wider context of ongoing global debates around early years education, and education in general.

The International Context

Early years education has become a major focus in many countries. A rapid review of the extant literature over the past two decades indicates that many countries share similar issues relating to the changing role of preschool education, contributing to a burgeoning body of research and scholarship around the area. Literature from the UK, Hong Kong, Australia and the USA have raised common concerns about the increasing formalisation of preschool education, and the dominance of a socio-economic, neoliberal discourse which has influenced the way early years education and education in general is shaped (Bialostok & Kamberelis, 2010; Dockett, 2010). In the USA for instance, academics have long debated and questioned the market-based principles that govern early childhood education and care where curricular developments since the 1980s have led to a growing emphasis on children's performance and achievement tests (Genishi, 1992; Genishi & Goodwin, 2008; Brown, 2009; Bialostok & Kamberelis, 2010; Soto & Tuinhof De Moed, 2011; Genishi & Dyson, 2012). In Australia, academics have critically examined policy reforms in the early childhood sector being driven by an economic and 'social investment' agenda, with emerging tensions around the differing demands on practitioners and the impact of this on early years services and children's learning (Ebbeck, 2003; Dockett, 2010; Irvine & Farrell, 2013).

The tensions facing early years education are all the more stark in countries where the sector is almost wholly privatised. In Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, academics have voiced apprehensions about the 'tremendous downward pressure' on early years' settings to adopt a target-oriented and formal academic curriculum, driven partly by parental demands to prepare children for admission into selective primary schools in a highly competitive education system (Chan & Chan, 2003, Fung & Cheng, 2012). Research undertaken by Fung and Cheng (2012) for example, reports on emerging tensions in regards to the role of early years education where parental expectations of schooling for their preschool children in Hong Kong are in conflict with government policies for early years education and pedagogy. The study shows that parents in Hong Kong perceive preschools as essentially a head start for the primary school system. This raises questions not just about the role of preschools in the society but the competing societal norms and values which shape the way early years education is perceived.

In keeping with emerging international policy trends, the rhetoric from world organisations seems to also focus increasingly on education and less on care, driven strongly by a 'productivity agenda'. International organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2006) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2010) use the term 'schoolification' to describe the downward pressures of school systems placed on the early years. Established in 1961 and 1945 respectively, the OECD

and UNESCO were set up in response to global calls for more cross-country dialogue to promote intergovernmental policies that improve the social and economic well-being of people and societies around the world, with early childhood education and care as a key part of the agenda.

A report by UNESCO (2010) which compares different integrated models of early childhood and care systems, refers explicitly to 'schoolification' as an 'enhanced risk' in today's society for *all education* systems, primarily because of the pressures facing the wider education sector with increased emphasis on preparation for schooling and the implications for teaching practices. The report states:

Widely expressed concerns about schoolification reflect a deep suspicion in many quarters about schooling, which should be a major cause for concern. To many, schools appear to be very conservative institutions, not open to change or even dialogue with ECCE [early childhood care and education]. Often the discourse is about how ECCE can provide 'preparation for school', rarely about whether and how the school might engage with and learn with ECCE (UNESCO, 2010, p. 119)

Raising similar concerns, the OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II* report cautions against growing global pressures in formalising early childhood education, arguing that early education is at risk of being driven by 'an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school' (p. 219). Scholars have likewise argued that such an interpretation of early years education presents a narrow view of children and childhood, informed in part by the purposeful positioning of the early years as a form of 'social investment' and early intervention to improve socio-economic outcomes for the wider benefit of society (Moss, 2006, 2013; Penn, 2008). Framed within an economic paradigm, a prevailing discourse is the role of early years education as a form of 'human capital' investment, with projected high levels of economic returns for future generations and the 'public good'. As a report by UNESCO (2007) states, 'From an economic viewpoint, investment in early childhood programmes offers a high pay-off in terms of human capital, so there is a strong case for public intervention' (p. 7). While recognising the importance of early childhood education and making the case for government investment, the overarching focus in such a discourse is that children are essentially perceived in their role as potentially productive individuals whose 'productivity' are important for the future of society, thereby creating an expectation to prepare children primarily for a productive future, and the role of early years education as a head-start for schooling and educational attainment.

In addition, increasing competition at a global level has also been a major factor in influencing the way early years education is shaped, and indeed the way education in general is viewed. Researchers have noted 'a dramatic change' in the development of educational policies driven by the process of internationalisation and globalisation where international comparisons are increasingly being made across education systems with greater competitiveness (Doyle, 2008; Gorur, 2011; Soh, 2014). Doyle (2008) asserts that there has been an exponential growth of large-scale international assessment studies in evaluating and comparing education systems across countries. Examples of such datasets include *The Global Education Digest* (UNESCO, 2011) which compares education statistics across the world and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scale. The scale offers an international survey of the target's country's educational performance and attainment scores, and is used by many governments as an international benchmark of educational outcomes and as leverage for shaping major educational policy (Doyle, 2009). The downward pressures on early childhood education in addressing these international targets are inevitable, with a major influence on emerging notions of 'schoolification'. While the availability of international comparative data may be rich in information and a useful resource in their comparative analysis of education inequalities, it has inadvertently had the adverse effect of fuelling a competitive 'global race' where governments become increasingly concerned with national ratings and maintaining a competitive edge in educational outcomes.

Given this international context, the role of early years education therefore needs to be considered against the backdrop of ongoing global debates. As the next section of this article will show, various global agendas have likely implications for many countries around the world including the UK which is witnessing changes in their educational policies towards a greater formalisation of children's learning, with associated pressures on assessment and learning outcomes. Within the field of early childhood research, past and present scholars internationally

whose works have sparked critical discussions around these complex and important issues have also been influential in shaping pertinent debates about the role of early years education. The work of Celia Genishi and other leading researchers to this extent have been seminal in informing a critical discourse in the field.

The Assessment and Curriculum Debate: the UK context

In the book *Ways of Assessing Children and Curriculum: stories of early childhood practice* (1992), Genishi presents an anthology of stories around the everyday experiences of teachers and children in a range of settings in the USA. The stories offer interesting vignettes about the ways in which successful learning can take place as a result of innovative practices in the early childhood classroom. The book discusses the role of assessment and the curriculum, the challenges as well as possibilities of supporting children's learning amidst various competing agendas outside the preschool setting. As Genishi (1992) states:

Life in many classrooms is steered by forces outside of the teacher and children. The origins of these forces – pressures – are multiple: there is pressure from agencies that fund early childhood programmes, from national mandates for accountability through standardised testing, from parents who want the best educations for their children, from other teachers and professionals whose needs are served by certain kinds of teaching and testing. (p. 5)

The pressures highlighted by Genishi, which emanate from various fronts including parental expectations, national mandates and prescribed regulations, resonate with current debates about the tensions facing early years education. In this context, Genishi's work was not only a fitting reflection of the time but is well rooted in the present. The issue of assessment – how and why we assess children's learning, and the implications of this on pedagogy and the curriculum, are perennial questions that strike at the core of early childhood education and care in all societies. These issues, Genishi articulates, are particularly important when working in diverse contexts, with children of varying abilities and backgrounds. Indeed, the notion of assessment and the curriculum continue to be trenchant issues in the field, and are embedded in international debates about the role of early years education.

Assessment, the process of monitoring and evaluating children's learning, is typically undertaken for a variety of purposes, for example to improve children's learning and progress, to evaluate pedagogical and curricula effectiveness, and to monitor particular trends in the service delivery of early years provision. As Genishi (1992) points out, assessing children's learning can be an important and valuable part of any curriculum and early childhood practice, but what is significant is not the unquestioning use of assessment itself, but the ways in which children are engaged appropriately in an empowering process where their diverse skills and abilities are recognised, and educators are able to explore alternative pedagogical strategies that support children's learning. Genishi makes a strong point about the inappropriate use of assessment as a tool for standardised testing often undertaken for the primary purpose of fulfilling policy expectations in order to achieve certain practical, instrumental adult-driven goals. She cautions against the use of assessment as a screening instrument to separate children in ability groups and the importance of challenging the often taken-for-granted rhetoric that testing is generally 'beneficial to young children themselves' (Genishi, 1992, p. 7).

Genishi's views of assessment and early years practice are particularly poignant, not least because of the continuing social and political ferment in societies where monitoring, measuring and assessing children's learning are increasingly widespread and commonplace. In England, a cause for much anxiety in the early years sector is the ubiquitous issue of assessment and the curriculum, and the extent to which a top-down nature of policy-development has influenced a highly prescriptive and assessment-driven early years climate.

Recent public debates in England have highlighted concerns about the changing role of early years education. In September 2013, a public campaign was launched by a group of leading professionals including academics, teachers, practitioners, and education advisors in response to emerging policy developments. Titled the 'Too Much Too Soon' campaign, over a hundred professionals voiced their concerns about the dominance of a 'school readiness' rhetoric and the government's seeming perception of early years education as simply a preparation for school. The

campaign revealed strong disquiet among stakeholders in the sector about the increasing use of baseline tests enforced upon children as young as four, and called for the early years to be re-established as a distinct stage in its own right. In an open letter to the national newspaper *The Telegraph* (2013), a statement from the campaigners state:

Instead of pursuing an enlightened approach informed by global best practice, successive Ministers have prescribed an ever-earlier start to formal learning. This can only cause profound damage to the self-image and learning dispositions of a generation of children. We as a sector are now uniting to demand a stop to such inappropriate intervention and that early years policy-making be put in the hands of those who truly understand the developmental needs and potential of young children ('Too Much Too Soon', [2013].
<http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/open-letter.html>)

A subsequent response by the Department of Education reported in *The Guardian* (2013) did little to assuage the surrounding furor. Referring to the campaign as a 'badly misguided lobby', which perpetuates 'the culture of low expectations in state schools', the government's rather dismissive response encapsulates the very tensions facing the sector, and the stark divisions in opinions about the role of early years education. Such tensions are symptomatic of the rapidly evolving sector, and have significant implications on the way early years education is shaped, not least in regards to the curriculum.

The *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (Department for Education (DfE), 2012a) is the statutory early years curriculum in England for all types of preschool settings including centre-based day care nurseries and child-minding or home-based child care provision. The introduction of the EYFS in 2008 and its subsequent revised version in 2012 could be perceived as a significant step forward in the government's commitment to early years education in ensuring a consistent quality of provision throughout England. It is significant that the document recognises the importance of providing 'a secure foundation' for all children through learning and development opportunities and affirms the important principle of equal opportunities, 'so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind' (DfE, 2012a, p. 2). The curriculum is clearly focused on providing the type of 'enabling environment' which will foster children's enjoyment of learning and engagement with an array of educational experiences. It also indicates the ways in which practitioners can provide opportunities for children to become active participants in their own learning and to 'develop and learn in different ways and at different rates' (DfE, 2012a, p. 3). The findings of a study on *Practitioners' Experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2010) indicated that the curriculum was generally welcomed by the majority of practitioners. The report states: 'The EYFS framework received high levels of support from all practitioner groups, and there is a broad consensus that it influences many aspects of daily practice, and improves the quality of experience for young children and their parents' (DfE, 2010, p. 1).

The merits of the curriculum have likewise been recognised by several academics in the early years sector. Pugh (2010) for instance, describes the potential role of the framework in pushing new boundaries for early years pedagogy:

The EYFS creates, for the first time, a statutory commitment to play-based, developmentally appropriate care and education for children between birth and five years of age, together with a regulatory framework aimed at raising quality in all settings and amongst all providers. (Pugh, 2010, p. 8)

Moyles (2009) highlights the significance of the framework as reaching a watershed moment in the field, 'To have the uniqueness of each child "validated", so to speak, through the Early Years Foundation Stage and Every Child Matters is an important step forward, particularly for policy-makers' (Moyles, 2009, p. 23). The curriculum has immense implications for the early years sector and its central tenets are encouraging to many who work in the field, whether as practitioners, academics or other professionals engaging with young children and families. An important rhetoric underpinning the EYFS and acknowledged by the early years community is the central notion that a quality preschool experience can make a difference to children's development, and at a broader level, its possible impact on wider national reforms such as improving outcomes for all children and reducing social inequalities, especially those who are disadvantaged.

However, while there is an apparent commitment by the UK government to raise the status and quality of early years education, major challenges remain, particularly in regard to assessment and pedagogy. Academics in the field argue that the introduction of a mandatory standardised curriculum has inadvertently influenced a greater formalisation of the early years curriculum in England, with increasing emphasis on educational attainments, assessment and learning goals, thereby devaluing the early years experience for young children (Pugh, 2010; Rose & Rogers, 2012; Faulkner & Coates, 2013). A prevailing argument is that the overriding aim of the EYFS is ultimately to prepare children academically for school and achieve prescribed educational targets. The argument is hard to refute when explicitly written and reinforced in the curriculum document is the aim of promoting 'teaching and learning to ensure children's "school readiness", their progress against expected levels, and their readiness for Year 1' (DfE, 2012a, p. 2).

An integral part of the documentation of the EYFS is the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), which is essentially an assessment record documenting each child's learning progression (DfE, 2013). All practitioners working with four to five year olds are required to complete the profile for individual children as a formal assessment of their development. The profile consists of 17 early learning goals against which all children are assessed, and practitioners are expected to judge whether a child is meeting the required level of development at the end of the reception year or the first year of primary schooling according to three bands: the expected level (expected), exceeding this level (exceeding), or not yet reaching this level (emerging) (DfE, 2013). Given the emphasis on development and progression, it could be argued that even though the principles of 'learning through play' underpins the curriculum as a whole, the profile that is used alongside the curriculum is essentially a formalised tool for monitoring and assessment to gauge levels of children's attainment.

Exacerbating the situation, a new statutory phonics screening check for five to six year olds was introduced in September 2011, amidst much controversy (DfE, 2012b). The check consists of an assessment of phonic decoding, where children will be required to read aloud a list of word structures and grapheme-phoneme such as 'a', 'c', 'ch', 'oo' and 'sh' as a way of assessing if they have acquired the skills of phonic decoding to an appropriate standard to become effective readers. An *Assessment Framework for the Development of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check* (DfE, 2012b) stipulated by the DfE's Standards and Testing Agency sets out the indicative performance descriptors and exercises which teachers are expected to use for the screening check or test, where children's responses are recorded and scored at the end of the test. Appendix 1 provides an extract from the assessment framework which shows some of the descriptors and content used in the check. An accompanying evidence paper published around the time sets out the government's rationale for the new screening regime, as a way of tackling a wider issue of literacy and regaining the country's position in the international league tables for reading. The report states:

The PISA 2009 Study 'How Big is the Gap?' highlights how far England has slipped behind other nations in reading. GCSE pupils' reading is more than a year behind the standard of their peers in Shanghai, Korea and Finland. Overall, in the last nine years, England has fallen in PISA's international tables from 7th to 25th in reading. This decline is reflected in the skills of England's workforce. ... For all these reasons, tackling reading failure is an urgent priority for the Department for Education (p. 1).

The paper goes on to reinforce the importance of the phonics screening check and its implementation from June 2012 onwards as a way of monitoring individual children's levels of reading and literacy, and to provide 'a national benchmark for phonic decoding, so that schools can judge their performance against the national average' (p. 5). The impetus for the phonics check is clear, which is essentially to measure children's literacy performance against expected educational outcomes.

Thus, even as the intended principles of the curriculum espouse an exploratory play-based approach to the curriculum, they seem at odds with expectations set out in the standardised targets and tests stipulated in the current assessment and curricular reforms. It could be argued that these issues are symptomatic of the wider educational landscape in England where children's learning in schools is predominantly measured against a single benchmark of assessment, exemplified through the Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) given nationally to all children in England at the end of year 2 (age 7), year 6 (age 11) and year 9 (age 14). It seems almost impossible that the strong

assessment culture that exists in schooling in the wider education context in England does not create pressures on the early years. The expectations of children to achieve in the national tests inevitably contribute to the drive for a more formal curriculum, focused mainly on core aspects of learning such as literacy and numeracy.

Indeed, there is research in the field to show that the pressure for schools to ensure that students meet nationally prescribed educational targets is so great that the pedagogy of supporting children's learning during the early years is increasingly formalised and academic, relegating early years education to a type of 'prep'-school (Aubrey, 2004; Pugh, 2010; Bradbury, 2012; Smith, 2012; Faulkner & Coates, 2013). As Pugh (2010) contends, 'the downwards pressure of Key Stage 1 into reception classes, together with poorer adult-child ratios in those classes, is creating a less than ideal situation for many four-year-olds' (p. 9). Distinct changes in curriculum and pedagogy between the early years and primary school, from a play-based to a more formal approach also lead to transition challenges for children when settling into a new school environment (White & Sharp, 2007). Despite calls for clearer links, the EYFS remains largely distinct from the primary school curriculum, where issues of continuity or rather discontinuity between the two phases of education remains. The relationship or partnership between the early years and schooling, and the integration of curriculum and pedagogy between the two phases of education in facilitating children's transition is also ambiguous. Within an assessment-driven education system, the danger is that the notion of children's learning and education, as exemplified through the EYFS and its accompanying assessment frameworks, is relegated to a checklist of requisite skills that describe children's competence or lack of competence at school age entry. The overall concern is that the focus on children's overall well-being and holistic educational experience is somewhat lost in the drive towards targets and attainment, especially when assessment is used as a policy tool in education.

Moving Forwards: rethinking the role of early years education

This article has so far problematised and critiqued dominant discourses of early years education, in particular with regards to assessment and the curriculum. While it is important that these issues are brought to the fore, just as pertinent is the exploration of alternative possibilities in our rethinking of early years education. The discussion in this section offers two considerations. First, to advocate for a more holistic approach to assessment and the curriculum with a renewed focus on the affective domains of children's learning; and second, to consider resistive steps that early years professionals may take in reclaiming their autonomy in practice by exploring differentiated and innovative approaches to assessment and the curriculum, and recognising practitioners' tacit knowledge and understandings of early years education that can significantly influence the way children's learning is shaped. My interest here is to emphasise the importance of finding critical spaces from which to consider how we may disrupt the hegemony of imposing external discourses in order to uncover alternative approaches to early years education and practice.

The discussion at the start of this article established that the intersections between assessment and the curriculum are crucial determinants of young children's learning and early years experience. Researchers past and present have long established that assessing children's learning does not entail a simple straightforward approach concerning how children meet pre-set goals or educational targets, but a holistic approach focusing on how children's learning is supported by the relevant pedagogy (Dewey, 1939; Genishi, 1992; Carr, 2001; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Genishi & Goodwin, 2008; Cowie & Carr, 2009; Genishi & Dyson, 2009, 2012). The complexities of children's development and the many variables that influence learning and development suggest that there needs to be a differentiated approach to assessment and the curriculum.

Research shows the importance of taking into account a holistic and 'affective dimension' to children's learning, rather than a cognitive-driven approach (Claxton, 1990; Laevers, 2000; Claxton & Carr, 2002; Ball, 2003; Crick et al, 2004). Laevers (2000) for example, contends that the social and emotional development of children is first and foremost an important foundation to establishing positive learning experiences and dispositions. Laevers' (2000) research shows that children's emotional health and well-being leads them to become more driven learners who are able to focus their energies on the task at hand. His argument is that the emotional wellbeing of the child is a fundamental aspect of learning and development, and that children need to be emotionally secure

to achieve 'deep level learning' (Laevers, 2000, p. 21) Along similar lines, Claxton and Carr (2002) make a distinction between children's disposition for learning and capacity for learning, suggesting that educational outcomes for children should encompass more than just cognition but the ability to become ready, active and willing participants in a rapidly changing world. Rather than academic and cognitive outcomes, children should be supported to acquire affective learning dispositions that would provide them with the foundations to become lifelong learners (Claxton, 1990).

There is also research which shows the multifaceted and situated nature of learning, and the myriad ways in which children learn from their active and sustained engagement with the world around them (Dewey, 1939; Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Katz, 1993; Gauvain, 2001; Rogoff, 2003). Dewey (1939) for example, contends that education cannot be divorced from real-world life experiences, but that learning takes place most effectively through social interactions when students and children are engaged in the community and in their varied sociocultural settings. I look here also to the work of Genishi (Genishi, 1992; Genishi & Dyson, 2009) which shows that learning takes place amidst the relationships and interactions that children participate in daily and this includes not just the relationships between the children and practitioners, but also the interactions between the children, their families and communities. As such, the notion of assessment and the curriculum needs to be conceptualised beyond the confines of any formalised or homogeneous framework of learning but to focus more overtly on the wider contexts of learning, the relationships between children and their environment, and the different ways in which children build and participate in the complex and reciprocal relationships around them.

Given the extant research, there is an urgent need to reconceptualise the role of early years education – what it is for and for whose benefit, in particular with regards to assessment and the curriculum. This article contends that a critical challenge is the need to discern and communicate clearly the purpose for which assessments and curricula are being created and for whom. In the context of England, what is perhaps limited in a standardised mandated curriculum such as the EYFS (DfE, 2012a) is the scope to take into account children's learning and competencies in other learning contexts beyond the classroom, which can have an equally profound effect on children's overall progress and development. It could be maintained that by assessing through prescribed learning goals, whether intentional or unintentional, is a way of streaming children into ability groups, as a baseline predictor of children's later performance in school. The over-reliance on assessment is also likely to distract from the richness of children's informal and spontaneous learning from a wide range of social and cultural contexts to which they are exposed in various everyday experiences such as the family, community and various environments outside the classroom and curriculum; thereby perpetuating the disconnect in children's experiences between their homes, communities and early years settings that some research have revealed (Brooker, 2002; Hedges et al, 2011).

Given the weight of evidence on the contextual and situated nature of learning, it is therefore important to understand the integrated ecology of social, emotional, cultural and cognitive qualities that are so crucial to children's learning and their overall well-being, especially in the context of increasing diversity. Researchers have argued that within the context of a prescribed curriculum and standardised educational goals, the learning environment needs to adequately take into account individual differences and children's diverse learning dispositions (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008; Goodwin et al, 2008; Stires & Genishi, 2008; Ang, 2010; Petriwskyj, 2010). Genishi's research is particularly poignant here as she alerts us to the importance of being responsive to children's differing backgrounds and abilities, especially in an educational environment driven by targets and goals, as 'traditional assessment tests, which are problems that outsiders set for us, fail to measure significant aspects of children's growth and learning' (Genishi, 1992, p. 2). Extending to Genishi's later work, Genishi and Goodwin (2008) caution that 'children are at risk of failing in school when curricula leave no room for their multiple interests and identities' (p. 278). As such, there needs to be a systemic shift from a narrow skills-based, outcomes approach to assessment to a much broader ecological perspective to children's learning and development.

Implicit in the debate surrounding early years education is also the role of the early years professional and the implications for practice. Researchers in the field have long argued that the increased emphasis on assessment is evidence of a wider system of policy-driven regulation, that is symptomatic of an educational system concerned primarily with accountability and academic

attainment rather than about education as a learning process for later life (Genishi, 1992; Ball, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Faulkner & Coates, 2013). Genishi and Dyson (2009) for example, highlight the apparent disconnect between the realities of early years practice and government policies where '[t]he terrain of early childhood classrooms has been notably eroded by the cumulative pressures for accountability in education' (p. 3). Their research reveals the daily challenges faced by early years educators who grapple with the pressures of looming academic assessments and who feel compelled to make compromises in their pedagogical choices to account for the demands of a mandated curriculum.

In England, the role of early years professionals remains at the core of debates about assessment and the curriculum. The EYFS has been described as symbolising 'the imposition of neo-liberal conceptions of professional accountability into this phase of the education sector' where teachers and practitioners are subject to being monitored and regulated, and their performance measured by the standards stipulated in the curriculum framework (Bradbury, 2012, p. 175). Referring to the education sector in general, Ball (2003) describes the current heightened climate of professional accountability, targets and measurability as 'misleadingly objective and hyper-rational' which serves only to undermine and devalue teachers' personal beliefs and commitment in favour of managerial calculations (Ball, 2003, p. 217). Ball's analysis of educational discourse is significant in challenging the notion that targets and assessments necessarily raise standards and improve children's outcomes, but conversely, they merely reflect a prevalent assumption or accepted 'truth' about children's learning and development.

In considering the role of the practitioner, Genishi's research is also highly relevant in influencing new paradigms for practitioners to rethink their pedagogy and curricular approaches, to better understand and support children's learning. A consistent thread throughout Genishi's work is the intrinsic value of supporting children's learning through the exploration of innovative practices and different ways of negotiating the agency and power of both children and practitioners in the classroom. Urging practitioners to look beyond the state mandated objectives, Genishi argues that early years professionals must engage children's interests and learning outside the boundaries of narrowly defined curricula and support alternative means of assessment (Genishi, 1992). This includes using a combination of both informal and formal assessments, and employing their professional ability and autonomy to 'see where children are' in their learning and progress, rather than relying on traditional standardised tests (Genishi, 1992, p. 14). Practitioners should be encouraged to explore and initiate differentiated assessment approaches using a wide spectrum of activities within and outside the curriculum. Practitioners can then respond to children's learning in a way that is guided by appropriate goals that are relevant to children's diverse contexts and abilities, and not merely by the contents of a standardised curriculum or assessment framework.

The work of Freire (1970) on the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is useful here in reminding us of the importance in reclaiming practitioners' autonomy in initiating and enacting effective pedagogies. Freire's work suggests that the act of teaching, learning and interacting is not a mechanical process but one that involves human relationships and interactions. Pedagogy and supporting children's learning is a social process which best takes place in a context where the human ability to compare, judge and make pedagogical decisions is exercised, not when learning, teaching and practice is conditioned by policy and statutory requirements. To this extent, Bruner's concept of 'folk pedagogy' is crucial in recognising the value of practitioners' implicit knowledge and practices of pedagogy and children's learning that are often not explicitly documented in the written curriculum (Bruner, 1996). The hidden and unofficial curriculum of embedded sociocultural beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning is equally or even more important in guiding practitioners in their work with the children. There needs to be legitimate spaces within the curriculum that recognise practitioners' tacit understanding of their own sociocultural pedagogies of how children learn and how best to support their learning. Just as important, practitioners need to be alert and responsive to the possibility that external demands for accountability can encroach negatively on intuitive and responsive pedagogical practices, and feel empowered and confident to negotiate these demands in their everyday interactions with the children. In the context of the EYFS (DfE, 2012a), a key question remains – if the curriculum is meant as a guide for practitioners, then surely part of the intention is to encourage practitioner reflection and autonomy, so that professionals can critically analyse and consider their own practice in order to generate, evaluate and produce their own understandings of early years education and pedagogy, so that professional

and sociocultural knowledge, and personal experience can be interwoven into new innovative practice.

In a neoliberal era of productivity and competing national agendas, the notion of early years education and what it entails has become all the more complex. Genishi and Dyson's (2009) caution against the imposition of a 'one-size fits all' set of homogeneous assessments and curricula created for young learners whose living experiences and realities are marked by great diversity and difference in terms of culture, language, ability and other social markers. The key question is to what extent a standardised curriculum with pre-set goals is able to make allowances for diverse learners with varying abilities, and for whom learning and the acquisition of knowledge may well deviate from 'the average or norm'. To this extent, the need to rethink the role of early years education – what it is and what it is not, how it is shaped and delivered, and whom it is for, is crucial and timely.

Conclusion

As the newspaper reports described at the start of this article reveal, there are global issues that influence and at times inhibit the way early years education is shaped. A declaration by UNICEF states, 'Choices made and actions taken on behalf of children during this critical period affect not only how a child develops but also how a country progresses (UNICEF, 2006). In a fast developing early years sector imbued with a rapid pace of change in policy and legislation, it is imperative that crucial questions are asked and difficult choices are made about the role of early years education at both a national and international level – what it is for, how it should be delivered, and whose benefit it ultimately serves. As the debates around early years education rage on, this article does not attempt to offer simple solutions. However, what it does argue is that in order to safeguard the over-riding principles of preschool education as a way of providing children with the opportunities of an inclusive, equitable and enriching early experience, those of us who have responsibilities for children, indirectly or directly, are required to rethink our own practice and values, and advocate for what we rightly believe to be the role of early years education in the best interest of children's well-being and development.

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APPENDIX

The content domain for the Year 1 phonics screening check is defined in the two sections below.

3.2.1 Section 1

Section 1 will contain words using the following grapheme-phoneme correspondences.

Grapheme	Phoneme	Example word
a	/æ/	cat
ar	/ɑ:/	arm
b	/b/	bad
c	/k/	cat
ch	/tʃ/	check
ck	/k/	check
d	/d/	dog
e	/e/	hen
ee	/i:/	see
f	/f/	if
ff	/f/	puff
g	/g/	gum
h	/h/	how
i	/ɪ/	hit

10 Year 1 phonics screening check assessment framework

Grapheme	Phoneme	Example word
j	/dʒ/	jug
k	/k/	key
l	/l/	leg
ll	/l/	hill
m	/m/	man
n	/n/	man
ng	/ŋ/	sing
o	/ɒ/	hot
oi	/ɔɪ/	coin
oo	/u:/ & /ʊ/	room & book*
or	/ɔ:/	born
p	/p/	pet
qu	/k/ /w/	quit
r	/r/	red
s	/s/ & /z/	sit & hens
sh	/ʃ/	she
ss	/s/	miss
t	/t/	tea
th	/θ/ & /ð/	both & this
u	/ʌ/ or /ʊ/	cup**
v	/v/	vet
w	/w/	wet
x	/k/ /s/	mix
y	/j/	yes
z	/z/	zip
zz	/z/	buzz

* In some regions the 'oo' in book is the same phoneme as in room. The phoneme intended here is the same as the 'u' in put. **All regional pronunciations are acceptable.

Source: Department for Education (DfE) (2012b) Assessment Framework for the Development of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, pp. 9-10.

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