

Time to listen to fresh advice

The removal of the old guard at the Department for Education provides us with hope that the new ministers will take counsel from different sources, ones that have children's welfare at their hearts.



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GOODNESS, WHAT a month it has been. We have now seen the demotion of Michael Gove, the moving of Liz Truss, the installation of two new ministers and the sacking of Mr Gove's special advisors (SPADS). All, apparently, because David Cameron's three new election gurus reported back that the aggressive, anti-teacher, child and family policies of the current department have alienated the electorate. How sad that it takes an election to make those in power take stock of what really matters to the people that they represent.

I have no doubt that Gove believed that his policies were beneficial, nor do I question Liz Truss's clear abilities as a politician, but I do seriously question the level to which politicians are now intervening in the early years, which we all know is the single most important period of human development. I also have significant concerns about the lack of transparency and rigour that Gove's department applied to their own advisory processes and use of evidence.

Within three years we have seen expert concerns and advice summarily dismissed, the recommendations of two major consultations ignored and, despite widespread opposition, a serious attempt to increase ratios. We have recently had to respond to the idea of two-year-olds in schools, with universal childcare being prioritised by both parties. The idea is acceptable in principle – there are some great systems in evidence elsewhere in the world – but these are backed with many years of substantial cultural and financial investment in family life, together with early years workforces that have both high pay and status.

Other countries also understand that, until the age of six, young children need to be in highly creative, social and play-based environments that allow them the time and space to mature their physiology and neurology, and to develop the learning dispositions, belief systems and mindsets that will then serve them though life.

Exposing our youngest children to developmentally inappropriate and unnatural pressures risks compromising the motivations that underpin positive learning and development. Thus, we can force a child to do the tasks that we want, but at the cost of the enjoyment of that task in later life. The ongoing English obsession with literacy and numeracy is a betrayal of the extraordinary competencies of children and is exacerbated by an increasingly intrusive and overly cognitively-focused inspection system. I do not doubt Michael Wilshaw's commitment to raising

standards, nor his own belief that he is serving the needs of children, but statements, such as his accusation that the sector is against the word 'teaching' and that it is 'setting up play and learning as opposites' reveals a worrying lack of understanding, especially from someone who is in a position of influence. He is also a supporter of baseline testing that has been unanimously challenged by a range of experts as both potentially damaging to children and statistically invalid.

We must hope that the new incumbents at the DfE take the time to listen to those that have real expertise in the early years and to look at the global evidence.

We all know that the situation in England is a complex one. We know that we have a long history of excellence in early years provision, but that the sector currently lacks consistency. We know that disadvantaged children benefit most from early intervention, but that there is problem with both affordability and accessibility. We know that the single most important thing is quality – and for that we need highly qualified practitioners – but we cannot afford to pay them. But, most of all, we know that what children need most is loving and secure relationships, especially within their own families.

The danger of a head-long rush into state childcare, especially without an appropriate understanding of the developmental sciences and genuine commitment to quality, is that we may see the kind of results that were initially reported in Canada by the National Bureau of Economic Research – a rise of child anxiety of between 60 and 150 percent, a decline in motor/social skills of between eight and 20 percent, and stressed families manifesting in more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse adult mental health, and lower relationship satisfaction for mothers.

The issue is simply too important for us to get wrong and we counsel the new minister to take his time in engaging new and more balanced advisory groups that look at all the evidence, rather than that which serves a particular political agenda, and that he ensures that the health and wellbeing of children and families is always put first.

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Useful resources

- Canada's Universal Childcare Hurt Children and Families, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006 Digest: www.nber.org/digest/jun06/w11832.html