

It is time for something new

Rather than misguided and barbed attacks on the early years sector that wants the best for children, by ministers who are being badly advised, we need to move educational policy making beyond politics.



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THESE LAST few weeks have been fascinating, since the Save Childhood Movement's Early Years Education Group launched the 'Too Much Too Soon Campaign', which has produced a highly supported online petition and a lobby at the Houses of Parliament. The campaign began with an Open Letter to *The Telegraph*, signed by 127 eminent experts, including Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, former children's commissioner for England and Professor Emeritus of Child Health, University College London; many other professors, numerous PhD academics, the leaders of our major early years organisations, senior practitioners, well-known writers, early years campaigners and the heads of the major unions.

The aim of the letter was to question aspects of what was seen as developmentally inappropriate policy-making, to provide supporting evidence and to initiate a fully informed debate leading to the changes necessary to protect the developmental rights of the young child. It received enormous national coverage and support, and the signatories carried out about 25 interviews over the following two days.

What followed was, however, both unexpected and deeply worrying. As mentioned in last month's editorial [*eye*, *Rhetoric over reason will not fool sector*, November 2013], instead of acknowledging the depth of concern expressed by the sector, the DfE issued a number of highly dismissive and contemptuous statements, calling the signatories 'misguided' and that they were 'bleating pop psychology about self-image'. Elizabeth Truss wrote an article that said the signatories were 'outlining a vision for a learning-free world. In this utopia, children shouldn't start learning until they're 6 or 7'. She called the signatories 'prophets of dumbing-down' who 'maintain a veneer of professional respectability' and called the group's suggestions 'misguided, regressive, inaccurate and superstitious'.

What became increasingly evident to the signatories, as they watched the various interviews and saw the government's responses, is that key advisors and representatives had a highly disturbing lack of true understanding about the early years and an alarming lack of openness to dialogue. This is unacceptable in any professional field, but particularly so when we are talking about the rights and wellbeing of children.

For me, what has now become equally important to the issues raised, are the values that are being demonstrated by those in power. Most of the responses that we received were more suited to the bullying tactics of the playground than to an open-hearted,

rigorously evidenced debate about what best serves the needs of the child. If we were to list them they would include: Power, control, aggression, arrogance, contempt, ridicule and a total lack of respect for anyone challenging current policy.

I can understand the difficult position that ministers and under secretaries of state are put in when they are given authority over areas about which they have no expertise – it leaves them totally reliant on their advisors. They are then told what research to quote, what tactics to use and what they can and cannot say in any interviews. It is a system that is totally reliant on the reliability, balance and rigour of the evidence – which is why it is so essential that this evidence is totally transparent. They are also substantially influenced by their own backgrounds and value systems that will make them more likely to feel comfortable with the systems that they themselves are the results of. This does not mean, however, that these systems are the right ones for the wellbeing of a nation.

This has all convinced me that we now need to move educational decision-making above the manipulations of party politics and, beyond the initial aims of the campaign, the movement is calling for the creation of a new National Council on the Science of Human Learning and Development that can consolidate all that we know about the biology, psychology and neurology of learning and wellbeing, and that can become a centre of global excellence.

In this way, we can give this extraordinarily important field of early human development its true prominence, we can highlight the importance of the adults that share the learning journeys of the child, we can give them the support and respect they deserve and we can ensure that the values of the system are aligned to the best of human character and potential.

Article 3 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that: 'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration', and we need to ensure that this is the case. This is not about any one group being right or wrong, it is about what truly serves the wellbeing of children and the creation of a healthy, meaningful society.

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Useful resources

- Read more about the Too Much Too Soon Campaign here www.toomuchtoosoon.org