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Critical Guides for
Teacher Educators



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Elise Alexander
Mary Briggs
Catharine Gilson
Gillian Lake
Helena Mitchell
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ABOUT THE EDITORS AND AUTHORS

ABOUT THE SERIES EDITOR



Ian Menter is Emeritus Professor of Teacher Education and was formerly the director of Professional Programmes in the department of education at the University of Oxford. He previously worked at the Universities of Glasgow, the West of Scotland, London Metropolitan, the West of England and Gloucestershire. Before that he was a primary school teacher in Bristol, England. His most recent publications include *A Companion to Research in Teacher Education* (edited with Michael Peters and Bronwen Cowie) and *Learning to Teach in England and the United States* (Tatto, Burn, Menter, Mutton and Thompson). His work has also been published in many academic journals.

ABOUT THE BOOK EDITOR



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Catharine Gilson is senior lecturer in early childhood education at Oxford Brookes University. She has experience of teaching across a range of courses including the early years strand of the Postgraduate Course in Education (PGCE) and the early childhood studies degree. She has previously worked as a teacher and as a local authority early years advisory teacher. Her doctorate focused on the learning and teaching relationship between adults and three- to five-year-old children and other research interests include children's rights and children's voice and observational methods.

Gillian Lake was a primary teacher in Ireland for many years before first undertaking an MSc in child development and education, and then being awarded the Talbot Scholarship to read a doctorate of philosophy in education at the University of Oxford, focusing on the early years. Her research comprised the design, development and evaluation of an oral language intervention targeting vocabulary and narrative development, of children aged three to four years. The results have been promising and she hopes to further investigate the possibility of introducing this intervention as a professional development tool for early years' practitioners. She

has an ongoing research interest in early childhood education, oral language interventions, narrative development, pretend play and emerging literacy. She leads child development 1 and 2 on early childhood studies and child development and learning on BA Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

Helena Mitchell is currently a visiting fellow at Oxford Brookes University. She is vice chair (research and knowledge exchange) and treasurer for the early childhood studies degrees network, a voluntary organisation that brings together institutions across the UK which run degrees in early childhood studies. Prior to taking on this role she was head of the school of education at Oxford Brookes University, having previously been head of the department of early childhood and primary education. She led the primary Postgraduate Course in Education (PGCE) programme and also the early childhood studies degree when it was introduced at Oxford Brookes in 2000. She has extensive experience as a classroom teacher. She is a member of British Education Research Association (BERA), Teachers of Accounting at Two-Year College (TACTYC) and the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), and a trustee of Peeples, a charity that supports parents and children learning together. Her most recent research has focused on graduates from early childhood studies degrees and their transition to professional status as teachers and leaders in early years' settings. She is also currently involved in a research project on values and beliefs in primary education, a collaborative partnership with primary teachers.

Nick Swarbrick is programme lead for the undergraduate degrees in the school of education, teaching on the undergraduate degree in early childhood studies and the primary Postgraduate Course in Education (PGCE), principally around early years pedagogy. He has a research and teaching role in children's literature and how young children explore the outdoors environment. Nick holds an associate teaching fellowship at the university and is a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Prior to joining Oxford Brookes he was headteacher of a multi-cultural nursery school in Oxford city, which pioneered the Forest School project in Oxfordshire and supported a school-based Initial Teacher Training Scheme.

FOREWORD

Historically, the early years sector of educational provision has been characterised by an enormous paradox. It is the sector where all the foundations of learning are laid and has been consistently demonstrated to have great significance for later educational success (Sylva et al, 2010). Yet at the same time it has often been undervalued and treated as less demanding for the staff who work in this sector rather than in other parts of the education system (Moyles, 2001). That this paradox persists into the twenty-first century is both disconcerting and alarming. The best early years practice, whether it be in schools, day nurseries or elsewhere, is only achieved through the development of considerable skill and knowledge by those who practice therein, whether they be teachers, early years practitioners or classroom assistants.

It is therefore a great pleasure to welcome this new volume into the series of *Critical Guides for Teacher Educators*. Mary Wild and her colleagues at Oxford Brookes University offer us a collection of invaluable insights into the challenges faced by early years practitioners and offer many suggestions about how those who are educating those practitioners may encourage the development of the qualities required. This collection is imbued with a deep sense of the ethical, social and emotional responsibilities of early years practitioners, as well as the very real cognitive demands that working in this sector produces. It also recognises the importance of inter-professional collaboration in this sector and the crucial importance of effective communication with children's parents and carers.

In short, this book – *Professional dialogues in the early years: Re-discovering early years pedagogy and principles* offers a redress to those who undervalue the sector and will be of immense value to those who have responsibility for cultivating future generations of high-quality staff to work with the youngest children.

Ian Menter, Series Editor
Emeritus Professor of Teacher Education, University of Oxford

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 1 | INTRODUCTION: CURRENT CONTEXTS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

Mary Wild

CRITICAL ISSUES

- *What are the issues and challenges facing educators* in working with students* in the early years sector?*
- *How can educators support their students in a way that recognises and is responsive to the voice and needs of the students?*
- *Why is it important to emphasise critical reflection and professional dialogue based on principles and values rather than competences in early years education?*

**Definitions: The terminology used to denote roles within the early years sector range widely and this is replicated in the diverse terminology that can be applied to those who contribute to their professional development. For the sake of simplicity this book will adopt the term 'educators' to refer to those who provide training and professional development and 'students' and sometimes 'professionals' to refer those who are being supported through training or professional development.*

Introduction

In order to provide nurturing and enabling environments for young children to learn and flourish emotionally and socially as well as cognitively, it is imperative that teachers and practitioners make well-informed and thoughtful decisions about the experiences they provide for the children in their care. There is no shortage of texts that steer or guide professionals working in the early years towards acquiring particular skills and competencies or particular pedagogic approaches but there are fewer texts that seek to open up debates about the underlying assumptions and evidence base to inform practice. There are even fewer texts that are addressed primarily towards educators who are responsible for guiding and supporting students across what has become an increasingly complicated and often fast-changing backdrop of policy and provision for the training of those already working in the early years sector as well as those seeking to join the sector's workforce.

The purpose of this book is to provide educators for the early years sector with a starting point for supporting students that is not driven by the most recent set of approved standards and competences but rests, more surely perhaps, upon a set of fundamental principles and philosophies for early years pedagogy and that fosters critical reflection and professional dialogue on the nature of early years education. The book will be framed by a principle of continued professional dialogue as integral to, and essential for, effective practice. In order to have professional dialogue professionals need to have an informed and principled knowledge base to draw upon and the critical skills to interrogate and evaluate these sources of knowledge. This book will also take an ethical standpoint that considers the child to be an active agent in their own learning, whose views and opinions as well as fundamental needs must be the cornerstone of education in the early years. This principle will be extrapolated to the students with whom teacher educators work, whose voice and agency in their own development should be similarly respected and reflected, which is not to say that as educators we should never challenge our students' views. This book will provide early years teacher educators with critical guidance to explore enduring philosophies and principles of early years pedagogy and to creatively interpret and communicate these to those they are training to be teachers and professionals in these crucial early years of children's development and education.

In this opening chapter some of the current context for professional development in early education is outlined but the emphasis is less on specific policy initiatives, which may always be subject to change but on some rather more deep-seated trends and issues that challenge those working to educate others within the sector and which highlight some perennial tensions in developing the professional profile of the sector as well as the professional identities of those within it.

A context of change

Over the past two decades the early years sector has experienced an unprecedented degree of focus and attention from policy-makers of all political persuasions, both nationally and internationally. This attention has included a foregrounding of professional training and qualifications across the sector. These developments are charted in a joint review of early years research published by British Education Research Association (BERA) and Teachers of Accounting at Two-Year College (TACTYC) in 2017, which is highlighted in the recommended reading to be found at the end of this chapter (BERA/TACTYC, 2017). One of the most recent qualifications introduced in England is the Early Years Teacher (EYT) status and the antecedents of this initiative are captured in a paper by Henshall et al (2018), which also provides a useful review of the development of early years qualifications in England. This drive towards a greater level of workforce qualifications in the early years is repeated elsewhere in the world and a number of studies located in other countries are also included as recommended reading. However, it is not the intention to review these policy developments in depth in this chapter, partly because they are already so expertly summarised (BERA/TACTYC, 2017, Henshall et al, 2018) but more importantly because this book is intended to support educators in a manner that can maintain the focus on principles and understanding that are relevant irrespective of particular policy initiatives or

qualifications that can readily be altered by a change of government or at the instigation of regulatory authorities.

Of course it would be foolish to pretend that our work as educators exists in a policy vacuum and so although specific policies and qualifications will not be singled out it is important to draw attention to some underlying trends and challenges that are apparent in policy-making and pertinent to the ways in which we educate students and professionals in the early years. These include a series of contentious issues such as what constitutes quality in early years and how it is seen to drive policy, a trend towards school readiness as a principal aim of early years education and associated debates about the relative balance to be struck between education and care imperatives in working with our youngest children. We shall return to these debates that have intensified in recent decades but first let us consider some more enduring characteristics of the early years workforce.

Continuities in professional contexts

Despite the policy imperative towards a more qualified workforce in early years there remain some persistent features of the early years workforce that will impact the ways in which educators are able to work. In an article examining the distinction between *'being a professional'* as opposed to *'practising professionally'* Dyer (2018) highlights figures from the Department for Education (DfE, 2017), which show that over 80 per cent of early years provision remains in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. This means that substantial variations remain in regard to the terms and conditions of employees within the early years (EY) sector and this variation extends even in regard to their job titles and roles, both as described and as experienced, in different parts of the sector. Notwithstanding an increasing number of graduate courses in the sector and of those holding qualifications in equivalent status with nominally qualified teacher status (QTS), the general level of societal status as well as terms and conditions remain relatively low. Furthermore, there is no *'clear, nationally agreed career progression or professional infrastructure to ensure the collective voice of practitioners'* (Dyer, 2018, p 349). Thus it can be argued that a traditional marker of a professional workforce, which is to be a collective body with clear and publicly recognised parameters of experience and status, does not pertain in the same way as it would do for teachers in other phases in education. In the empirical element of her research project working with students on a BA Early Years undergraduate course, Dyer further highlights the differential career trajectories and aspirations of these students and for some of them the anomalies and challenges they face in studying for higher level qualifications when they return to a workplace setting where they may then be more qualified than their senior managers.

The diverse nature of settings and workplace contexts coupled with the broad spectrum of workplace needs mean that as an educator supporting professional development within the early years sector you may frequently encounter both a varied array of courses to work on and professionally diverse cohorts to work with. Even within cohorts there is likely to be considerable variation in the contexts and settings from which your students have come.

REFLECTION

For example, you might be teaching a seemingly clearly delineated course such as an Early Childhood Studies degree course that is aligned to well-defined benchmarks (QAA, 2014). However, within the group you have students who have arrived on the course straight from school, with relatively little voluntary experience of working with children, alongside some who have studied a more vocational childcare qualification at a Further Education (FE) college. Before you there is also a small group of more mature students who have returned to study after having their own families and are now wishing to retrain and a further group of experienced practitioners who are completing a top-up qualification, having successfully completed a Foundation degree at a FE college. Some, but not all, of this cohort are aiming to complete the EYT course alongside their degree studies.

- *How will you pitch your intended teaching to accommodate the range of experience and perspectives in the group?*
- *How will you ensure active engagement and mutual respect for differing perspectives and degrees of experience?*
- *What will be the key personal and communication skills you will need to utilise in this situation?*

A gendered workforce

One of the persistent features of the early years workforce is the under-representation of male students and employees. As Brownhill and Oates (2016) note in their study of gender perceptions and roles in the early years sector, 98 per cent of the 0–5 years' workforce is female. They offer a fascinating insight into some of the ramifications of this imbalance in which both genders are presumed to exhibit different characteristics and strengths and have stereotypical roles *imposed* upon them. Men working in the early years can feel especially pressurised to serve as male role models. As an educator it is worth reflecting on how you will incorporate gender-sensitive reflection into your tutoring whilst ensuring against tokenism or all too easy stereotyping.

Knowing our students and avoiding assumptions

One of the growing trends in research on early years professionalism has been to seek the voices of students who have been at the heart of the various initiatives to improve the qualification base and range in the early years workforce. In general these studies demonstrate a widespread and deep commitment amongst students and professionals to the work that

they do, confirming a sense of vocation and passion for working with young children and their families (Moyles, 2001; Hallett, 2013). Early years students and professionals are often defined quite significantly by an ethic of care (Osgood, 2006) at least as strong and perhaps more so than an educative orientation, leading Osgood to make the case for educators supporting students to become '*critically reflective emotional professionals*' (Osgood, 2010).

This deep and abiding commitment is well evidenced throughout the literature and is clearly something we need to bear in mind as educators in the early years but as Georgeson and Campbell Barr (2015) remind us it is not something we can automatically take for granted amongst our students: '*there is a risk of assuming that if people have found their way on to an early childhood course, they very likely already have certain general dispositions*' (Georgeson and Campbell-Barr, 2015, p 323). Similarly, they will not necessarily hold commensurate views and values to our own and Georgeson and Campbell-Barr further caution educators to '*be wary of constructing what we view as the "good early years student"*' (Ibid, p 329). If we are to hold to an ethic of sensitive and respectful ways to work with young children we will need to find it in ourselves to accord similar sensitivity and respect to the students we work with, whilst simultaneously opening up a professional dialogue around core professional principles and values.

As educators we may also find ourselves working with students who have been encouraged to sign up for courses by their managers and setting leaders but are not necessarily deeply committed to participating (Ingleby, 2018) or who are used to a more constrained and functional level of training and who believe that '*a lot of it is common sense*' (Vincent and Braun, 2011).

REFLECTION

Consider the following quotations from early years students included in Vincent and Braun's article (ibid, pp 778–779):

'I don't think there's a course in this whole world, childcare course, that could teach you more than what you could learn once you're doing it.'

'Some of the theorists are so long ago that I think I probably find it difficult to think, "And we still agree with that?"'

'I do think a lot of it is common sense. I kept thinking, why do I have to write this down when it is common sense to do it...?'

- *How would you respond to such views and sentiments if you heard them amongst your students?*
- *Do you agree in part or do you disagree profoundly? Why do you feel that way and how should your views inform how you would respond to the students?*
- *How might you open up a wider debate about the need for less constrained visions of working in the early years?*

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