

New proposals for under-fives' education in Britain

## Learning through play an "easy option" — says Labour

Tania Kent  
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That young children learn through play has been the most elementary, yet significant, viewpoint regarding an understanding of childhood development this century. Now, the Labour government has denounced it arrogantly as an “easy option” and intends to remove this guiding feature, against all professional advice.

Quoted in the press, Education and Employment Minister Margaret Hodge believes that young children's play in nurseries and kindergarten must be “purposeful”. The “days when under-fives were left to colour, cut and paste are over,” the Minister said. “I don't accept, as some from advantaged backgrounds seem to be arguing, that we are being over-formal. If the well-to-do expected these standards of attainment by their children, how could the government deny them to poorer children for whom education is the best hope for a better life?”

Clothed in the words of social improvement, Labour is introducing a retrograde step in the education of young children. The results-orientated conceptions that motivated the introduction of a restrictive “National Curriculum” and rigorous test procedures right down to the age of seven, are now to be extended into the nursery.

Labour Ministers are pressing ahead with proposals for a foundation stage of the National Curriculum for children aged 3-5, in spite of expert criticism denouncing the measures. The review of nursery education published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was rejected by 16 of the 18 Early Excellence Centres set up by the government itself to highlight the best ways to teach three to five-year-olds.

The “early learning targets” for toddlers set out in the

proposals include: naming and sounding all the letters of the alphabet; reading a range of common words and simple sentences independently; showing comprehension of stories; using phonetic knowledge to make plausible attempts at complex words; writing their names and forming sentences, sometimes using punctuation; counting reliably up to ten everyday objects; recognising numbers 1-9 and understanding the vocabulary of adding and subtracting.

This emphasis on more formal education would be at the expense of allowing children the freedom to learn from play, without any evidence that it helps their long-term development.

Wendy Scott of the Early Childhood Education Forum said the proposals could “press down unsuitably on children not yet mature enough to cope. People who are qualified and trained will be able to interpret them. But many working with under fives are not. It is a complex area and ministers and chief inspectors like simple answers.”

The Pre-School Learning Alliance has also criticised the proposals. Chief executive Margaret Lochrie said children should be allowed to gain skills through playing, not be scared away from education at an early age. The Alliance has presented a report stating that the government's plans would put unnecessary pressure on infants. Instead of achieving an improvement in learning, children would be put under pressure to meet early learning targets that could bring about symptoms of anxiety and stress, such as tantrums and bed-wetting. By creating “failures at five,” this would increase the requirement for Special Needs facilities.

Already the lack of nursery and kindergarten places puts pressure on parents to send their children to

primary schools. Parents may even send their young children to an over-subscribed primary school rather than a nursery, so they can move to a better secondary school later. This has resulted in large numbers of the under-fives starting formal education, which research has shown can produce negative results in the child's later development. Formal education normally starts later in many European countries who subsequently have better standards of attainment throughout the school system.

Struggling already with shrinking resources, the financial incentives provided to primary schools to open classes up for three to four-year-olds has meant that these schools have grown at the expense of playgroups and nurseries. Over 1,500 playgroups were shut last year alone, according to a report by the Pre School Learning Alliance.

There is usually a much better child/adult ratio in nursery facilities, compared to primary schools in Britain. Moreover, the environment in nurseries is designed to fulfil the physical, intellectual, emotional and social needs of the young child through play-based activities.

Labour's new measures for pre-school children are part of the restructuring of the entire education system based on introducing a more formal and discipline-oriented approach to teaching. Labour's weasel words about improving the prospects of children from poorer families belies the whole thrust of their social policy, which is meritocratic and has widened, not reduced, social differences in Britain.



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