

Opinion: To the Point - What we have learned

Nursery World, 29 October 2009

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Fifty years ago, I trained as a nursery teacher at the Froebel Institute. The principal, Molly Brearley, later became an influential member of the Plowden Committee. She and her staff showed us that teaching is much more than instruction; their commitment to learner-centred education informed their lives. They influenced students through character as much as words, and we were imbued with deep and lasting principles, now embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our learning then was grounded in observation and reflection, applied as much to ourselves as to the children and families we worked with. We began to understand the interrelated nature of learning and the importance of play in all its complexity, and were always encouraged to link theory and practice.

As I get older, I am increasingly convinced of the significance of the early years, and growing experience and knowledge illuminate how much remains to be uncovered. This, of course, is part of the fascination of engaging with the everyday miracles revealed through individual children's early development. It also justifies the necessary investment of time and thought as well as funding to develop the quality of provision. Getting things right from the start is so much more effective than trying to pick up the pieces later.

We have increasing insights into the formative effects of young children's experience, from before they are born. It is a considerable satisfaction to find that this knowledge, including hard evidence from brain research, confirms the approach built up empirically over many years by generations of thoughtful and dedicated educators. Significantly, it is endorsed by the rigorous Cambridge Review of the primary curriculum, which recommends teaching - for those intending to become educators, as well as children - based on evidence and principle, rather than compliance with prescriptive strategies. Keeping alive this inheritance is crucial as we face future uncertainties.

In principle and in practice, it is imperative for individuals and for society worldwide that we do the best we can for future generations. So it is up to all of us to keep fighting for children's entitlement to the best possible start in life.

I am sure everyone attending the Awards Ceremony in London, and indeed all Nursery World readers, are involved in continuing efforts to provide well for young children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable.