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Forgetting Kindness: Politics, policies and practice in early childhood education

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Beginning with a brief discussion of kindness we argue there is a weakness in governmental capacity, specifically in policy directives, to ensure citizens' entitlement to 'care'. Several recent, disturbing, instances of failure to care, and failures of care, are cited. Some voices willing to cast blame, for this absence of kindness and compassion, at the door of education, are named. The authors reflect that some of these voices belong to politicians content to excise thoughtfulness from the U.K. early years curriculum. The authors point to agreement between practitioners' accounts of young children's capacity for empathy and kindness and the field of educational neuroscience. A tension between practitioners' commitment to young children's empathetic development and curricula, and inspection, demands is also reviewed. The authors conclude by suggesting that social understanding, arguably the most important trait for nurturing caring citizens, evident in historic educational principles, is currently being forgotten by early childhood policy makers in the U.K..

Introduction

This paper engages with the apparent contradictions between the United Kingdom (U.K.) government current early childhood education policy for England, and its expressed desire for an humane society. The authors begin by accumulating evidence from the U.K. of the lack of respect for persons amongst members of the caring professions as well as amongst disaffected young urban citizens. With the recent cuts in funding to English public services, citizens do not have a sense that we are, as the U.K. Prime Minister declared, "all in this together ... where people come together to make life better"(Cameron, 2010). Some of the negative consequences of the continuing reduction of social provision in the U.K., justified by claims of financial necessity, challenge the current U.K. coalition government's welfare agenda. While failure across care systems, was not anticipated by the coalition we have seen widespread failures in hospitals, and residential care for young people and the elderly with far reaching consequences.

Phillips and Taylor (2009, p.4) have suggested, "sympathy, generosity, altruism, benevolence, humanity, pity and empathy" form a sympathetic expansiveness linking self to other. Borrowing this reference, 'kindness', is linked in this paper



to thoughtfulness for persons, implying a capacity to reflect. After Rousseau, we believe that an education in kindness is essential in early childhood (Emile, 1762). Educators have been aware, for the last 300 years that there is a case to be made for the inclusion of kindness in any curriculum for young children. To illustrate this point consider ways in which kindness might promote happiness, relationships, well being and success in learning, hence a sense of belonging to a community and culture. Given successive U.K. governments' enthusiasm for children's achievements in literacy and numeracy and their aspirations to promote a sense of belonging, it is indeed unfortunate that this belief has been marginalised.

It is our contention that a focus on kindness in early childhood has consequences for reducing the disparity between children's discourse in domestic settings and children's discourse in early childhood settings (Bernstein, 1975; Hasan, 2005; Athey, 2007; Wells 2009). We have signalled our interest in domestic learning and local tacit pedagogies that are described by Lee and Eke as, "thinking about how parents and others are moulding children's minds and perceptions by the way they use language with them" (2009, p.143). Though children may be challenged in early childhood settings, the boundaries established by the principal domestic care giver, usually the mother, are usually infused with kindness. Hasan (2002), discussing local pedagogies, provides a detailed analysis of children's interaction with caring others, maintaining that learning how to relate to other persons is an early and essential condition for all other kinds of learning (p.546). Noddings suggests that "we recognise human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence" (1984, p.4). Since experiences of caring and being cared for, form the foundation of ethical responses, early childhood pedagogy is characterised by these ideas. Following Hasan's research and Noddings's conception of an ethic of care, any attempt at teaching in early childhood must begin by nurturing the young child's capacity to be caring and thoughtful. Such an approach aligns with the evidence from neuro-scientific findings indicating that cognitive gains and emotional confidence go hand in hand.

We want to suggest three aspects of kindness and that policy for early childhood in England needs to address these concerns:

- Failure to care in adult life corresponds with a failure to promote care in earlier life
- A view promoted by the U.K. government that, teachers and early childhood workers are not to be trusted, and government and its civil servants know better than professionals how early childhood curricula should be constructed
- The absence of an explicit engagement with the importance of kindness in early childhood is a policy failure, which has life-long implications for learners, their personal identity and consequently their cultural contribution

We also want to suggest, that the remedy is not to be found in simplistic policy borrowing, for example by importing the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (1996) into the English context.



Failure to care in adult life

Cuts to local funding for the year 2011/12, have led to a £900m reduction in U.K. budgets for social care (Ramesh, 2012). Government imposed savings, referred to as efficiencies, with reductions in staffing and service provision were realised at an individual and institutional level. In February 2011 the U.K. Health Service Ombudsman found that there was “an attitude-both personal and institutional - which fails to recognise the humanity and individuality of the people concerned and to respond to them with sensitivity, compassion and professionalism” (Abraham, 2011, p.7). Subsequently an enquiry by U.K. Equality and Human Rights Commission (2011) found “serious systemic threats to basic human rights of older people who are getting home care services” (EHRC, 2011, p. 89). In a report commissioned by a partnership comprising the Local Government Association, National Health Confederation and Age U.K. noted:

It has been deeply saddening to see reports highlighting cases of undignified care of older people in our hospitals and care homes. In too many instances, people have been let down when they were vulnerable and most needed help. (Vize, 2012, p.32)

The absence of this quality standard at a major English hospital was also recognised in a review of provision for patients with learning difficulties. In a report by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), November 2012, more than a third of 32 care homes for those with learning disabilities were seen as failing to meet the required standards for care and welfare. The failures included: “Cultures in which unacceptable care becomes the norm,” (p.8) and, “...in too many cases care was not person-centred” (p.9.) At one hospital Flynn (2012) reported on the “casual indifference of staff,” (p.10) and, “... that there was nothing fair, compassionate or harmonious about (the hospital)” (p. iv).

Without kindness?

We see these statements above as signifiers of a culture that has abandoned caring, neglecting the value of kindness. A wider absence of care, was evidenced in English towns and cities during the riots of 2011. The behaviour of rioters was described as “civil protest, riot and theft” – despite 75% of the *rioters* being classified as *educated* (Morrell, Scott, McNeish, & Webster, 2012). Reports identified policing as a possible cause for the violence with poverty another contributory factor. Respondents not involved in the riots cited poor parenting and criminality as causes of the riots. These reports did not identify central government as having any responsibility. There were no observations that state provision of early childhood education could have in any way contributed to or mitigated the public disorder.

Some politicians linked the riotous behaviour with schools (Johnson, Channel 4 News, 15.8.2011). The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, also asserted that the riots were “a straightforward conflict between right and wrong,” citing the inability of four year olds to “sit, listen, and learn” adding: “If as evidence we do not act we will perpetuate the suffering of innocents by allowing them to be inducted into a lifestyle without boundaries, self respect and hope.” (Gove, 2011). As Kelley (2009) observed, in accounting for why some children become violent:



The emotional and social development of young people is not central to education systems ... stories about poor behaviour of young people appear in the media everywhere on earth, though never linked to the impersonal and judgemental educational experience that might, in part account, for it. (p.71)

U.K. early childhood policy

Since the mid 1970's politicians have routinely argued that educational provision would be enhanced if the curriculum were under state control. In 1988 they achieved that end with the U.K. Education Reform Act. The Act applied to the education of children between the ages of 5-16. In 2000 the U.K. government widened parliamentary jurisdiction to include the curriculum for 3-5 year olds. In doing so there was evidence of policy borrowing from New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* in the definitions adopted by Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS, 2000): "The term curriculum is used to describe everything children do, see, hear or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned" (p.1). With the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (2007), children between the ages 0-5 were subject to a curriculum within which there was an emphasis in England and Wales towards learning outcomes. The 2007 iteration of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, DfES), in the non-statutory guidance, did however make explicit reference to shared sustained thinking and the non-statutory version over-emphasised the role of the adult (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). The expectations in the guidelines indicated that "a high quality, continuously improving setting" (p.12) would foster shared sustained thinking. Assessment included thoughtful performance practices, whereby children: "form good relationships with adults and peers, be sensitive to the needs, views and feelings of others and understand what is right, what is wrong and why" (DfES, 2007, Statutory Requirements, p.12.). Comparable expectations are found in the 2009 iteration of assessment for learning in *Te Whāriki*, where a child's developing identity as a caring and thoughtful person is valued: "Manaaki: To tend and care for, to show respect and kindness." (Mason, 2009).

In the revised EYFS, (DES 2012), young children's capacity for thinking is cited throughout the 17 assessed learning goals. Expectations regarding the assessment of young children's thoughtfulness being implicit. They occur in the "prime area" labelled *Personal, social and emotional* and the "specific area" labelled *Understanding the world*. In the prime area they ask whether "children talk about how they and others show feelings, talk about their own and others behaviours and its consequences and know that some behaviour is unacceptable, show sensitivity to others" (p.8). In the specific area of *Understanding the world* children are assessed as to whether they "know that other children don't always enjoy the same things, and are sensitive to this" (p.9). Children at this stage are also expected to "know about similarities and differences between themselves and others and among families, communities and traditions" (p.9) and "talk about how they and others show feelings, and show sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others" (p.8). Hence the area we would characterise as thoughtfulness is assessed in the English early childhood curriculum.



In commenting on ways in which ideas about thinking and thoughtfulness are embodied in curriculum legislation we recognise that we have aligned “thinking” with Siraj-Blatchford’s (2004) conception of shared sustained thinking and conceptualising young children’s thinking as intrinsically social. We have also aligned thoughtfulness with a set of early learning goals, apparent in the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the English EYFS that acknowledge talking about behaviours and their consequences and sensitivity to others.

Without thoughtfulness?

Curriculum control is the first strand of governmental intervention in early childhood provision. A second strand of intervention in England has been the inspection of early years’ settings by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Reading reports of recent inspections it is clear that through the grading of settings, a priority of the inspectorate is early literacy and numeracy. The learning goals linked with thoughtfulness appear to be ignored in this reporting.

Children have unequal access to opportunities for thinking and, by extension, thoughtfulness (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Kiernan & Mensah, 2011). Poverty may be found to be a significant variable, however this is not to the exclusion of parenting styles and early educational experience. The U.K. review by the Independent Panel on Poverty and Life Chances, HMG, 2010, (The Foundation Years: Preventing poor children becoming poor adults) found that:

By school age, there are very wide variations in children’s abilities and the evidence is clear that children from poorer backgrounds do worse cognitively and behaviourally than those from more affluent homes. Schools do not effectively close that gap; children who arrive in the bottom range of ability tend to stay there. (HMG, 2010, p.5).

There is some evidence that a language for learning is acquired in domestic settings (Bernstein, 1990; Hasan, 2005) and that not all settings are adaptable to all children’s early language acquisition (Wells, 1987). A focus therefore on kindness would give additional weight to the quality of relations in early childhood learning and have the potential to bridge diverse home discourses. This in turn may make the school curriculum more accessible.

Researching professional perspectives

An objective in this research has been to learn how professionals working in early childhood viewed kindness, firstly, through asking about its place in the curriculum. By attending lectures and joining seminar discussions we collected their observations on thinking and thoughtfulness. Informed consent was sought from all the participants. By cross checking interview data with the participants we ensured that they maintained control over the transcripts. Through the research it became clear that almost anything could provide a basis for promoting sustained thoughtfulness with children. One respondent added: “Anything, stories, activity at hand, how and why questions, topics of interest to them” (Feedback from working student, 2012).



With the professionals we discussed thoughtful kindness and taking care of each other being above issues of literacy and numeracy. For the most part the participants felt that parents and especially parents using private day nurseries would, like Ofsted, rank issues of numeracy and literacy above those of kindness and taking care of each other. They recognised that a capacity for care and respect for others could be prioritised over, a capacity for what might be described as *cognitive rationality*. This intuitive link between a capacity for empathy and the ability to develop a cognitive rationality was felt to be worthy of further of exploration.

Bearing in mind Siraj-Blatchfords' (2010) helpful invocation of Morley (1999), this reminds us that there are multiple accounts of childhood which variously articulate and conflict with each other. These multiple accounts consider structural, cultural, discursive and material misrecognitions and inequalities ignoring the way that intelligence, talent and potential are socially constructed in the interests of particular hegemonic groups and communities (Morley, 1999).

The interest in gathering anecdotal examples of children's acts of kindness to each other and towards adults, springs from an impression that while there is an enduring interest in children's shared sustained thinking in England, there is only an implicit policy engagement with what it means to be thoughtful. Some examples led us to take *thoughtful* as marrying ideas of reflection with those of sensitivity to others. There is evidence (Braten & Trevarthen, 2007) that thoughtfulness in both of these senses is a characteristic of children's thought from a comparatively early age.

Children's kindness seems to move beyond theoretical preoccupations with decentring towards a sense of children's anticipatory agency reliant upon their sensitivity to others. We shall bring together two accounts of thoughtfulness in which kindness is implicit. The first account comes from one of our participants and the second draws on the emergent field of developmental, social, cognitive neuroscience (Zelazo, Chandler & Crone, 2010). We have utilised this emergent field because it moves beyond simple autonomous accounts of the development of children's thinking. One of the research participants reported to us:

My 3 year old daughter desperately wanted to play outside a restaurant in which we were eating. When I finally agreed to go outside with her she started and then stalled. 'But Mum, if we both go outside then Nannie will be left on her own' she said and then sat back down in her seat next to her Nannie. (Professional Informant (1), 2012).

This narrative exemplifies thoughtfulness in the sense of being aware of others and in the sense of cognition. Gerhardt (2004) reminds us that links between emotional and cognitive activity are at their strongest when individuals find themselves under threat. Alternatively in a rewarding environment the same links may have very positive consequences. Rewarding, relatively stress free circumstances, would thus seem to be the bedrock on which both kinds of thoughtfulness are built. Cozolino's (2006) account, from the field of developmental social cognitive neuroscience, prioritises the *insula cortex* in co-ordinating limbic and cortical processes: "the insula may play a central role in the development of our sense of self and the degree to which we can develop



self insight” (ibid., p.208). Cunningham and Zelazo (2010) suggest that as cortical complexity develops so does the capacity to control and organise thought. Schogler and Trevarthen (2007), see the creation of meaning is not achieved through similar imitation but rather by sympathy for the motives and emotion of another’s actions and anticipation of these.

The acts of child kindness reported were frequently provoked by another’s suffering. For example one of our undergraduate students reported that while being in an early years centre “lots of children looked for the *comforter* of a child whom was in distress, then another child was prepared to offer his own comfort toy if the other’s *comforter* could not be found” (Research Student, 2012). In another example a lecturer reported that:

A nursery child had fallen in the garden. The early years’ practitioner was helping the child and took her in for first aid (a cut on the knee which was bleeding). Before the adult had even arrived at the chair, which is usually used to care for injured children, another child, a boy three and a half years, had been into the bathroom and made their own cold compress from a paper towel, he offered it to the upset girl ‘put this on then it’ll be better’ he said. (Professional Informant (2), 2012).

Dunn’s (1988) observations of children aged two or less, found substantial evidence that in the home young children had a capacity to marshal the social evidence available to them to offer kindness, humour or even deception in order to achieve their goals. Gallagher (2008, p.539) confirms that developmental evidence shows that young infants are capable of grasping the purposeful intention of others. Another view of these behaviours have shown very young children using scripts, or knowledge of both everyday (e.g. eating) and ritualised (e.g. birthdays) activities (Nelson, 1993) based on seeing those in power in their lives offering care and comfort. Two further illustrations, one involving an adult prompted reflection, revealed what might be termed, sustained shared kindness. In the first example a boy and girl are playing on a climbing frame:

I watched a boy on the climbing frame, he spoke to a girl and put his thumb up to her and smiled. She is a very shy child who chooses not to speak in our setting. After I spoke to the boy saying I saw him talking to the girl helping her join in. He said I asked her to join in and she shook her head but then she got on the climbing frame with us and I said well done to her showing how he put his thumb up. The girl stood next to me and looked up smiling as the boy retold what happened. (Professional Informant (3), 2012)

In this example young children demonstrate a capacity to exhibit thoughtfulness in two distinct contexts; the first of these shows caring responses by children predicated on the suffering of another, the second shows children manifesting a caring response to the anticipated needs of others. “A two year old girl calls to a baby that his mother has arrived then she gets the coat for the parent.” (Professional Informant (4), 2012). The material presented endorses Noddings (1984) appreciation of the capacity to care demonstrated by young children. Following Noddings observation that: “The educator does not want to diminish this incipient ideal but to enhance it. It is fragile” (p.193).



In discussion with early childhood professionals it became clear that they were aware of Ofsted's emphasis on early literacy and numeracy. The professionals claimed that they prioritised kindness in all that they did with the children in their care. They knew that the children's parents held diverse views and said that the enthusiasm for basic skills, rather than kindness, increased with the affluence of the parents. This confirms Phillips and Taylor's findings (2009, p.6) that it is only between parents and children that kindness is expected, sanctioned, and indeed obligatory and hence marginalised. Indeed, kindness in the contemporary cultural environment of individualism is considered to be "the virtue of losers... a sign of weakness ... distinctly old fashioned" (ibid. 6-7). Kindness, akin to that in relationships between parents and children, ought to be extended, as a minimum expectation, to professionals like those we have been working with. Currently in early childhood settings kindness occupies a similarly ambivalent position, a benefit that may be present but not mandatory. As Ofsted consistently works to ensure a focus on basic skills for all children this has now impacted on U.K. performance to the point where over the last 10 years there has been an 8% rise in literacy. However in 2010 despite an undue emphasis on performance, scores have dropped by 6% (Jama & Dugdale, 2012). Despite the Children's Act of (2004), the accompanying umbrella policy Every Child Matters, UNICEF report cards 7 (2007) and 10 (2012), the work of Layard and Dunn (2009) and Bradshaw (2011), show that England does not come out well when we make judgements about the well being of children and young people. Government agencies remain content to struggle with the complexities of assessing literacy, than those of assessing children's happiness. Indeed Ofsted (2012) working with the Children's Rights Director for England, had some difficulty in measuring children's happiness and concluded that their approach was better suited to assessing unhappiness (p.14.)

Conclusion

The preoccupation of successive governments with children's performance in basic skills (Eke, Butcher & Lee, 2009) has, in our view, contributed to a decline in English children's happiness and the expansion of a lack of care across public services. It is as if England has forgotten the importance of kindness in the curriculum for young children. We favour an inclusive definition of the curriculum, one that embraces both the instructional and regulatory aspects of early childhood provision. As the authors of *Te Whāriki* (1996) put it we need to consider "the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (p.10). An unkind narrowing of the curriculum in the U.K., with a focus on a limited selection of outcomes at the expense of prioritising kindness, is seen as misguided.

Whilst the early years' curriculum in England (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, 2000) lent heavily on the inclusiveness adopted by *Te Whāriki*, it did not provide a defence against the encroachment of a drive for accelerated learning in the basics. It seems as if the grass is indeed greener in New Zealand and our colleagues, whilst sustaining care in their settings, may wonder whether such practices can be readily aligned with policy agendas elsewhere. It seems as if we have cast aside precepts handed to us by earlier generations:



The only uniformity of practice that the Board of Education desire to see in the teaching of Public Elementary Schools is that each teacher shall think for himself, and work out for himself such methods of teaching as may use his powers to the best advantage and be best suited to the particular needs and conditions of the school. Children are instinctively attracted by sincerity and cheerfulness; and the greatest teachers have been thoroughly human in their weaknesses as well as in their strength. (Board of Education, 1918, p.243)

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