

JULIAN GRENIER

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OFSTED

INSPECTIONS

THRIVING CHILDREN, CONFIDENT STAFF



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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Jude Bowen
Assistant editor: George Knowles
Production editor: Tom Bedford
Copyeditor: Andy Baxter
Indexer: Cathy Heath
Marketing manager: Dilhara Attygalle
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

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First published 2017

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016939627

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-3840-3
ISBN 978-1-4739-3841-0 (pbk)

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Julian has a Doctorate in Education from the UCL Institute of Education, London, gained for his research into the work, views and theories of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds. He is a National Leader of Education and a trustee of the East London Partnership, which brings together schools, early years settings and childminders to work collaboratively, improve quality and enhance the life chances of young children in East London.

Julian is the co-author of the best-selling *Child Care and Education* (5th edition) with Tina Bruce and Carolyn Meggitt.

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PREFACE

This book provides navigational tools which help leaders and managers of early childhood practice, working in a range of settings, to find their way through the complexities of the work they do, and to deepen their sense of fulfilment in working with the children, families and staff as well as the challenges they deal with daily.

The information presented has great clarity and is very accessible to read. There is enjoyable provocation towards thought and reflection, with practical guidance to help leaders and managers into 'discussion, debate and professional dialogue' with staff and families.

Whilst acknowledging Ofsted's importance, the book sets the inspectorate in a contextualised framework such that 'the tail does not wag the dog', and it shows the pitfalls of responding to 'every fashion, whim or headline'. The case studies provide invaluable help in developing and sustaining quality of practice, so that children are given of the best in this short but important phase of their lives. This book will guide, support and help the reader to be strong through their journey.

Tina Bruce, CBE

PART 1

DEVELOPING THE PROFESSIONALISM, SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE OF YOUR STAFF TEAM





1

Introduction

It has never been more important to have a successful Ofsted. If you are an early years setting, you may lose local authority funding for some of your places unless you are judged to be 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. Many parents who pay for childcare will look around first using the Ofsted website, and may rule out anywhere that does not have a positive report. It will also be much harder to recruit good staff if you have been judged as a setting which 'Requires Improvement' or is 'Inadequate'.

If you are in a maintained school, there are equal, if different, pressures. The specific early years judgement in the new school inspection framework means that a poor outcome for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) could bring down the school's overall grade. Ofsted have focussed strongly in recent years on transition in the early years, progress and specifically the outcomes of children eligible for free school meals: shortcomings in any of these areas could have a very adverse effect on Ofsted's overall judgement of the school.

For both schools and settings, the judgement that you Require Improvement will lead to more regular monitoring and inspection. Being found Inadequate will lead to intense pressure: schools may be forced into academies or federations, and settings may lose their registration, if they do not manage to improve rapidly. Complaints or concerns that you are failing to meet the Statutory Framework for the EYFS can also trigger no-notice inspections and lead to a poor grade, even for a school or setting which has previously been successful.

So, it may come as a surprise that, although this book is about achieving success in your Ofsted inspection, it does not take Ofsted, or its current inspection frameworks, as the final word in best practice. For a start, those frameworks, reports and public announcements change significantly from one year to the next, depending on a whole range of other priorities, including the personal views of the Chief Inspector of Schools. In this book, I am arguing that whilst Ofsted is important, we must not allow the tail to wag the dog. What really matters is that we find ways to develop safe, effective and sustainable early years practice which meets the needs of the children and families we work with.



We need to grow staff teams so that individuals work well together and develop their professionalism. And we need a range of techniques to collect information about how effective our practice is, so that we are constantly monitoring the quality of the provision and the children's progress and wellbeing, and making adjustments where necessary. These cycles of development should be robust and accurate, and we should be open with staff and with parents about how well we are doing and what we need to do to get better. Most importantly, we need to work together, as professionals, to develop the values and principles which will guide our work. No-one ever journeyed far by changing course every few moments, and no-one can offer children a high-quality experience of early education by making changes according to every fashion, whim or headline.

That said, Ofsted itself has consistently argued for some important principles: that children in disadvantaged circumstances should have the care and teaching they need, so that they have as good a chance to do well in their education as their more advantaged peers; that children should be kept safe and healthy; and that staff should be professionally led and managed so that they can develop their skills and professionalism. Until a few decades ago, the regulation of early years settings was locally determined and inconsistent. Ofsted took over in 2000, and Peter Elfer has argued that there is evidence to suggest that there has been:

a significant improvement in the safety of nurseries compared to before 2000, when inspection and enforcement were much weaker. Alongside improvements in safety, regulation has also ensured that awareness of the importance of emotional well-being and the provision of a broad range of opportunities for play and learning is commonplace. (Elfer, 2014: 288)

On the other hand, the pressure which is created by Ofsted's no-notice and short-notice inspection regimes can lead to a defensive culture. Managers and staff set about trying to please Ofsted: decisions are taken on the basis of second-guessing what an Ofsted inspector may wish to see. In my role as a senior early years adviser, I would often ask staff why they used a particular format for their planning, or timetabled the day in a certain way, and would get a two-word answer: 'For Ofsted.' However, in this book, Ofsted's framework and inspection system is not seen as a guide to best practice, but rather as a way for you and your setting to validate your practice, and to be accountable for the public money which you receive. Successive governments have invested many billions of pounds in early years provision: just think about all the Children's Centres which have been built, the expansion of free places for two-, three- and four-year-olds, and funding for staff training and development over the years. The public is entitled to know whether these are wise investments, and Ofsted is the main source the public rely on for this information.

It is also important not to see Ofsted as the only indicator of quality. Academics like Professors Iram Siraj, Kathy Sylva and Ted Melhuish, who spend their working lives researching the quality of early years provision and looking at what promotes the best outcomes for children, have consistently argued that it is important to have a range of tools to assess quality. It is also

important to have well-trained, confident and skilful professionals who can make judgements which are specific to their school, setting or community. There is no 'manual' that can teach any of us how to be the perfect carer or teacher: but high-quality training, reflection on our work and experiences, and working in supportive teams can help us to get better throughout our careers.

It is difficult to make decisions about measuring outcomes and measuring quality: difficult, but essential if we are to make a difference. We need to make those decisions as well as we can, using the best available information, and as openly as possible by engaging and involving staff, parents and other stakeholders.

Having a range of perspectives on quality cannot just mean considering a lot of different opinions: instead, we need tools and approaches that can provide us with useful information or 'data' about how well we are achieving the aims which we have set out. The choice of tools to use will depend on how well developed your provision is. Later in this book, assessing your setting's level of development and the tools you might use to help you in self-evaluation are discussed in more detail. Drawing on an approach which was first developed by Pauline Hoare, Early Years Lead Officer in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, I am proposing that there are three broad phases of development in the journey towards the most effective and appropriate practice.

Phase one: Practice which works for you

If you are leading a new team, or you are struggling to achieve a satisfactory level of quality and consistency, then you will need to focus on meeting the requirements of the Statutory Framework for the EYFS. You may need to insist on a high level of documentation: you will need to see plans for adult-guided learning and for child-initiated play opportunities that detail resourcing, strategies for adults to follow, and learning outcomes for the children to check that they are at least adequate. You may need to lay down a requirement for the number of observations and assessments to be completed per week, and to see how these assessments inform the weekly planning. By linking these with your monitoring observations and monitoring of the outcomes for children, you will be able to begin to establish what works for you. This includes having evidence to show it works: evidence that this approach is supporting a good quality of adult care and interaction, and that it is effective in supporting the development and wellbeing of the children on roll so that each child makes good progress in their learning.

Phase two: Practice which works for you, and is consistent with the research and evidence base

Once you are confident that you have achieved a level of consistency in the team's practice, and that this is effective for the children on roll, you will need to develop further by looking beyond your individual setting. On our own,

we can only achieve a certain amount: we need to learn from the practice and insights of others, rather than trying to create everything from scratch.

For example, you may be able to show that staff are interacting positively with children and focussing on listening to them and holding conversations. To develop your practice further, you could then adopt an evidence-based programme like the Early Talk 0–5 years programme from I CAN, the National Communication Charity (www.ican.org.uk/ICAN-Training/Early/Early%20Talk%200-5.aspx). There is a good evidence base to suggest that this programme can enhance the learning environment for all children and can have a long-term and positive impact on staff and practice.

When your staff team is more highly trained and skilled in their practice, and you can show that outcomes for children are good, then you will not need so much written or documented evidence. An inexperienced or little-trained member of staff may need a plan before an activity, detailing what she or he will say to the children and how conversation will be encouraged. You may need to check this plan to ensure that an appropriate experience will be offered. But, in the case of a more highly trained member of staff, whose practice you have observed to be effective, you will not need to see this level of detail because you can rely on her or his professional judgement and skill.

Phase three: Developing leading-edge practice

A well-trained and highly professional staff team is able to develop leading-edge practice which is specifically developed to meet the particular needs, or strengths, of the children on roll and the local community they come from. This practice might be linked to degree- or MA-level study and research projects. For example, when I was the deputy headteacher of an urban nursery centre, I noticed that Turkish-speaking children did not seem to be as engaged as other children in nursery activities. In the local area, outcomes for Turkish-speaking children later in their primary schooling were not as good as the outcomes for other children. So, I set up a series of focus groups to learn more about how Turkish-speaking parents understood early years education. This led to the development of a weekly group, with an interpreter, where we talked together about what the children were doing at home and in nursery, and, crucially, considered how this might link to their learning. Parents who had been unsure about how children learnt through play, because their own education had been more formal, saw how their children were learning in nursery and talked about the way they could help this further at home. The nursery learnt a lot about the children's home culture, play and learning, and was able to make changes to its approach and resourcing. For example, singing Turkish songs all together at group time helped the Turkish-speaking children to feel more of a sense of belonging. In turn, the outcomes for those children by the end of their time in nursery improved significantly.

Case study

An infant school was recently graded Requires Improvement for its early years. The headteacher felt that some new approaches were needed, and the EYFS co-ordinator had been very impressed by a conference she had attended on Natural Play. So, the school engaged the conference speaker to work with them as a consultant. She suggested that the school should develop a Forest School and that most of the tables should be removed from the classes, and replaced with small carpet areas with wicker baskets full of natural and open-ended resources. The consultant took the team to see an inspirational nursery and reception unit, where the children could move freely between the different classes and a beautiful garden with a huge sand and water area, and used a Forest School area every day.

Lots of new resources were bought and plans were drawn up to develop the outdoors. It took many months to develop the plans, cost them and arrange for the necessary tenders. The headteacher and the co-ordinator found themselves attending numerous meetings discussing materials, specifications and problems with drainage on the school site.

However, when an HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) came to monitor progress, the EYFS was judged still to be a cause for concern. The HMI commented, in verbal feedback, that staff did not seem to have the skills to manage or develop the children's play, so that, when she observed, many of the areas were a chaotic mix of different materials which were sometimes just tipped out of the baskets by the children. There was no evidence that the children were making adequate progress in their learning.

The school used the Three Phase Model to reflect on its development, and realised that the best fit for where they currently were, was Phase one. But they had been trying to develop the leading-edge practice they had observed and been inspired by, as if they were in Phase three.

Many staff were not confident about basic skills in interacting with children and encouraging their play, so bringing in a new approach without adequate support and training at this stage had just made the reception classes chaotic. The co-ordinator put a halt to any further changes and worked intensively with staff. She checked each classteacher's planning thoroughly and required everyone to share at least ten observation-based assessments with her every week. This highlighted that some staff were not at all sure what learning was going on when children were playing. Teachers were not using all the assessment information to help them to plan, so much of the planning was not matched well to the children's level of learning or their interests. The co-ordinator realised that she had been distracted by 'big plans' and was not focussing on the day-to-day support and management of her team. When she talked to team members individually, she found that some were more confident when developing play with children in a more structured way, for example playing with Lego with a small group. So she considered that it would be better to build their skills in areas of confidence, and then begin slowly to introduce more natural and open-ended materials. She realised that some staff needed daily support and encouragement - they could

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not be 'left to it' whilst she was in meetings or working on the plans for the outdoors. She discussed this with the headteacher, and they agreed to scale back the changes to the outdoors and just focus on developing a small area for a Forest School rather than change everything. Once they had agreed the basic outline for the plans, they delegated the meetings to the School Business Manager, who reported back to them on progress, and this freed up more of their time to undertake joint work supporting staff and monitoring practice.

After a strong focus for a term on the basics of planning, assessment and supporting play and communication, the reception classes became much more settled and children were happier and more purposeful. Assessment information showed that children were making strong progress, especially in their communication. The co-ordinator began to use the new, natural resources for blocks of time once the children were more settled, and these were successful in encouraging more creative play and more collaboration. Less-confident staff were given time to observe how the resources were being managed and how they were benefitting the children, and the co-ordinator decided that she would then develop this approach across the whole team the following year.