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Principles under pressure: student teachers' perspectives on final teaching practice in early childhood classrooms

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Global concerns about what constitutes an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for young children inevitably raises questions for teacher educators and the content of teacher education programmes. These concerns have been particularly visible in England following recent policy initiatives and the resultant 'academic shovedown' and 'high stakes' performativity culture in schools. Against this background, this article reports on a qualitative study of student teachers' experiences of their final teaching practice, identifying pressure from a range of sources to deliver a more formalised curriculum than they were prepared for in their university-based courses. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner among others, we consider the socio-political and -cultural sources of pressure linked through human agency, and the implications of these for teacher educators. The study argues that student teachers of young children may be faced with cognitive and emotional dissonance between the content of university-based training on the one hand, which promotes a developmentally appropriate, play-based approach in keeping with the Early Years Foundation Stage (the statutory curricular framework in England), and the reality of pedagogical practice in early years settings on the other.

Keywords: early childhood; teacher education; developmentally appropriate curriculum; pressure; performativity; dissonance

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Introduction

In England, the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008 (DfES 2007), a statutory curricular framework for children from birth to school starting age, represented a significant and long awaited shift in policy embracing education *and* care for all children under the age of 5 years. The framework supports a holistic consideration of the various individual and sociocultural factors that contribute to children's development and learning, to ensure that 'all children have the opportunity to learn through play… practitioners are required to support children's learning and development by planning to meet their needs, participating in and extending their play in ways which best facilitate their learning' (DfES 2007). The Cambridge Primary Review (CPA), published in England in 2009, drawing on comprehensive and systematic reviews of research into both the early years and primary education fields (Alexander 2009), confirmed the importance of a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young learners which includes active learning experiences, multi-sensory approaches and pretend play (Goswami and

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Bryant 2007), sentiments which resonate with the revised contextual model of developmentally appropriate practice advocated in the USA (NAEYC 2009). Similarly, a longitudinal, cross-cultural study of preschool in 10 different countries argued that developmentally (and contextually) appropriate practice works best for younger children (Montie, Ziang, and Schweinhard 2006) and a survey of practitioners in 21 countries across the globe concluded that an interactive, play-based curriculum is the most appropriate for children in the early years (Bertram and Pascal 2002).

The weight of evidence in support of an active, play-based curriculum and pedagogy for young children is matched by a significant body of research which identifies a marked discrepancy between theory and pedagogic practice. For example, in England, studies of practitioner experiences of classroom pedagogy (Brooker et al. 2010) suggest that the introduction of the EYFS in 2008 has not yet alleviated the long-standing and widely documented difficulties surrounding the provision of an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for 4-year-olds in reception classes (see for example, Adams et al. 2004; Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; Rogers and Evans 2008), particularly the increasing pressure to prepare children for entry to formal schooling emphasising skills in literacy and numeracy, arguably to the detriment of other imperatives such as personal and social development. The current review of the EYFS offers an opportunity to assuage those elements of the EYFS which appear to promote more formalised learning contexts such as the literacy goals (DfE 2011). However, concerns remain in some quarters that the 'school readiness' ideology that permeates government early years rhetoric continues to pervade the proposals and that the review will not sufficiently ease pressures within reception classes[1] to ensure developmentally appropriate learning environments (House 2012). Given current government policy to introduce formal reading tests for 6-year-olds, it is likely that early years educators, and in particular reception class teachers will continue to be susceptible to 'top-down' pressures which may further compromise the provision of appropriate contexts for children's learning and development.

Our trawl of the literature suggests that many countries share similarities in relation to recent policy initiatives which commentators have described as 'top-down pressure' and 'academic shovedown' on the early years curriculum. For example in Australia, similar concerns have been expressed about increasing formalisation of early years classrooms (Dockett 2010) and Ho notes the difficulties of implementing a play-based pedagogy in Hong Kong early childhood settings and the 'backwash effect' of academic pressure (Ho 2008, 233). In Sweden, the recent Education Act has applied the concepts of *education* and *teaching* to preschool provision for the first time with the introduction of more explicit educational goals in language, mathematics and science (Ministry of Education and Research 2011). In spite of these similarities, the findings presented here are rather distinctive to England where the school starting age is younger than in most other countries (OECD 2006), officially determined to be the 'term after a child's fifth birthday'. This already early school starting age in England is compounded by the increasing trend for children to enter the reception classes of primary schools at just 4 years old (Rogers and Rose 2007) despite evidence that children who start formal school at a later age eventually outstrip English children in academic achievement (Whetton et al. 2008; Riggall and Sharp 2008). Significantly, in 2011, the school admissions code was revised to enable all 4-year-olds to take a place in reception classes of primary schools in the

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term after their fourth birthday should their parents/carers wish it. In light of this change, the question of what constitutes an appropriate context, curriculum and pedagogy for young children becomes even more pertinent.

Within this broad context, the focus of this study is on early years preservice or student teachers. Research into the significance of the theories, beliefs and principles that inform teachers' decision-making and practice has a long history and has obvious implications for teacher education (e.g. Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; Borko and Putnam 1995; Brownlee and Berthelsen 2006; Hargreaves 1995; Trepanier-Street, Adler, and Taylor 2006). The need, for example, for student teachers to interconnect theory and practice and to eliminate 'discrepancies between intentions and practices' (Day 1985, 134) is high on the agenda in any teacher education programme. In spite of an established literature which explores the relationship between the beliefs and practices of in-service teachers (e.g. Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; Cheng and Johnson 2010) research which has considered this relationship in the context of pre-service early childhood teachers is limited. Some recent exceptions include studies in the USA by Nicholson and Reifel (2011) who investigated childcare teachers' perceptions of initial pre-service and in-service training, and research by Brown (2009) whose study examined early childhood educators' responses to the normalising discourses which are at the heart of policies governing early childhood provision. Brown and Feger's (2010) work has also noted the conflicts encountered by trainee teachers between 'progressive and constructivist rhetoric versus the reality of an overarching school bureaucracy that mandates curricula and measures student performance through high-stakes tests' (287). Their exploration of these processes correlates well with our own study since it was largely concerned with the evidence that showed marked discrepancies between the extent to which student teachers' espoused principles were matched by the classroom pedagogy experienced on final teaching practice. Our findings revealed that the vast majority of student teachers experienced high levels of emotional and cognitive dissonance between the theories and principles obtained from their training and the pedagogic practices observed and experienced in teaching practice classrooms. For many, this dissonance created disappointment in the very early stages of their teaching career. Our concerns led us to investigate more closely the phenomena that created this dissonance and disappointment. What emerged from student teachers' accounts of classroom practice demonstrates quite starkly the presence of severe pressures on reception class teachers to meet the regulatory demands of a standards-based educational context in spite of recent major developments towards a play-based framework for children under 5 years in England.

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Methods

Participants

The participants were 100 early childhood student teachers in the final year of a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), in two different universities in England. The students followed an academic degree programme alongside extended periods in school leading to Qualified Teacher Status, the statutory professional qualification for teachers in the UK. The participants for this study were all taking a specialist early years pathway within the degree programme which focused on the 3–7-year age

range. The data for this study were drawn from the final placement in a reception class and represent a total of 76 different schools across the South West of England.

Data sources

Two data-sets were created from four cohorts of students. The first set comprised essay documents written by 50 participants from one university. As part of their final assessment, the student teachers were required to write critically reflective accounts, identifying the key principles which underpinned their pedagogic practice, and to evaluate these in relation to the context of their final teaching placement in reception classes. The second data-set comprised recorded narratives drawn from a series of four focus groups totalling 50 participants from the second university. During these sessions, the participants were guided through a series of reflective questions to firstly share their principles and then to discuss how they were able to realise these into their placement experiences. Through written and spoken narratives, the 100 participants were enabled to recreate and reconstruct the meaning of their experiences (Cortazzi 1993). Ethical issues were considered seriously, particularly in the light of the sensitivity of some of the comments made about the practice that student teachers had experienced. Informed consent to draw upon the students' work was acquired, with recognition given to the fact that there may be tensions in using assessed work as data. Anonymity was assured, with permission given to refer to the participants by their initials, although no settings or individuals have been named.

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Data analysis

We adopted a traditional qualitative analytical approach utilising grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), in the sense that the emerging themes arose naturally from the narratives portrayed in the post-practice assignments and group discussions. The authors sought confirmatory patterns as well as disconfirmatory evidence through constant comparative method (Erikson 1986; Strauss and Corbin 1998) and repeated visitations to the various manuscripts to detect themes, patterns, commonalities and drawing these into a manageable framework of key issues (Goetz and LeCompte 1984; Lincoln and Guba 1988). Analyst triangulation occurred via initial independent analyses by the two authors. Researcher reflexivity was also incorporated throughout in the tradition of Lincoln and Guba (1990). The data were triangulated to some extent through field notes taken on visits by the first author to the various reception class settings in her role as tutor, providing some corroboratory evidence as well as via the temporal and multi-site comparisons from two different institutions over a 4-year period. We have endeavoured to portray the participants' own explanations and reflections on issues and to sustain their genuine voice as far as possible. Member checks (Lincoln and Guba 1988) were ascertained in two of the cohort groups to improve credibility of the study.

The findings have been presented below in three sections which reflect the sequence and development of our inductive data analysis process. The first section identifies our preliminary findings which highlight the main category of dissonance between the theory and the students' experiences. The second section depicts the emergence of the central theme of 'top-down pressure' from the data whilst the third section explores in more detail the nature of this 'top-down pressure'. In this final

section, our analysis draws upon a sociocultural theoretical framework, in particular the work of Bronfenbrenner to support the interrogation of the data.

Dissonance and disappointment

> Each morning and four afternoons a week were heavily structured with only one afternoon allocated to play, timetabled as 'choosing time'. But the teacher chose what was available each session and these activities did not vary from day to day. There often appeared to be a tension between what the children were compelled to engage with and what they would have liked to engage with. Although the teacher recognised that children needed to play, it was seen as secondary to formal learning. Not once did I see her sit down and play with the children or make any written observation of the children other than when she removed them individually for a specific 'test'. (WD)

In many ways, this extract from one student teacher typifies the sense of dissonance prevalent in the data. The theoretical input students received regarding contextually appropriate practice was frequently in conflict with a very different reality in the classroom, as the following quote affirms:

> Every early years practitioner I have spoken to has, like me, got a story to tell about unsuitable play provision in school. Many have described miniaturized year 6 classrooms, with children sitting behind desks all day and very formal expectations. (EK)

This dissonance invariably manifested itself in disappointment in what they were witnessing and mirrors the 'discouragement' felt by students on practice in early childhood centres in Canada, as identified by Nickel, Sutherby, and Garrow-Oliver (2010). The evidence from our data is exemplified by the emotive words of the following student:

> I was watching a reception class sit down at tables on a Monday to write their news from the weekend. They had to choose between 'I went to. . .' or 'I played with. . .'; and write it out completing the end of the sentence. Only when they had finished their sentences could they draw a picture to go with it. I hated having to take part in such activities as they were painful to watch – the children clearly hated doing it and were not at all interested. The point seemed to be for the teacher to get the children to write as much as they could before they went up to Year One. (KM)

And another:

> Despite having been in 3 reception classes during my teaching practices, I have yet to see the types of experiences provided to children that I expected to see and this made me feel so frustrated and disappointed. (JI)

It became clear that the kind of practice that the students were expected to undertake conflicted with their beliefs and principles – this could be detected in 95% of the participants' texts. Their emotional and cognitive dissonance is aptly expressed in the words of one student:

> At times I felt trapped, the timetable said I should be doing one thing, but in my head and my heart I felt I should be doing something else. (CB)

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These experiences resonate with a study of reception class practice conducted in 2004, prior to the introduction of the EYFS in 2008, which revealed discrepancies between the principles and practice of early years provision and referred to the pressures on reception teachers to prioritise more academic pursuits (Adams et al. 2004). A more recent, small-scale study undertaken since the advent of the EYFS curriculum similarly reveals that, despite a small increase in play-based activity, reception classes still predominately reflect formalised learning contexts with little provision for rich, challenging and complex play (Moyles and Worthington 2011, 2). The researchers of this study write 'whilst the rhetoric of the EYFS . . . is strongly in favour of play and meaningful activities for children, few teachers appeared able to sustain this in their pedagogy and practice' (Moyles and Worthington 2011). Our own findings show that of the 100 practitioners who participated in the study, 95% of them considered the pedagogy in the reception classes to be in conflict with their principles.

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Top-down pressure

From our preliminary analysis, it emerged that the main source of dissonance lay in what was often described as 'top-down pressure' or what Goldstein (2007) calls 'shovedown'. For example, one student explains:

> My feeling was that the teacher was bowing to the pressure of a 'top down' influence in the school. . . This was a school had great pride in being in the top 5% of the country for their Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Tests results and the teacher felt under immense 'top down' pressure. (JR)

What was clear from the students' narratives was that these 'pressures' were affecting the nature of practice in the reception classes. The following two quotes both describe this process:

> Many reception classes are experiencing top-down pressure to prepare the children for Key Stage 1 and more formal teaching contexts and although my classroom teacher agreed with my principles, she had recently felt unable to plan for the play-based activities that she would have liked. The classroom teacher's planning heavily relied upon whole-class sessions and teacher intensive and teacher directed small group work. (BG)

> . . . My reception class was set up just like a Year One class with tables and chairs and a carpeted area facing an interactive whiteboard. The teaching was also very formal. (HB)

Indeed, formalisation of the children's experiences into teacher-directed 'pencil and paper' tasks appeared to be one of the main consequences of the 'pressure' experienced by teachers:

> The class teacher told me that I could implement a play based curriculum for the children, but that I would need to derive the same outcome and levels of attainment as those gained with a more formal approach. I felt that this was a case of doing whatever was necessary to meet 'pressure from above'. (HB)

> . . . the teaching of [literacy and numeracy] dominated the school day. The children were working in a very prescriptive environment and being expected to achieve well

> beyond the guidance given. Subjects were being taught in discrete ways and the emphasis was very much on recorded 'work'. Each child had five different books for specific recording. When I had become more responsible for the overall planning in this setting a frequent comment from the class teacher to me would be, 'And when will they be doing anything in their books?'. (JR)

These comments resonate with a recent survey of in-service early childhood professionals in England who report the unnecessary pressure to provide a baseline assessment for Key Stages 1 and 2 and the 'accountability culture' prevalent in early childhood classrooms. This survey also notes that reception teachers are 'struggling with the more play-based, child-led elements of the EYFS' (Watson 2009) and reflected in a recent study of practitioners' experiences of the EYFS (Brooker et al. 2010).

Sources of the pressure – socio, political and cultural factors

Brown and Feger (2010) refer to the 'political' pressure witnessed by student teachers in their field placements in the USA and this form of pressure was clearly detectable within the data reported here. However, Goldstein suggests that the challenges facing early childhood trainees in the USA go beyond a simple battle between the imposition of government-directed policies on educational standards and developmentally appropriate practice (Goldstein 2007). Our own evidence bears this out. When reviewing the data, we tried to ascertain the sources of the 'political' pressure. Clear identification was not always possible as students often referred to the pressure without exploring its nature. But as we have seen from the evidence quoted earlier, some did offer either opinions or actual evidence of the sources. Three specific aspects were identified from the data: government policy (in the form of standardised testing), work colleagues (particularly head teachers and teachers in Key Stages 1 and 2), and parents. To illustrate:

From government policy:

> There can be a lot of pressure to prepare the children for year 1 and beyond and even be accountable for SATs[2]. This too often results in there being a struggle to implement the Foundation Stage effectively because instead of there being a child-centred play-based approach, management expect to see a more structured, formal learning in order to get results. (LB)

From head teachers and colleagues:

> One problem reception teachers have is pressure from other teachers who regard the time in reception as some kind of initial training for Key Stage One. I felt this 'top down' pressure during teaching practice when I was told by my school mentor, who was the Y1&2 teacher that I needed to get the children to write more, certainly on a daily basis. Mark making in sand, gloop or other materials did not count, it needed to be writing with pencil and paper. Although I put forward my justification for not making the children formally 'write' every day, I was told that it needed to happen because 'before long these children will be in class 2 and they will need to write everyday'. (WD)

From parents:

> I have seen a number of parents at parent evenings ask straight away about their child's development in numeracy and literacy and to a certain extent dismiss any enthusiasm

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> the teacher has shown for the child's development socially or their developing physical coordination. (HR)

Of the 95 participants who considered their experiences within their placement reception classes to be in conflict with their principles, 58 made reference to the government as a source of pressure, 34 pointed towards pressure from head teachers and other staff (echoing the pressure from Key Stage 1 colleagues highlighted in the study by Adams et al. 2004) and 24 commented on pressure from parents. As the figures suggest, some of these students identified more than one pressure source, most notably the government and other teaching staff – hence the total of 116 references to pressure sources.

Initially, we felt such data suggested three separate sources for the top-down pressure suggested above (government policy, higher grade teachers/head teachers, parents) but our analysis has led us to conceive a convergence of the three pressure sources into overlapping socio, political and cultural phenomena with each aspect feeding the other through human agency, similar to the processes and spheres of influence identified within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. It was possible to locate the particular pressure sources emerging from the students' narratives within Bronfenbrenner's various 'systems of interaction'. The most obvious system impinging upon student teachers' experiences is the macrosystem (and chronosystem), that is the existing cultural values, societal beliefs and political trends that impinge upon the nature of the school microsystem, all reflected by governmental policies, teachers' attitudes and parental expectations highlighted in the students' narratives. The school microsystem itself is sustained by the mesosystems, in this case the other teachers, head teachers and parents, who, as the data suggest, actively assist in the perpetuation of the macrosystem by helping to connect the various systems via social relationships and practices. Our analysis correlates with Court, Meray, and Ornan's (2009) study of Israeli preschool teachers which shows how professional identities are constantly 'tested' and 'shaped' through interactive relationships and notes that 'preschool teachers, like other teachers, work in a complex environment made up of many human factors including parents, colleagues and supervisors, all with expectations of the teacher' (214). This process is similar to Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that cultural capital acts as a social relation with a system of exchange that presents certain practices as being more worthy and sought after, conferring power and status on such practices.

Our data show how the various pressure groups contribute to the progression of the institutionalised and embodied cultural capital inherent in the microsystem of schools – in this case, in what have become legitimised pedagogical practices within the habitus of reception classes. These ideas also resonate with sociocultural theory and the work of Holland et al. to which Brown and Feger (2010) have drawn attention when considering the so-called 'figured worlds' that student teachers encounter on practice. Such worlds comprise 'specific… practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed ''worlds''' (Holland et al. cited in Brown and Feger 2010, 288). Drawing on the work of Hatt et al., Brown and Feger (2010) highlight that such figured worlds 'represent the expectations, rules and social forces ''that influence… the ways people speak, behave and ''practice'' within social spaces' (299). Our data show how the trainee teachers encounter various participants within the 'figured worlds' of the school

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microsytem, such as teachers and parents, who assign significance to certain practices and discourses as the following illustrates:

> Both the parents and members of staff believe that if the reception children are not at a certain level when they reach Year 1 they will do poorly in later years when it comes to SATs and other formal testing. So I have heard both parents and teachers say they like reception to have a structure so they are ready for Year 1. (HB)

Or as another expresses it:

> Many reception classes I have been in have focused on children holding pencils to write their name and copy down words. Often play is squeezed out to make space for areas of learning that parents and teachers consider to be 'more important'. (HF)

Using Bronfenbrenner's framework, it is possible to understand how the various pressure sources interact with each other to create a powerful, psychological exosystem that is not physically tangible, but exerts tremendous power on students and helps to create the cognitive and emotional dissonance experienced by student teachers as they move from the microsystem of HE to the microsystem of the school and the 'cultures of performativity' that they encounter (Troman 2008). This process brings to mind the work of Das (2007) who refers to the power dynamics that are manifested through social interactions within school cultures and how such power dynamics serve to shape the desired learning environment.

Government directives are invariably based on sociocultural expectations and vice versa. Certainly, the CPA has revealed that children are 'under intense and perhaps excessive pressure from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially-driven values of the wider society' (Hall and Ozerk 2008). Goldstein (2007) notes similar pressures in the USA with increased accountability, a greater emphasis on academic skills and predetermined learning outcomes, which, in turn, has led to early years practitioners 'struggling with the disjuncture between their philosophical beliefs about best practices and the increasingly structured and narrow curriculum dictated by local school districts' (Goldstein 2007). Tissington (2008) has also utilised Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective to help conceptualise and understand the processes within transitions to teaching and to recognise the sociocultural and socio-political influences and social relationships between trainees and their surrounding contexts.

The stories told here about the 'top-down pressure' on reception classes are echoed in previous research. Tales of children experiencing literacy and numeracy preparation earlier than they should in order to prepare them for Key Stage 1 (Grade 1) (Moyles 2007; Ofsted 2000; Whitebread and Coltman 2008) and practitioners' fears of inspection requirements which is driving them to more formal practice (David et al. 2000; Miller and Smith 2004; Rogers and Evans 2008) and research which suggests that an emphasis on skill acquisition can be to the detriment of children's motivation to learn, reading skills being a classic example of this trend. The Primary Review, for example, has noted that any gains have been 'at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of reading' (Whetton et al. 2008, 19; Tymms and Merrell 2008). Oberhuemer (2005) similarly expresses concerns in the literature about the 'school readiness' culture in which economic goals take precedence over children's rights and needs.

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However, we believe blame cannot be laid simply at the door of governments since it is parents and the wider public who ultimately vote politicians into power. At the same time, parents and the wider public create an audience for the accountability system which itself becomes culturally self-perpetuating. Goldstein's (2007) research in the USA also points to parents as a source of 'pressure' and cites other studies that demonstrate conflicts between parent and teacher expectations about what children should or should not be experiencing. She refers to evidence from the literature of parents' 'disinterest in play-based, child-centred learning experiences and their preference for a greater focus on academic skill development' (49). Some of the students in our research give evidence of this. The differences in perspective between the public and the early childhood practitioners tend to fall under a child-centred, constructivist versus teacher-centred, skills-based divide which manifests itself, in particular, in literacy development (Trepanier-Street, Adler, and Taylor 2006). Professionals working within the system may be caught in the maelstrom of parent and politician but they themselves become advocates and often act as the most direct force in sustaining the kind of practice that proliferates. What is also clear from our own and Goldstein's work is that the pressures created by the 'standards debate' manifest themselves through colleagues teaching older children to relieve their own pressures. In the USA, first-grade teachers, for example, 'lighten their own load by pushing some of the first grade standards downwards' (Goldstein 2007, 50). Goldstein talks of the 'interdependence' between teachers of different grades and how the 'success of one depends on the other'. This can create professional tensions between colleagues in schools, again something the students in this study observed:

> Some members of staff believe that if the reception children are not at a certain level when they reach year 1 they will do poorly in later years when it comes to SATs and other formal testing. (HB)

The interacting complexity of the various pressures operating on early childhood practitioners is heightened by the conflicts that exist within government directives, within parents' aspirations for their children and within society's desire to achieve through education both economic well-being and personal fulfilment. The Primary Review in the UK has revealed the existence of tensions between, for example, policy imperatives that create competitive education markets and a remit that promotes an inclusive society and an emphasis on personalisation (Primary Review News Release 2007). In 2004, the Department for Education and Science (now the Department for Education) called for practitioners to tailor education 'to individual need, interest and attitude' but at the same time chose to place 'a more central social and economic emphasis upon performance and public accountability' (Osgood 2006, 188) thereby shifting the emphasis from individual growth to corporate success, from personal well-being to competitive economic drivers. McNarama, Brundrett, and Webb (2008) point out the 'contradictory ideological forces' and the 'lack of coherence and consistency in the educational principles and values, and at times the regulation and accountability, underpinning some of them'. Hall (2009) refers to the mixed messages inherent within the EYFS between formal literacy skills and informal, playful emerging literacies, a paradox that appears likely to continue under the new proposals with its recognition of both 'the central importance of play' and the 'need' for children 'to be introduced to formal learning' (Gove 2011). In the face of such contradictory pressures, newly qualified teachers face a challenging context.

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Nonetheless, it is our belief that a way forward is possible. In the following section, we identify two key avenues through which early childhood teachers might be able to engage with the various factors that appear to inhibit practitioners from sustaining their belief system and implementing a contextually appropriate practice as proposed in the EYFS. These are the processes of stimulating students to create their own critical vision of appropriate practices and empowering them to become agents of change.

Creating a vision and change agentry

In teacher education in the UK, provision is made to enable students to acquire a firm theoretical foundation, strategies and skills to put this theory into action, maximise opportunities to practice this and to reflect critically on what has been learned, emphasising the importance of developing self-awareness which includes the identification of personal beliefs and values which in turn will influence teachers' thinking and practice and where tutors 'are committed to them as unique individuals and are invested in their growth and development, not only as teachers, but as human beings' (Baum and King 2006, 218). A constructivist approach (Baum and King 2006; Bufkin and Bryde 1996; Hamilton and Hitz 1996) is adopted whereby the students can pro-actively engage in a self-examination of theoretical and practical issues against a backdrop of personal empowerment and 'intellectual safety' (Baum and King 2006). It is clear from our evidence that the student teachers profoundly understood the need to critically reflect on their principles in the context of their practice. As some have written:

> It is argued that principles form a model of what is expected/needed in [early childhood] settings and therefore become a frame of reference when teaching; this is why my core principles will underpin my role [. . .] I regard them as a work in progress because as I develop and progress [. . .]I shall reflect upon my practice and therefore adapt and modify them many times throughout my career (LR)

And:

> The deep rooted values, attitudes and beliefs that a teacher holds about children, childhood and how children learn, directly and profoundly influences the way that they teach and consequently impacts upon children's learning experiences. It has become clear to me that to be a successful [teacher] I must be able to critically examine my own beliefs and recognise the social constructions that inform my own thinking. (BG)

Most of the students made passionate statements about the need for a 'strong vision' for early childhood practice and it became apparent that many were able and willing to implement this vision despite the political and sociocultural barriers that they perceived stood between their principles and practice. This leads us to a second factor we believe helps to equip new teachers with the necessary tools to counteract those elements that work against the implementation of appropriate practices – developing a sense of change agentry.

Drawing on work of Dale and others, Osgood (2006) highlights the need for early childhood practitioners to develop their professional confidence so that they can question and challenge government directives and help them to 'actively position themselves in competing and alternative discourses of professionalism' one which

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'rests upon professional pride and reflection' (195–6). She calls for solidarity and collective action to resist 'top-down policy imposition' (Osgood 2006). Such approaches include the need to engage students in 'critiquing the discourses that shape and constrain their work' (Novinger and O'Brien 2003, 21), including prescribed curricular such as the EYFS, that may not support a broader vision of contextually appropriate practices. In doing so, they can develop a 'critical consciousness about teaching and learning' which is grounded in 'caring, democracy, and social justice' (Novinger and O'Brien 2003, 22). Similarly, Moyles' (2001) research has argued that 'diversified groups of early years practitioners have shown themselves able to engage in high level, critical reflection on their own practices to link associated theory and to challenge political prescription' (81). Our students certainly seem prepared to do this:

> By being clear about your own mind as to exactly what your principles mean you are more able to put them into practice. You are also less likely to accept anything other than what you believe to be right when you are under pressure from top-down factors such as SATs results. I want to promote the idea of the young child as a competent learner and fight for a bottom-up approach that resists the pressure to test children in a meaningless fashion. (JE)

Another declared:

> I must have candour, the courage of my convictions to stand by my principles wherever possible and above all try to provide the best education I can for the children in my care. (HB)

The absence of play was a common issue encountered by our students and a number of the students proactively introduced or extended this practice when given the opportunity. A small minority of students (4%) were able to directly influence existing practice:

> In my first week of being there I only saw two play sessions, which occurred when the class teacher was not there. I took on 80% of the planning and teaching from week two and slowly adapted the planning to suit my principles. I introduced a 'free play' session, where the children were able to move between the indoor and outdoor learning environments. On introducing this session I noticed a dramatic change in a lot of the children with their approach to learning, classroom behaviour, interaction with peers and overall achievements. Suddenly everything that I had been exploring, discussing, researching and observing over the duration of my degree proved itself in just two weeks. (FH)

> What was interesting to observe was the teacher's reaction to the play that went on within the classroom. She was amazed at the learning that went on and the quality of the learning that was taking place. Slowly over time she became more confident in her own practice. (LJ)

> I now had a better understanding of the need for quality formative assessment and observations so that we could show how we were planning a play-based curriculum that took account of individual learning needs and interests so that Kieran could build robots and Ahmed could become a pirate. I had to use my early years knowledge and understanding to justify some approaches but was well supported by my classroom teacher and consequently together we managed to overcome most barriers and re-establish some of the practices that she herself had wished to readdress. I was glad to

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> have been a catalyst for her and able to offer her support for her own professional values. The other classroom teacher and TAs all responded positively to the changes and appeared to reconsider the benefits for the children and themselves. (BG)

Conclusion – making rhetoric a reality

We have argued here for early childhood practitioners to challenge 'top-down' policy through individual agency and to transform practice to bring their principles and practice into closer alignment. As teacher educators, we can help students to critique dominant pedagogical beliefs, to interrogate cultural understandings and political environments, to confront the dynamics of power and hegemonic discourses that affect the educational process and empower them to implement the kind of practices that most benefit young children so that they have, as one of our students put it:

> the confidence and skills to carry out my own 'quiet revolution'. (BG)

In England, the increasing trend to expand postgraduate training to school-centred and employment-based routes (McNarama, Brundrett, and Webb 2008) coupled with changes in policy instigated by the current UK coalition government which are likely to place reception class pedagogy under further pressure, particularly in literacy and numeracy and related proposed testing regimes, creates an added impetus for teacher educators to act as suitable role models for future early childhood teachers and help to ensure that students are sufficiently prepared in university programmes to reflect critically on pedagogic practices observed on school placements that may not align with their knowledge about and principles for young children's learning and to cultivate alternative contextually appropriate ways of viewing and supporting the child in early years settings.

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Notes

1. The 'reception class', a term with a particular currency in the UK, is positioned as the first class of primary school although it is subject to the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Current policy allows for children to be admitted to reception classes in the term after their fourth birthday although they are not of statutory school age until the term after their fifth birthday.
2. Standard Attainment Tasks taken at end of Key Stage 1 (when children are age 6 or 7 years).

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