

Notes from speech made at NUT conference in Torquay, speaking against an early years motion on play 17-04-06

I don't object to play in early years. I object to the politicisation of play. There is no consensus as to what is supposed to be good practice. I go on the TES early years message board and all I see there is confusion and stress and guilt expressed by EY teachers, debates about play versus formal teaching, the workload of 117 tick boxes to be filled in, the lack of training in how to teach reading and the supposed superiority of schools in Finland and Reggio Emilia. The Early Years curriculum is a dog's dinner.

There is no consensus but we are in danger of creating a new breed of workplace bullies, Early Years advisors who come in and tell teachers they should not do "formal teaching" almost criminalising them. There is an Early Years consortium of academics which has sent out advice to all EY advisors on how to resist/stand up to the teaching of children in groups as advocated by the Rose Review final report on the teaching of early reading.

A play-based curriculum should include actual teaching of skills too. We are teachers. Yet in my LEA, an advisor heard her Early Years colleague reporting back that he had seen "dangerous practice" in a school. What was it? Children sitting on the carpet doing Jolly Phonics in Reception. Carpets can be dangerous places in some Reception classes, but to describe 20 minutes of Jolly phonics out of a 6 hour day as dangerous practice, is as much a nonsense, as the speaker who said we inflict state-sponsored child-abuse on our children in this country in early years.

This brings me to the teaching of reading in early years. SP has had a real bashing at this conference. Please as professionals can we separate out the value of synthetic phonics from this government's heavy-handed mandating of it? They are two different things. It is galling that they told us to switch the searchlights on and now they are telling us to turn them off.

In Newham we have lots of NUT members in over a dozen schools doing SP programmes like JP and RML, very successfully. Our kids, working class kids need, and their parents expect a good early start to reading. Muslim children go to Arabic or Bengali classes after school where they are explicitly taught the alphabet and many African-Caribbean children come to school already having been taught their ABCs. There is a cultural expectation that they will be taught. Literacy lifts them out of poverty. Or will there be a campaign to re-educate these misguided groups from harming their children?

I think there's a lot of ignorance and suspicion surrounding SP, some demonstrated by people on the platform. I invite any members of the executive to come to a Newham SP school. I promise them it's not s-t-u-h-p-i-d, it's not cruelty to young children, it's every child's right to be taught to read in early years. We are in danger of throwing the babies out with the bathwater and institutionalising a new anti-teaching orthodoxy.

Don't politicise play.