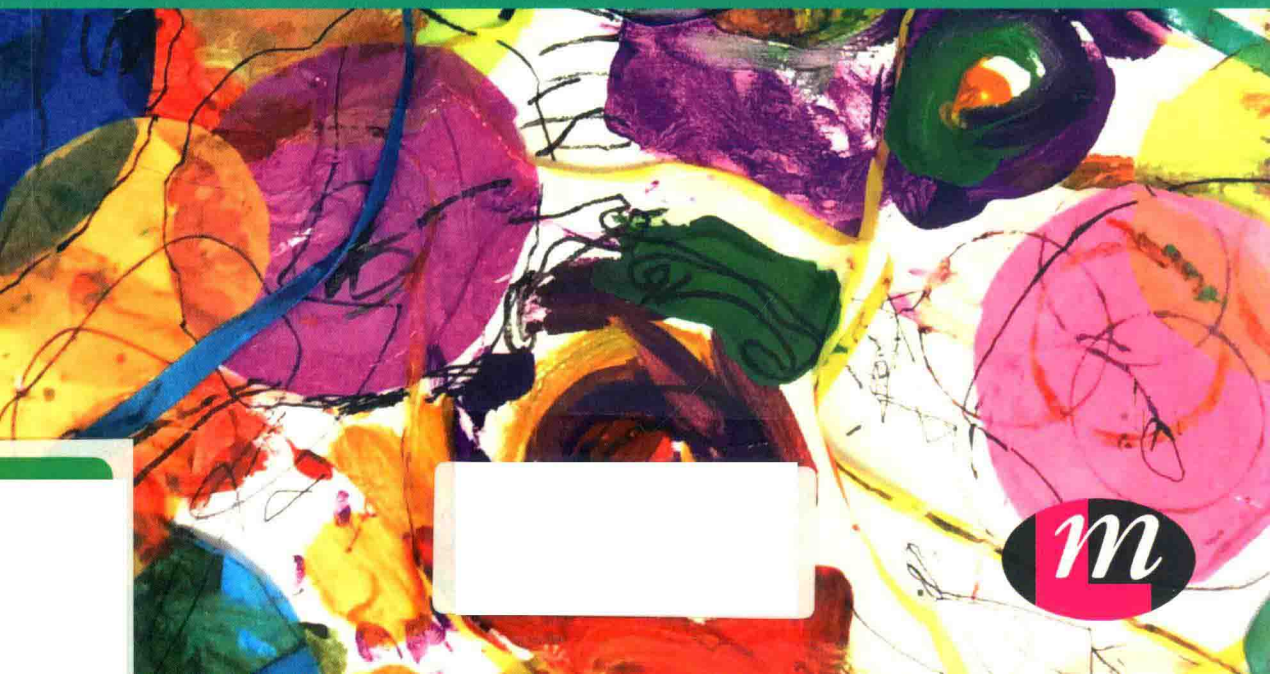




The Multiple Identities of the Reception Teacher

Pedagogy and Purpose

Edited by Anna Cox and Gillian Sykes



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Introduction to the editors and authors

Introduction to the editors

Anna Cox is the programme leader for a PGCE programme at the University of Northampton, training teachers to work with children from 3 to 7 years of age. She teaches on BA and PGCE programmes for primary and early years trainees. She previously worked at Sheffield Hallam University, for Derbyshire County Council Early Years Support Team and Tameside Borough Childcare and Education Team over the past 20 years. She has particular interests in supporting those who teach the youngest children and in teachers' self-efficacy.

Gillian Sykes is Senior lecturer in Education, Early Years at the University of Northampton teaching on the BA Early Years, PGCE 3–7 and PGCE 0–5 programmes. Professional interests in early years education include: enabling environments, learning outdoors, the arts and creativity and supporting young children's writing development. Specialised in the field of early years as a teacher, lead teacher, forest school practitioner, mentor and Local Authority Early Years senior advisor. Now supporting the development of early years teachers in 'community of practice'-based CPD projects.

Introduction to the authors

Eleonora Teszenyi is a Senior Lecturer in early years education at the University of Northampton. Before entering Higher Education she had worked in the early years sector for 19 years as a nursery practitioner, Early Years teacher/Early Years professional, Early Years advisor and children centre teacher. Her specialist area is child development (birth to 5 years) and her current research projects include work on mixed and same-age groups in Hungarian kindergartens. Her other interests are related to parent partnerships and work-based learners in higher education.

Julia Beckreck has a wealth of experience in the field of education. Having originally trained at Goldsmith College, and then teaching in both England and the United States, she has endeavoured to understand how children learn and how to provide them with the fullest support and care to reach their own goals. More recently, her headship in Leicestershire and, after retirement, as a children's centre teacher, both afforded her opportunities to observe children and adults learning and teaching together.

Shona Lewis is a visiting tutor at Birmingham City University supporting early years students on the Teacher First programme. She is also a county moderator for Warwickshire and an associate lecturer at University of Northampton. Professional interests in early years education include literacy and assessment. She worked as a classroom teacher, early years co-ordinator, literacy co-ordinator, senior leader, associate literacy teacher, county moderator, for the local authority as a senior early years advisory teacher leading on assessment and literacy, and was programme manager of Teach First Primary at The University of Leicester.

Claire Underwood is the Nursery teacher, EYFS leader and Assistant Headteacher at Eastfield Academy in Northampton. She is in her tenth year of teaching and is passionate about child-centred learning. She embraces outdoor learning and demonstrates a great commitment to developing Forest School and outdoor activities throughout the school. Keen to share her enthusiasm for early years she can be found collaborating with colleagues as far away as Bologna and Barnsley but can be mostly found on Twitter and her nursery blog.

Samantha Weeks is currently the director of Early Years at Stamford Junior School and a Reception class teacher. She is acting as a 'champion of research' at school and maintains her relationship with the University of Northampton where she was previously a senior lecturer in education, Early Years. Before lecturing Samantha enjoyed a range of Early Years positions including Reception and nursery teaching, Children's Centre teacher and a Local Authority Advisory teacher: always with an emphasis on the Arts. After studying for an MA at the Institute of Education she was lucky enough to visit Reggio Emilia and has never been the same again! Her specialist areas include expressive arts as a form of communication, the way in which children engage with clay and embracing a rights-based approach to teaching.

Introduction

This book has been created by a community of writers, all passionate about young children's learning. Our experiences include Reception practice in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and into the twenty-first century and our total of years of Reception practice is better not revealed! Our decision to write this book was based on the fact that we believe the Reception Year is a fascinating and exciting year for children and their teachers. This does not diminish what has come before, or indeed what comes after, but celebrates the 'magic bit in the middle'. Our discussions are often based around the complex nature of the role of the Reception teacher and the variety of 'hats' worn each day or each week through the year. Reception teachers metamorphose into and out of roles and identities as different situations arise. It is these many roles that this book seeks to unravel.

As authors we make no excuse for this book being written 'from the heart'. We recognise that the best Reception teachers are those who are 'emotionally connected' to the work they do, always striving for excellence. They are the teachers who cannot, and would not choose to, separate care from education. At all times they place the child and their well-being at the centre of all they do. We have often heard it said that the Reception year is a bridge into Key Stage 1; this can mean that it is devalued and seen only as a time of transition and preparation for something greater and more important. If the bridge analogy is in any way relevant to this book we must think of bridges in different ways. Firstly, bridges are vital in making way from one place to another and so it may be in the Reception Year. However, there have been times in history when bridges also provided other more varied experiences – with shops, chapels, markets and other activities bringing them to life. Bridges are varied and intriguing in design, bearing their travellers with care, but offering opportunities for risk taking, and diversity in mode and movement dependent upon the traveller. Such is the image of a Reception class and its teacher: each different, each unique and each responding to the needs of the children and their families.

We want to celebrate the way that teachers bring to life the Reception Year and we have conceptualised the Reception Year differently. An alternative image is to see the Reception Year as an opportunity for *time travel* and a time for children to have experiences which acknowledge their younger selves and which support their development as individuals.

Reception teachers facilitate the time travel of their classes and help them to make progress towards the people they will become, building on past experiences and creating new ones. They help children learn to be robust, to face challenges and to be able to cope with new

experiences in the school context and beyond. For that reason, this book is not curriculum focused (though the key themes which are considered can all be enacted successfully following the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance). There are many books which unpick the content of the curriculum; in this book it is our aim to unpick and explore the role of the Reception teacher, and their many identities without using the curriculum as a framework.

Why is this? We consider that Reception teachers fulfil a role which has a strong public face and one in which the boundaries of professional and personal identity can be blurred. How many Reception teachers have been invited to tea at a child's home or to a birthday party? This brings into conflict personal and professional values – should such invitations be accepted or turned down? Every Reception teacher knows that they are observed and judged, however informally. Cultural context plays a part too, with some environments where teachers are respected and even venerated. They are the source of example and inspiration for children and families. Many young learners on the African continent and in China are brought up with an elevated view of teachers. There are those who suggest that this is not the case in the United Kingdom, and indeed it is not so clearly demonstrated through the media and the pronouncements of politicians. However, many adults remember their own Reception teachers fondly and hope for the most positive and supportive Reception teachers for their own children. So, in this book we look at the ways in which the perception and the reality of a Reception teacher's role are formed, and how a Reception teacher's self-worth can be acknowledged and supported.

Many Reception teachers reflect on what their role is in the school context, sometimes undervalued by colleagues who teach older children and viewed as less encumbered by planning and assessment. Through the pages of this book we want to encourage Reception teachers to reflect also on their important roles in the lives of children and families, and the wider community. Sometimes this is understood by locating Reception teachers in their spheres of influence and action, such as the ecological systems theory put forward by Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.21). In this book an alternative model is provided for understanding *who* Reception teachers are in the lives of children, families and school communities. In a straw poll of Reception teachers the words used to describe themselves and the features of their role included carer, educator, key person, friend, play partner, more knowledgeable other. This list too is expanded upon later in the book, where it is linked to the children's skills, knowledge and attributes in the Reception year, always working in line and in tune with what is happening in the child's life. The best Reception teachers look for and find children's strengths, interests, capabilities and more and they build on them.

So, in this Introduction we set out the vision of the book and its structure along with suggestions for different ways in which to access it. These suggestions for the way that the book can be used, to make it useful and enjoyable to the reader include the use of the blank page at the end of each chapter for personal notes. The book is designed to be used as a working document: written in, jotted on, highlighted and thumbled by those who use it. Some



Figure Intro.1 Close co-operation between a Reception teacher and young learners

may choose to read through from the front to the back, and then revisit key issues. It is more likely that dipping in to chapters or sections which relate to current practice issues will be effective for individual readers straight away. Vignettes, talks and tasks for the team, nuggets of further inspiration and points to ponder are also included at various points in the text, and these can function as a stimulus on their own or following on from reading the chapters that contain them. The book takes an innovative view of teaching in the Reception year and so the content is presented in a particular way, alongside some theoretical underpinnings relevant to the individual chapters. The chapters reflect the characters of the writers and so they are not uniform in structure and approach but each one has been written with passion by the writer or writers responsible for it. Opinions and viewpoints will vary and will be a source of respectful debate. However, these are opinions and viewpoints which are based on years of critical reflection.

This book is intended for anyone interested in the role of the Reception teacher. It is hoped that it may be used to develop discussion among and between those working or training in the Reception year. We think this is a book where the more experienced Reception teacher will be able to find comfort and challenge. We also urge that the book is used to spark discussion with colleagues teaching in Key Stages 1 and 2 and beyond. Perhaps those who think we are 'just playing'? Thinking back to the analogy of a bridge, then, we imagine Reception teachers on a magnificent rope bridge with colleagues and giving it a good 'wobble'! We want to shake and reshape people's perceptions of the Reception teacher, and for them to appreciate its diverse and multifaceted nature. Who else would go home at the end of the day having had half a cup

of cold coffee, a bit of carrot (from the snack bar), wearing a row of wooden threading beads, covered in paint, clutching a note from an earnest four year old reminding you to bring in 'flawr, solt, and oyl'? Such is the life of the Reception teacher.

The structure of the book is as follows:

Chapter 1 – Anna Cox and Eleonora Teszenyi

Time travel, kaleidoscopes and a hat shop. Here the notion of multiple identities of the Early Years teacher is unpicked. In this chapter a range of possible models for the Reception teacher are explored. A further model created by the authors is proposed and explored. In this chapter the reader will be able to access ideas about Reception practice to add to their existing ideas and experience or to challenge them and also be able to engage with a more dynamic and flexible conception of the role.

Chapter 2 – Eleonora Teszenyi

Children at four. What is it to be a four year old? This is an in-depth chapter, deliberately longer and more theoretically based than the others. This was an informed decision as without understanding what it is like to be a four or five year old, we cannot begin to identify, justify and shape our roles.

Chapter 3 – Samantha Weeks

You as an advocate for Early Childhood. Fiercely protective of the importance which needs to be placed on Early Years education, this chapter explores the role of the twenty-first century Reception teacher in 'fighting the corner' for teaching and learning in this critical period of a child's life.

Chapter 4 – Claire Underwood, Anna Cox and Gillian Sykes

You as a collaborator in learning. This chapter is steeped in personal practice. Here you will find fine examples of adventuring in learning with young children, and the synergy that is created as you become partners in generating new knowledge and understanding.

Chapter 5 – Samantha Weeks and Claire Underwood

You as a creator of the learning environment. This chapter explores the relationship between pedagogy and knowledge of child development in the organisation of the learning environment. It validates the need to involve the children in this creation and draws on the work of Malaguzzi, Rinaldi and Jarman to help us develop our own child-centred environments.

Chapter 6 – Gillian Sykes

You as a landscape architect. This chapter prioritises the unique qualities of the outdoors as a learning environment vital to young children's development. It reflects on past and current theory to help us justify and plan for our own outdoors. Again, we highlight the

need to listen to the voice of the child as we become architects of these diverse, ever changing environments.

Chapter 7 – Shona Lewis and Julia Beckreck

You as an auditor of children's learning. This chapter begins 'We see children's development by what they do. They construct their own learning. Yet how do we observe, understand and respond?' It leads us on a path, filled with corners and bends, where we tune into the children we work with. It elevates this often-maligned aspect of our practice as we rejoice in what we see, and then do.

Chapter 8 – Gillian Sykes

You as a partner in the lives of children, families and communities. In this chapter we look at the many people who affect and effect the lives of the children with whom we work. This chapter seeks to promote these partnerships and takes a positive stance in making these relationships work for the benefit of the children in our care.

Chapter 9 – Anna Cox

You in a team of researchers. In this chapter some different ways of looking at learning through reflection and research are talked about. You are encouraged to see the children as researchers in a community of practice. The importance of researching your own practice and of CPD are also discussed.

Chapter 10 – Anna Cox and Gillian Sykes

The mirror in the hat shop. These are the closing remarks for now. We briefly revisit some of the ideas from the chapters and hope to send you off into an optimistic future.

As you delve into the book you will find it has a range of features which vary from chapter to chapter. There are some vignettes through which contemporary practice is exemplified and examined. We also include a 'points to ponder' to encourage personal reflection and review of experience in the light of ideas in the text. These are the most personal of the inclusions, not designed to change practice but to have confidence that personal professional practice is supported by sound judgement. We have also included some 'Further inspiration' where particular ideas are shared, web links noted, supplies or resources highlighted and other good things. Many may be known to readers already but others may not and so it seemed a good idea to share the things that excite us. Therefore, features of the text are:

Brief bullet points which offer an overview of what the chapter will cover

Point to ponder – ideas to challenge your own thinking

Team talks and tasks – these will help you to work as a team to become a true community of practice

Vignettes – examples of contemporary practice to bring aspects of the chapter to life

Further inspiration – ideas which have inspired us and we hope, in turn, will inspire you

References – to further support your personal knowledge and understanding

Jottings – a space to note points for interest or action.

To bring to a close this Introduction it is important to be explicit: the philosophy that underpins this book is based on a competence model of the child, based on understanding children's developing bodies and minds during this important year. This concurs with what Dubiel (2014, p.66) describes as 'socially just and child centred practice'. We can explain our approach by adopting his term 'a value prism' – we believe that children are curious and idiosyncratic, capable and enquiring, and full of possibility. This is the reason that the role of the Reception teacher is challenging and fulfilling as well as very important. The writing team who have produced this book share the view that Reception teachers are important and special people in the lives of children.

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Dubiel, J. (2014) *Effective assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Early Excellence: London.

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1 Time travel, kaleidoscopes and a hat shop

Anna Cox and Eleonora Teszenyi

In this chapter we will begin to consider:

- models and ideas about the identities and roles of a Reception teacher, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and 'the hierarchy of the heart and the head';
- new ways of looking at the roles to support a personally negotiated understanding;
- child-centred pedagogical approaches and care-full practice;
- the social construction of the teaching role;
- the different hats teachers wear according to the roles they fulfil in children's lives.

Starting points

The demands and pressures on the teaching profession are influenced by political change, and this cannot be avoided. The most successful Reception teachers fend off the favours and fancies that come about from this. Good teaching can become a contested notion in a climate of change and teachers need to be able to defend their own good practice. This will come from a strong sense of 'who you are as a teacher' and more specifically for the purposes of this book 'who you are as a Reception teacher'. In this book the term multiple identities is used as a concept that portrays a range of personal and professional roles within an educational context. This poses the questions 'what is identity?' and 'what is role?'. By identity we mean a sense of self, developed from experiences across a range of contexts – personal, professional and cultural, for example – which is ever evolving and changing through the life course. The notion of role is less dynamic and is the label given to a set of functions, and so is the practical

and utilitarian aspect of identity. So, a Reception teacher can be seen to have a complex and interlinked set of identities and roles. In this chapter these ideas are explored and new ideas generated. It is important to remember that multiple identities are not fixed nor are they shared among Reception teachers. They evolve, are negotiated and change; they are deeply personal. Some of the features discussed in this chapter will resonate with you and others less so. Over time some of the features you relate to will take centre stage and then they will recede – who you are as a Reception teacher is always in flux. The value of discussing the many identities is to help individual teachers to identify and develop their own identity as a teacher of the Reception year. It should also help to reassure you that it is wholly appropriate that your work is an integral part of who you are as a person and as a professional.



Team talks and tasks

Ask everyone in your team to write down five words that capture parts of their roles in the Reception classroom. Share the lists and combine them to make a master list. Use this to help you to clarify your shared purposes in the classroom.

One of a number of existing models is proposed by Rose and Rogers (2012) who unpick the role of Early Years practitioners into components. They suggest Early Years practitioners act as: critical reflector, carer, communicator, facilitator, observer, assessor and creator. This 'plural practitioner' (p.5) has undoubtedly shaped our thinking. The roles that they propose are recognisable in Reception teachers but do not cover all that it means to be an effective Reception teacher. We have expanded some of the categories here and others are left for your consideration (facilitator, observer, assessor and creator). Their first component, the skill of reflection, will undoubtedly have been highlighted throughout your training. Once in practice you are more likely to wake up thinking about how to redesign your role-play area than to use a reflective model to do this – it will be in your blood! The second Rose and Rogers category, the Reception teacher as a carer, is explored more fully in a later section of this chapter, but at this point it is sufficient to say that caring *about* the children in your class will go alongside caring *for* them but must always be done in the context of a vision of the strong child, not one based on viewing the child as a collection of needs to be met. The next role in the list, the teacher as a communicator, is explored very fully in other chapters and so does not warrant much additional comment. The importance and diversity of communication does allow us to explore briefly just how skilful young children are at reading our faces. An often-mentioned expression is that 'eyes are the windows of the soul' – this is thought to be part of a quotation from Hiram Powers (an American sculptor, 1805–1873). He said 'The eye is the window of the soul, the mouth the door. The intellect, the will, are seen in the eye; the emotions,