

The Multiple Identities of the
Reception Teacher
Pedagogy and Purpose

Edited by Anna Cox and Gillian Sykes



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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,

sensibilities, and affections, in the mouth'. The children in your class will be very able to attend to your features and learn a lot about you and for some of them what they read there will set the tone for their day.

The Rose and Rogers model of Early Years practitioners can shed some light on what it is to be a Reception teacher but you are a distinct group among Early Years practitioners. Below, in the point to ponder, another model is reviewed and commented on, as a further step on the journey to unpick the multiple identities of the Reception teacher.



Point to ponder

Hiram Powers

Try to find an image of the sculpture 'fisher boy' by Hiram Powers. The figure is a nude holding a shell to his ear. Take a close look at the shell and at the child's face. Can you think of an activity for your children stimulated by this image or another of Hiram's works?

Hierarchy of needs to hierarchy of the heart and the head

The well-known hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) has been revisited by Robinson (2007, p.10) to support practitioners who work with the youngest children. Here we use the term 'hierarchy of the heart and the head' to describe this model and reflect on it from the perspective of Reception teachers. As can be seen from Figure 1.1 overleaf it rests on the personal passion of the Reception teacher; a person who has chosen and wants to work with the youngest children in the school context. Working with young children whom you care for should allow you to be your authentic self, to share with them the person that you really are. All Reception teachers are different and they manifest their personalities as teachers and as people in different ways. What is really important is that you should be the Reception teacher that you know you can and should be. This is one of the things that make the role both draining and sustaining, challenging and affirming. You may be the butt of jokes about playing all day in the sand or not being able to count to more than ten; prejudice about working with the youngest children still exists in schools. This is discussed more fully later.

This hierarchy of the heart and the head reveals a person who in their practice creates sensitive relationships and high quality interactions; understanding the link between education and care for children who may be away from their familiar adults for longer in a school day than they have ever been before. An ethos of edu-care and a child-centred playful pedagogy

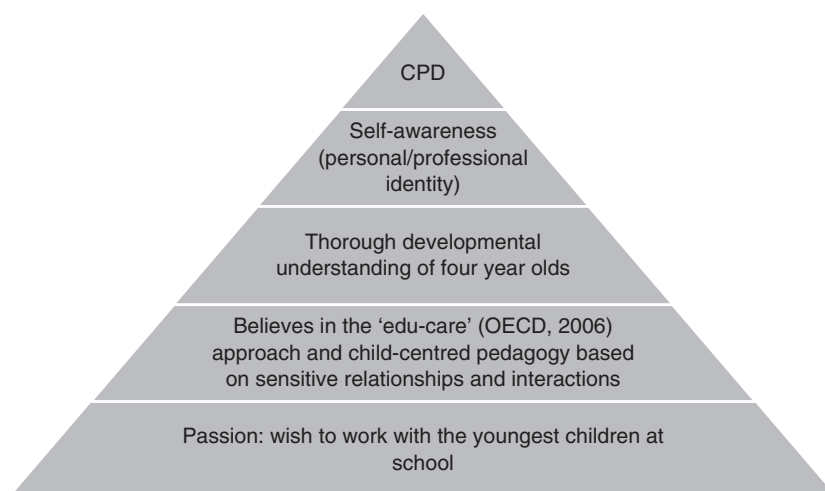


Figure 1.1 The basis for the 'hierarchy of the heart and the head'

must be embraced by Reception teachers; both suit a Reception teacher both personally and professionally. This is where the personal and professional identity merges the most. Think, for example, about the sense of security demonstrated by young children to a degree where they call teachers 'mummy' and invite them to their house for a play or birthday party. This depth of relationship with a young child is a real privilege but not one that is widely understood by others. Care roles are not valued as highly as the roles associated with education even though the expectations are that children develop lifelong learning skills in their earlier years of schooling to ensure they become useful citizens of our society. Creating the balance between care and education within their pedagogical approach to children places demands on Reception teachers more so than those of any other year group.

Alongside all this, the heart and the head of our Reception teacher need to be full of secure knowledge of child development and in particular a deep and always evolving understanding of four year olds. The significance of the developmental understanding of four year olds is fully explained and explicitly stated in Chapter 2. The Reception teacher's application of pedagogy must be in line with a full understanding of the children in the Reception classroom. One of the phrases which draws out the importance of the work of the Reception teacher is that we should always consider children as 'beings' and not mere 'becomings', somehow less important and worthy of all that is best in the world than adults are. Focus always on a credit model of the child that relies on the understanding of children's strengths and interests and avoid the energy-sapping deficit model where the focus of attention is on what the children cannot do or have not developed yet.

As the model indicates, self-awareness too is crucial. It is essential partly because it is a precursor for self-assuredness and resilience in the politically changing world of education.

In addition, it is essential because self-awareness gives reassurance to Reception teachers to rely on their instincts to do the best for and by the child. This is particularly needed because developmentally children in a Reception class are on such a broad spectrum. A resilient teacher, who is self-aware and self-assured, can interpret curriculum expectations and local or national drives/initiatives in light of what is best for the children who are actually in the class at any given time. They practise intuitively from a self-assured stance so they can justify decisions. You need to understand yourself from both a personal and professional perspective – as these aspects of identity play out strongly in the intimate relationships of the Reception classroom.

Nurturing the Reception teacher's soul is something we believe in strongly and it is part of the purpose of this book, so continuous professional development tops the hierarchy for the heart and the head. A model for the Reception teacher reflects the importance of this year in children's lives and the positive choices made to do this job. For the authors of this book the Reception year is full of vital opportunities, not something that happens between nursery or pre-school and the start of the National Curriculum. You will thrive most when you are driven by professional and personal reflections and by the desire to self-actualise; to reach full potential as a Reception teacher, not just as a teacher of any ages.



Team talks and tasks

When you have had a tough day and need a 'little lift' think about the passion for working with young children that brought you in to Reception teaching. How would you share this in a tweet of 140 characters?

Revisiting Bronfenbrenner and giving him a shake

A well-established approach to understanding roles is the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Here we locate his ideas in a complex and multi-layered ecological system. This can be conceptualised as the external factors which shape or at least influence the identity of the Reception teacher from outside. So, the hierarchy of the heart and the head model above relates to the intrinsic factors which shape us. Bronfenbrenner is well known for his proposal of five ecological systems and here this is revisited with the Reception teacher at the centre. The micro-system in psychological proximity to the individual appears at the core – for the Reception teacher that might be the immediate environment of the class. That is the domain in which a Reception teacher's most important professional relationships lie. In the classroom you can be empowered and nurtured by the children and have the opportunity to grow into the Reception teacher you are supposed to be. You are a unique teacher with your group of four and five year

olds around you. The exciting thing about the micro-system is that how you treat those children will greatly impact how they respond to you. Each child's special temperament will be important to you.

The meso-system around it describes how the parts of the micro-system work together with you at its heart. The emotional climate of the classroom, the respect you show to the children and your commitment to inclusion are key to the meso-system that is usually called your school. Here your own interpretation of the role will come into play; some Reception teachers are bubbly and loud, others are calm and tranquil and the best can be all of these things and can find their way between them to benefit the children.

The exo-system is the level at which other people and places impact a Reception teacher who does not interact with them directly. For example, in a school in an alliance of local schools there may be influences which filter down to particular teachers explicitly or otherwise. The impact of local authority initiatives and school networks or clusters fit into this layer of influences.



Point to ponder

What is the exo-system that influences how you function as a Reception teacher in your current context? Is your school part of an academy chain? Are you part of a cluster group? Is yours a faith school? How do such features influence your practice and are you able to honour your beliefs and principles?

The macro-system is often described as the largest and most remote set of people and things that relate to the individual but which still have a strong influence. For most Reception teachers this is most likely to be the national educational system in which your school operates. Interestingly, this is the level at which relative freedoms for the Reception teacher can be explored; for example, the relative freedom or otherwise allowed by the legally defined curriculum and the impact of the community in which the school is located. These things can affect you either positively or negatively and must be negotiated to allow you to function effectively and undertake 'care-full practice' (Luff and Kanyal, 2015). These authors describe a model of practice in Early Years settings derived from and supported by many of the giants in early childhood upon whose shoulders we stand today. They reflect on the view of Pestalozzi, who in his approach to educational practice saw the possibility to improve the human race, and on Montessori's deeply held view that conflict resolution, unity among peoples and the establishment of lasting world peace was the work of education (1946, 1949, 1992). These ambitions remind the Reception teacher to keep eyes up, so that the horizon full of potential is in sight.



Point to ponder

Finding your own 'care-full practice'

By 'care-full' practice we mean practice that is respectful of children and sees them as active and engaged members of a learning community. We mean practice that acknowledges but is not limited by differences in individual development. We mean practice which is whole hearted and generous but not sentimental. Practice from the head, the heart and the hands. It is important that you have and continually revisit your own vision of 'care-full practice'. Create an image or write a poem to capture some key elements of your 'care-full practice'. There is a space at the end of the chapter where you can do this.

Returning to Bronfenbrenner, there is one more system to consider. The chrono-system adds the useful dimension of time, which allows the influence of both change and constancy in your environment to be revisited. Chrono-system changes can have an enormous impact on the role of a Reception teacher – the movement of migrants across Europe from other parts of the world provides a contemporary example. Also part of the chrono-system are political changes such as government changes at a general election. In this book the political context is not a key consideration; this is not because it is not important but because we believe it is possible to be the best teacher you can be in any political climate. All Early Years practitioners, including Reception teachers, have experience and skills to 'fly under the radar' to achieve the best for children.

Bronfenbrenner also highlights the role of networks and how agency for the individual comes from being located within cultural, social, political and historical contexts. Many Reception teachers will be able to locate themselves in these nested systems. Also from Bronfenbrenner's work is his notion of 'ecological transitions' (p.6) – changes in role or setting, which occur throughout the life course. Reception teachers, as time travellers, undertake ecological transitions at an altogether higher speed. Such transitions are frequent in the term, the week and often the day of a Reception teacher. They are also frequent in the lives of children in the class with the arrival of a new sibling, moving house or joining the 'after school club'. The children's ecological transitions impact on the teacher too. Sometimes both teacher and child are involved in transition at the same time but for different reasons. You will face transition to being the teacher of a completely different class of children each year, for example.

One of the ways to view the interplay of ecological transitions and the role of the Reception teacher is to imagine it as a kaleidoscope. The view is ever changing and the balance between the elements is in flux as the ring is turned – this is perhaps more like the changing roles, responsibilities and responses of the Reception teacher. Bronfenbrenner's model is useful in showing some of the multi-coloured shards in the Reception teacher kaleidoscope, stimulating

thought about influences on the Reception teacher and the spheres in which they move. However, it feels too static, or at least too ordered, to be really representative of the multiple identities of the Reception teacher.

Caring by choice

Hargreaves placed emotions at the centre of teachers' work (1994, 1998) and this is no less the case today. There is no reason to think that this will change any time soon. Reception teachers enter a private world with their classes and they invest themselves in it. The investment is emotional, psychological and cultural. Sometimes it can also be financial! Most Reception teachers we know want to share good things with the children they teach and cannot resist new and exciting resources for example. Their homes are full of items linked to their professional practice and this indicates the strong link between the professional identity of teachers and their personal identity, the very people that they are.

Teaching involves strong feelings of protecting and supporting, and immense emotional labour – labour of love. Because of the developmental stage Reception-age children are at, this dimension of teaching is fundamental in children's healthy development and progress. Positive responsiveness, mindfulness and empathic engagement are key components of a Reception teacher's professional identity; these are some of the things that make a Reception teacher distinctly different from teachers of other ages. These essential characteristics are directly aligned with the developmental needs of four year olds. Reception teachers are drawn to young children through emotion (Moyles, 2010). Predictability of care from the teacher and the classroom assistant, sensitivity, patience and kindness are ingredients of the love you offer children. This is something that not all teachers are comfortable to acknowledge.

Professional love is not a notion much explored in the UK context, though it is more widely understood in some European countries. Some languages, such as Hungarian, distinguish between love for children in a professional context (*szeretet*) and love between people in relationships (*szerelem*). Two different terms are used for a kiss Early Years practitioners might give to children in their care (*puszi*) and for a kiss in a more sexual context (*csók*). Love in the Early Years context has been considered by Page (2011) and is the focus of the PLEYS study (Professional Love in Early Years Settings study). The study is located in work with the youngest children and those in private, voluntary and independent childcare settings. It is our view that the issue remains crucial further into children's experiences with adults outside their families and is certainly important for Reception teachers. Our contact with children can, and to the authors of this book should, be both physically and emotionally intimate. Loving children in a way that does not threaten or undermine parental love and in a way that is appropriate in a professional context is demanding. It is a dynamic act as opposed to it being passive and not everyone can do it. Robinson (2007) points out, it is not what you do but HOW you do it. The child is mapped out in your mind so that the warmth and care you offer is tailored to the child's

needs and reflects acceptance and respect. This is more a human response than a pedagogic one, and highly appropriate to the Reception teacher role. In this way Reception teachers are able to hold children's emotions for them and help them to develop strategies for emotional self-regulation (as discussed in the emotional development section of Chapter 2).



Figure 1.2 Reception teachers should feel comfortable to show professional love for children they teach

Multiple identities and your view of yourself

Thinking about the multiple identities of a Reception teacher can be liberating and should allow you to construct an individualised professional identity, reflecting your professional values and beliefs, often very closely aligned to personal values. Griffin, researching identity among health professionals, considers professional identities to be 'the intersection where the outside world meets the individual' (2008, p.356). Taking this idea into education does reveal some of the ways in which Reception teacher identity is formed. Families of the children you teach will hold views about what a Reception teacher can and should be. These are often a reflection of personal experience, whether this was good or bad. In addition, colleagues, governors, inspection agencies and members of other related professions all hold views about what a Reception teacher is. A similar notion was noted by Goldstein at the end

of the twentieth century. She berated the 'erroneous conception of early childhood educators as somehow not as professional or not as intelligent as teachers of older children' (Goldstein, 1998, p.245). It was her view that the humanistic approaches that underpin 'care-full education' are certainly not less valuable than other curriculum-directed phases of education and potentially more so. As you work out your own professional identity never let anyone get away with the 'working with young children is easy' argument, explicit or implied. It not only insults you, it also insults the children who you work with.

Moyles (2010, p.89) reminds us that not only is self-belief important for you from an internal perspective but also that 'educational improvement depends on practitioners feeling they WANT to make a difference; upon them feeling empowered and professional'. Traditional models of teacher efficacy and self-belief suggest that the early years of teaching are formative in this regard. For a Reception teacher efficacy does not arise only from the Early Years of teaching but from experience with every new class, from changing social and cultural pressures which shift over time and from a deeply rooted secure belief in your own practice. This book seeks to influence your sense of self-belief as a Reception teacher (that internal reassurance that you are doing a good job) and your self-efficacy (the capacity to believe in yourself and to advocate for what you do with confidence). Bandura (2005) created a teacher self-efficacy scale but for the authors of this book the measurement of self-efficacy is not particularly valuable or important. What is key for Reception teachers is to be able to reflect on what you do and why you do it, to sustain self-efficacy. Every teacher has had challenges and felt they could have done better; it takes strength of character to address these feelings and to come back again tomorrow. A secure image of yourself as a teacher can help you to do this.

The social construction of the teacher

Most people will nod with understanding when they are told someone is a teacher but the role of the teacher is seldom discussed. One widely chanted comment about teachers remains 'those who can do, those who can't teach'. This is unfair and off track to say the very least, but thinking of the Reception teacher most people who use the expression would be hard put to explain what it is that Reception teachers 'do'. Connell (2005, p.4) suggests there is an individual and collective 'knowing' in society in general about teachers, who they are and what they do. It seems teachers are in the public domain, to be talked about, to be praised and to be blamed, to be inspired by and to be turned off or demotivated by. Most people have a view of teachers because most of us have experienced being in education in one form or another. Teachers, teaching, education are among the things that people feel strongly about. The social and cultural constructivist idea of the teaching profession and of the 'teacher' and how individual teachers identify with this social construct as they become one is rather complex. In many people's minds the boundaries are blurred between social and personal identities as mentioned before. Rogoff (1990) discusses the social construction of the teacher and the learner. She highlights the socio-cultural construction of what it is to be a teacher; you

work with children whose learning is both socially and culturally situated and consequently the identity of the teacher is socially and culturally constructed. One cannot be unpicked from the other and they are best seen as interwoven strands which are sometimes wound together tightly and sometimes less so. The culture of an individual school is set within the wider society in which it functions, and both have an impact on you as a Reception teacher.

So, as a Reception teacher, where do you fit in the public perception? Overarching ideas in society about teachers are not sufficiently nuanced to take account of the special nature of the Reception year. You are people who work with children who have left nursery or pre-school but are not yet in the world of the national curriculum, despite being on school premises.

Visit the hat shop

A simple image to capture some of the interchange between aspects of the Reception teacher's role is the 'hat shop'. Imagine yourself changing hats in line with the different parts of your role during the day, as the expectations and demands change. This is far more rapid than the pace of ecological transition proposed by Bronfenbrenner. You might wear a team leader's hat, a planner's hat and a nurse's hat before 9 a.m. By the end of the day, the week or the term the list of hats is long and varied and the Reception teacher often wears more than one hat at a time. So the hat shop has to be on the back burner to allow a serious consideration of what it means to be an aspirational Reception teacher.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the 'facets of being' for a Reception teacher – re-examining theoretical concepts to construct a view about what it is to be a Reception teacher. Through examining the different identities of the Reception teacher and the roles they take in their professional lives an opportunity has been opened up for Reception teachers to find a voice and empower them to influence the social construction of the teaching role that is unique to this age group.

Reception teachers as a professional group share a distinctive ideology about children and about childhood. Being a member of that group makes you uniquely different from the larger group of school teachers as a whole. The Reception teacher's ideology is fed by a developmentally thorough understanding of children at age four. The next and pivotal chapter, Chapter 2, is about that very body of knowledge and understanding.

Being a member of the teaching profession is a rewarding role and a privilege. However, educating children cannot be solely the role of their teachers. It is often said that it takes a community to raise a child. Partnerships are essential to the shared endeavour. Children are entrusted to various members of the community at different stages of the child's life and the family's life. All of this contributes to shape the future for the child. This has to be set in the context of a credit model of the child as competent and capable. This behoves all who relate



Figure 1.3 Teacher and pupil take pleasure in learning together

to the child to stimulate and challenge them as they grow and change. Reception teachers are described in the UK as working in the 'Foundation Stage' and they hold a unique role in providing the secure foundations from which children flourish. The skills of lifelong learning are introduced in the Reception year, and the ingredients of a successful life, but it is the children themselves who will shape their futures. However much we cherish the children we teach, each is their own person and working with them at the wonderful age of four should be its own reward. As each class of children moves on new children will enter our lives and it is important to remain passionate about being a Reception teacher. Passion 'keeps the romance of teaching alive for great teachers' (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998, p.228).

The purpose of this chapter is not a sentimental one: it aims to provide each Reception teacher with ways of viewing their work and themselves. Thinking about the multiple identities you may hold as a Reception teacher can and should be liberating. It is a platform from which you can construct a personal professional identity, reflecting your values and beliefs.

Further inspiration

For a really interesting article (by a secondary school teacher) on parental and 'teacher' love, see <http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/blog/is-professional-love-appropriate/> (last accessed January 2016).

For more on Hiram Powers, visit the website of the Smithsonian American Art Museum at <http://americanart.si.edu/>

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Jottings