

It's time to talk!

Ahead of the revision of *Development Matters*, **Helen Moylett** and **Nancy Stewart** ask what the Government's motivations are and call for sector-wide participation

The EYFS is shifting, and the Government has announced a rewrite of *Development Matters in the Early Years*

Foundation Stage. Hard-pressed professionals, faced with yet another initiative, have been heard to comment, 'They can change the guidance all they like, but children's development doesn't change.'

It is important that we hold on to basic principles and understanding about children, how they learn and develop, and how we can provide the best circumstances for them to flourish. At the same time, our own learning doesn't stand still and there is always room to review and improve official documents to ensure they are up to date with current thinking and professional knowledge. So, the Government's announcement of the current rewrite of *Development Matters* (DM) could mark a welcome opportunity to make it as useful a tool as possible.

A number of serious questions about the purpose and process, however, raise concerns about whether it will prove to be a change for the better. It is crucial that any changes clearly make the document more effective, or we risk pointlessly increasing workloads as practitioners get to grips with another new document.

POTENTIAL CHANGES

One of the Government's aims in the rewrite is putting an end to the endless tracking that many settings – and electronic systems – have turned DM into, sometimes focusing so much on assessment of each statement that they miss opportunities to interact with and support children.

We applaud that aim, continually pointing out that DM is a best-fit sample of typical progression and that it states on every page that it is not to be used as a checklist. It



could be useful to explore whether or not structuring the document differently could lead to changing that practice, though there is no control over what private companies will do to turn any document into a product.

Removing the overlapping age/stage bands has also been mentioned, in order to recognise that children all take their own pathway and avoid interpreting DM as a prescription of where each child should be at a particular age.

In the current document, the wide age span of the bands plus the overlap is intended to indicate that there are not definite age-linked milestones, and that children will develop at different rates.

One purpose of DM is to support practitioners in understanding typical child development, which can be particularly important for less-qualified staff and perhaps for teachers in schools who may well

Will the new document retain the principles of the EYFS?

not have any background in early childhood development. We wonder whether removing the bands completely will provide adequate support for practitioners in, for instance, recognising developmental delay or in their expectations and appropriate challenge.

At the core of the EYFS are the themes and principles of the Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and Learning and Development. Currently, DM is designed to support practitioners to understand and work with the relationship between these themes.

There may be other useful ways of designing the content of DM, but we hope the principles of the EYFS – arrived at through detailed consultation in 2007 and reviewed in 2012 – won't be lost without careful consideration of maintaining the integrity of the EYFS. As management theorist

Harrington Emerson said many years ago, 'The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble.'

CONCERNS

The way in which the Government is going about rewriting DM is a cause for concern. The Government has launched the rewrite as an afterthought to making the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) align with Year 1, rather than building up from the development pathways from birth. *Development Matters* must merge seamlessly into the EYFS as a whole and must reflect the overarching principles, curriculum and pedagogy.

Following any EYFS changes, which should be based on careful review and consultation, it would make sense to revise the guidance. When the EYFS was altered in 2012 after the Tickell Review, introducing the Prime and Specific areas of learning and making the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning statutory, there was a strong reason to revise DM in line with the changes.

This time, however, the Department for Education (DfE) is commissioning a revised DM in the midst of a piecemeal rewrite of the EYFS. They have started at the wrong end by rewriting the ELGs and Educational Programmes in the face of widespread opposition and concern from the sector that the proposed changes are based neither on evidence nor expert and practitioner engagement.

As a separate project, the DfE says the reworked DM will focus on curriculum, and will not be linked to the ELGs. It is difficult to see how curriculum guidance for children in the EYFS can be separate from the path toward the ELGs, as surely these must align. The promised consultation on the ELGs over coming months will undoubtedly raise many fundamental issues about the early years curriculum, so rewriting DM without reference to the outcome of this debate seems strange indeed.

We particularly oppose the way the Government is splitting Reception from the rest of the EYFS, with two different teams working on the guidance. The Reception year is the final year of a unique key stage with its own aims

and principles, and should therefore be considered as part of the whole. It is not an annex to the National Curriculum, nor is it a mere waiting room for Year 1 where children have to 'get used to' a more formal approach.

The best schools take elements of the EYFS forward into Year 1 in order to ensure consistency of curriculum, provision and experience and to make the transition a happy continuation of children's learning and development. Schools that do not properly understand or respect the holistic way in which young children develop and learn in the EYFS tend to focus overly in Reception on literacy and maths as subject areas with formal skills to be learnt.

Direct teaching has its place, but literacy and maths are specific areas built on the Prime areas and are best learned through playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically. Without the engagement, motivation and thinking that come with a holistic approach, many children go into Year 1 already convinced they are failing.

PROCESS

The DfE has commissioned Dr Julian Grenier, head teacher of Sheringham Nursery School, to lead the rewrite of DM. An Advisory Board of ten people has been announced, but as far as we know this group has so far met only once and is not writing the document. It does not include anyone from the private, voluntary and independent sector, nor from further education.

It is unclear how the content and layout will be produced, who will be involved and how expert and practitioner input will be gathered. We hope that rather than eventually issuing a finished document, the DfE will ensure that there is wide circulation to a range of experts and practitioners to comment on and improve successive drafts.

For comparison, the current DM was commissioned by the Government in consultation with an advisory group of highly expert professionals, who also commented on the outline, content and layout of the document. In addition, the Government insisted on a wide-ranging group of experts to be actively involved in the writing process. Over the course of seven

drafts, this reference group commented in detail on the content. As well as civil servants from the DfE, the group included representatives from:

- ✓ Family Nurse Partnership
- ✓ Early Support ✓ health visitors
- ✓ educational and developmental psychologists ✓ child psychotherapists ✓ professors of education ✓ Communication Champion ✓ Department of Health ✓ paediatrics and child public health ✓ speech and language therapists ✓ SEND experts ✓ Primary curriculum review ✓ early years consultants ✓ early maths experts ✓ early years research centres ✓ Children's Centres ✓ private nurseries, pre-schools and childminders ✓ local authorities ✓ Ofsted ✓ primary school early years co-ordinators ✓ Primary School Improvement Partners.

As a final stage in developing the guidance material, the document was piloted with a full range of settings, including childminders, private day nurseries, pre-schools, maintained nursery classes, nursery schools, special needs nurseries, primary schools and Children's Centres. Comments and suggestions from these were considered before finalising the document.

THE CHALLENGE

Mr Grenier is a respected early years expert. The challenge for the DfE is to support his work in a democratic and participatory way, allowing the whole sector to be involved. It must ensure a process that can result in guidance covering the whole EYFS, not separating the Reception year. The rewrite of the ELGs and Educational Programmes on the back of the primary assessment consultation was highly undemocratic and disrespectful of the early years sector.

We hope that the rewrite of DM can be rescued from the same sort of mess. We have a long tradition of principled professionalism in the early years which was successfully built on in the first two iterations of the EYFS and in *Development Matters*. For supporting excellent practice in the future, children and professionals deserve no less. ■

Helen Moylett and Nancy Stewart are early years consultants and co-authors of Development Matters

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