

# Your choices

Evidence must underpin the approach we take to educating young children, says *Dr Julian Grenier*



**A**ll schools are under significant pressure to get results, but that does not excuse any of us for making rash choices about early years practice. There is currently such a strong emphasis on progress and outcomes that every choice we make – whether it is about the curriculum, the environment, or our assessment system – feels ‘high stakes’.

But our choices are only truly high stakes in one sense: three-, four- and five-year-old children cannot have their early childhood back if we get things wrong for them. The decisions we make can have a decisive impact, for good or for ill, on every child we teach. Although some children are resilient and will cope with all sorts of provision, others are not. They may not be experiencing much in the way of play and conversation at home. If we cannot get school right for their emotional well-being, early communication and self-regulation, we risk doing harm to their prospects.

## WRONG TURN

A common problem, I would argue, is a lack of proper consideration of the

evidence and information available. For example, when practitioners say they ‘believe in learning through play’, they are reflecting an admirable part of early years education’s heritage. But they are also taking a wrong turn.

It is not that I disagree with that great early years pioneer Susan Isaacs, who wrote in *Nursery World* in 1932 that ‘play is the breath of life’. But Isaacs did not come to her position out of belief. She spent many years patiently observing children’s learning, experimenting with different approaches to teaching and to helping children play, and she was meticulous in following up the outcomes.

When she observed things she did not expect, she took notice and made changes. In the same way, it is important now for early years leaders, and their teams, to argue for the role of play in their provision based on evidence. Simple ‘belief’ is not enough.

The same problem is also at play when senior leaders in school focus solely on ‘progress data’, or expect to see the same sort of learning in Reception as in the rest of the school.

It is one thing to insist on the highest standards of practice in every year

## It is hugely important that schools do not lose this holistic vision

group. But where is the evidence that, for example, recording all your number work in books is the best way for four-year-olds to learn the foundations of mathematics?

The EYFS is a unique phase of our education system. As Frank Field MP comprehensively showed in his 2010 report to the Government, it is the time when effective provision can have the most impact on improving the life-chances of disadvantaged children.

Early education is holistic: it explicitly brings together support for children’s physical development, health and emotional well-being with a focus on helping children to become more powerful learners, through the Characteristics of Effective Learning. It is very much about parent engagement. It is hugely important that schools do not lose this holistic vision.

Speaking to the House of Commons Education Committee earlier this year, Dr Mary James, former professor of education research at the University of Cambridge, wondered if early education is being seen as ‘just preparation for secondary schools at the age of four’? We must not let it become so. ■

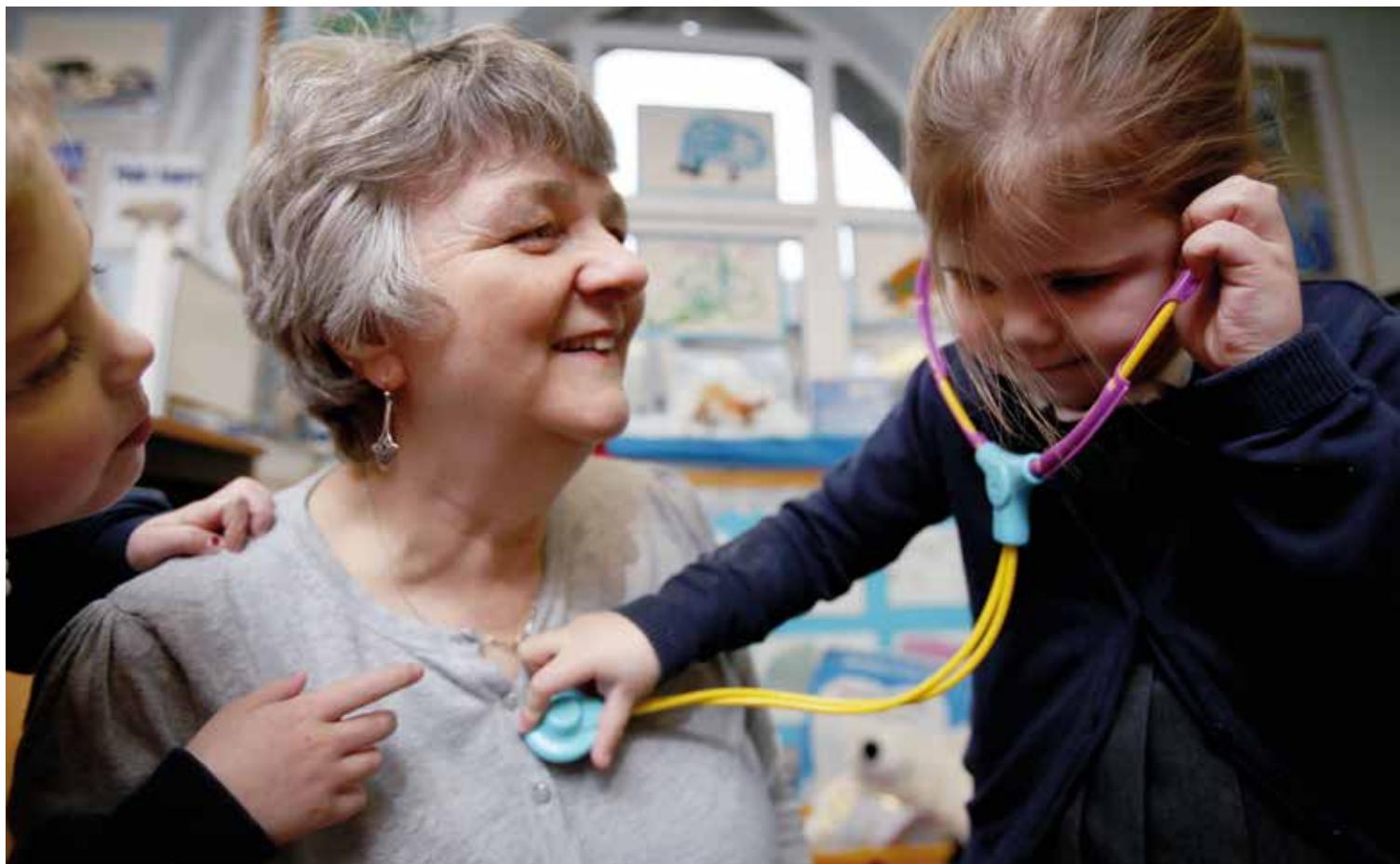


## MORE INFORMATION

- For the background and link to Frank Field’s report *The Foundation Years: Preventing poor children becoming poor adults*, visit: [www.frankfield.com/campaigns/poverty-and-life-changes.aspx](http://www.frankfield.com/campaigns/poverty-and-life-changes.aspx)

# In evidence

Assessment and progress data matter, but they must not detract from the real purpose of teaching, while teachers should be better trained to deliver the ethos of the EYFS, explains *Dr Julian Grenier*



**L**earning through play' has become the place where some of the fiercest conflicts about early years are taking place. In 2009, when the most recent review of the EYFS happened, the Department for Education's Literature Review stated that 'play is a prime context for development' and then added, slightly wearily, 'again, this is not new'. Yet this conclusion, reinforced by research year after year, does not seem to be translating into action. In fact, some schools appear to be expressing a full-scale rejection of 'learning through play', especially during the Reception year.

When professionals go against mountains of research evidence, something odd must be happening. Anecdotally, many early years prac-

titioners blame head teachers and senior leaders who have not themselves taught in the early years and are tightly focused on outcomes at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. If writing is a problem in Year 6, best get cracking early and give handwriting worksheets to nursery children.

On the other hand, the large majority of heads and senior leaders I have met, as a National Leader of Education, have a genuine commitment to the children in their schools and want the very best for them. I may not agree with them about everything, but I would be very reluctant to imply that they do not want to develop high-quality, evidence-informed practice. Yet there are some who ignore the available evidence and expect to see an increasingly

## A broad, rich and deep curriculum in action at Tuel Lane Infant School

### Ignorance about effective early years teaching is rampant within the sector

formal early years curriculum. Why might this be?

I would argue that there have been two main factors which have brought this about:

- The logic of the educational system, which can seem to prioritise progress data over the individual experience of the child.
- Shortcomings in professional development and training.

### PROGRESS DATA

The desire to do well in league tables and to have the best possible data for Ofsted are some of the strongest driving forces in education. In an important recent speech, Amanda Spielman, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, commented on the conflict school leaders experience between

'your desire to give children the right education and the pressure to maintain your league table position'.

A similar concern is reflected in the most recent report of the House of Commons Education Committee, which expresses the concern that the proposal for new baseline tests for children in Reception will merely shift the 'negative consequences of high stakes accountability to early years'. This sort of accountability drives teachers to focus on getting the best possible progress data, rather than on the proper purpose of schools, which is to offer the best possible education to every child.

Assessment throughout schooling – and perhaps especially in the early years – should be about planning to build on children's existing competencies. It should help practitioners to identify the barriers children have in their learning, and help the children to overcome them.

As Professor Dominic Wyse from the UCL Institute of Education put it in his evidence to the Education Committee, 'The main purpose of the assessment of children in nursery and Reception should be to assess their learning to inform teaching, and to inform parents about their children's progress.'

Where the system demands 'progress data', it is ever-tempting to shimmy past all of these purposes, and merely produce the required outcomes. But that is not only poor practice, it is almost certain to obliterate some of the most important features of effective early years provision. Maybe the lack of focus on the 'whole child' is one of the factors contributing to the rise of childhood obesity and poor mental health?

Where the early years curriculum focuses on a narrow set of skills which are tested, children may miss out on the support they need for their health, their emotional well-being and the development of their dispositions to learn. In some cases, children appear to lose their enthusiasm for learning before they have even started compulsory schooling.

As Ofsted argues in its recent report, *Teaching and play in the early years: a balancing act?*, 'play provides the natural, imaginative and motivating contexts for children to learn about themselves, one another and the world around them.'

The regime of testing and data comes from a desire to make the education system more accountable, a



desire which is understandable when one considers the many decades of poor-quality education that so many children – especially the most disadvantaged – received in recent decades. Through much of the 1990s, when I first started teaching, it was still common for parents to know little about how well their children were progressing in schools, and for teachers to fob them off with vague comments and jargon.

Having accurate assessment information, and being able to analyse it, also matters if we are going to translate general theories of equality into action. If we do not know which groups of children are making poorer progress in our early years, then we cannot take the necessary actions to change that state of affairs.

Back in the 1990s, Bangladeshi pupils had some of the worst results in the English system: but many decades of hard work, including careful analysis of assessment information, in areas such as Tower Hamlets in East London, have helped to change that and give the current generation of Bangladeshi-British pupils a much better chance of educational success than their parents had. So, assessment and progress data matter, but the stakes should not be so high.

Schools should not be using targets in their data to drive the development of their early years curriculum. Instead, the curriculum needs to be, as Amanda Spielman has argued, 'broad, rich and deep. It matters so much for children, and particularly for disadvantaged children, who are less likely to have the gaps filled in at home.'

#### INITIAL TRAINING

I would argue that the second factor which is influencing this turn away from an evidence-informed early years curriculum is the inadequate initial training received by

many practitioners. The inadequacy is compounded when there is a lack of high-quality ongoing professional development.

Ignorance about effective early years teaching is rampant within the sector – where, as Professor Cathy Nutbrown found in her recent review, both teacher training and the whole qualifications framework for staff at Levels 2 and 3 leave so much to be desired. And more widely, there is still a sense that the early years are less important.

School Direct trainees based in the early years must have experience in both Key Stages 1 and 2 – but trainees in those Key Stages are not required to have early years experience. That is why it was so heartening to hear Sir David Carter, the National Schools Commissioner, say, 'I think that focus of what really good early years teaching looks like should actually be a prerequisite of every teacher's training.'

We need better-trained teachers and early years educators with a wider schools' workforce which is more informed about early education. Then, perhaps, the difficulties of putting the research findings which so crisply underpin the revised Early Years Foundation Stage will diminish. That is a long-term project.

In the meantime, practitioners need much more time and support to engage with the new approaches to assessment without levels, and to focus on the formative use of assessment – rather than merely labelling children with levels and totting up meaningless progress data.

Better early years practice needs to be developed through high-quality professional development which helps all practitioners to unpick, understand and implement the EYFS. And finally, the messages from Ofsted's new Chief Inspector, and in its recent report *Teaching and play*, need more careful consideration. ■



#### MORE INFORMATION

- DfE (2009) *Early Years Learning and Development. Literature Review*, [www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/DCSF-RR1761.pdf](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/DCSF-RR1761.pdf)
- House of Commons Education Committee (2017) *Primary Assessment*, [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmeduc/682/682.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmeduc/682/682.pdf)
- Ofsted (2015) *Teaching and play in the early years: a balancing act?*, [www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-a-balancing-act](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-a-balancing-act)

# Here and now

What is true ‘free-flow play’, and when is children’s ‘involvement’ in their learning not actually worthwhile engagement? *Dr Julian Grenier* unpicks the theories in the context of best practice



**I**t could be argued that early years provision in school largely fits into three categories: the good, the bad and the ugly. As I have argued in this guide, the ‘ugly’ is the type of provision that pays no account to the child’s experience or to evidence about effective pedagogy. It is driven solely by external factors, such as high-stakes assessment data, or a wrong-headed drive to have a consistent style of learning across every age group so that nursery children end up with maths and writing books just like everyone else.

But it is much more common to find the ‘bad’: early years provision which is well-intentioned, but simply not very effective. Typically, this is the sort of provision which is informed by a desire to do the right thing. Practitioners may have attended training

on play-based provision, or free-flow environments. But the problem is implementation.

#### FREE-FLOW PLAY

‘Free-flow’ is generally understood to mean that the children can move freely wherever they want within the provision. However, the ‘12 features of free-flow play’ set out by Tina Bruce (1991) actually make no reference to this. Instead, Bruce is advocating for play which is ‘intrinsically motivated’ with no ‘external pressure’ on the child. It might be initiated by either child or adult – but it will not be directed by an adult agenda. Bruce’s 12 features were elaborated, in part, to differentiate this type of play from structured, adult-directed play.

Developing provision that includes time for free-flow play involves care-

**Tuel Lane: first-hand experiences promote worthwhile engagement**

**Prioritising ‘involvement’ can lead to provision that is very calm and orderly, but also unchallenging**

ful consideration of what we mean by play, and what sort of subtle pedagogical approaches will lead to what the theorist Lev Vygotsky argued was ‘the highest level of pre-school development’. Practitioners will need to plan for the children to have many rich, first-hand experiences to support free-flow play. For example, in the Froebel Early Education Project directed by Chris Athey and with Ms Bruce as the teacher, the children took part in many visits – to the police stables, the farm, Kew Gardens, a helter-skelter in a fairground, and the Natural History Museum.

When setting out her definition of free-flow play in 1991, Ms Bruce drew particular attention to children’s play, drawing on their ‘previous first-hand experiences’ and using the ‘technical prowess, mastery and competence

[they] have previously developed'. In other words, free-flow play may take place in a context where children can move freely between different areas but must have very carefully planned support. If the children have not developed 'technical prowess, mastery and competence', their play will not be rich.

So, where children are simply rocking from one place to another, they are not engaged in free-flow play at all. Ms Bruce and Ms Athey very carefully planned to build on the individual interests of children, so that they extended their thinking and their pretend play, and so that their individual needs could be addressed. To quote the current chief inspector of schools, this was indeed a curriculum which was 'broad, rich and deep'.

## INVOLVEMENT

Another example of early years provision that is well-intentioned, but may also be ineffective, is where practitioners prioritise children's 'involvement'. This can lead to provision that is very calm and orderly, but also unchallenging. The fact that children appear to be 'involved in their learning' is not necessarily a sign that they are engaged in worthwhile education.

There is not space in this short guide to do justice to the largest-scale research project on early years education in England, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project. But, in brief, the project found that the most effective practice was characterised by high-quality learning environments, well-qualified staff led by qualified teachers, carefully planned play, and adults skilfully engaging with and sustaining shared thinking with children.

This type of pedagogy includes some direct instruction, as well as what the researchers call 'reflexive

co-construction' (Siraj-Blatchford *et al* 2002) in which children's ideas are taken as the starting point for extended and mutual investigation. The EPPE researchers argue that a simple measure of involvement 'provides no basis for assessing the content of the engagement, e.g. to what extent the teacher's intervention may be considered "worthwhile" or, with regard to "content", whether the "correct" information is imparted' (Siraj-Blatchford *et al* 2002).

For example, imagine if children were involved for an extended period of time experimenting with floating and sinking in the water tray; and imagine that this was brought together in a lovely class book which concluded by saying 'children found that light objects float, and heavy objects sink'.

This would not have been a worthwhile educational process for the children, despite the time spent involved and the attractive resource produced at the end, because the scientific information is incorrect. However, imagine that a child had said 'I think that heavy things sink' and the practitioner had used this as the starting point for an extended joint-investigation.

That sort of 'reflexive co-construction' might have led to very worthwhile and deep scientific knowledge. Ms Athey and Ms Bruce took their group of children on boat trips along the Thames – I wonder how the idea that 'heavy things sink' would have struck the children as they got onto a hulking metal riverbus?

## OVERSIMPLIFICATION

So, how might we turn away from the bad and the ugly, and set about



## MORE INFORMATION

- Bruce T (1991) *Time to Play: Play in Early Childhood Education*. Hodder Education
- Athey C (2007) *Extending Thought in Young Children: A parent-teacher partnership*. 2nd edn. Sage
- Laevers F (2003) *Involvement of Children and Teacher Style: Insights from an International Study on Experiential Education*. Leuven University Press
- Siraj-Blatchford I *et al* (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*. Department for Education and Skills, <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4650>
- For more on EPPE, see: [www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research/featured-research/effective-pre-school-primary-secondary-education-project](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research/pdf/Effect_of_starting_pre-school_at_age_2_report.pdf)

developing the sort of practice which is good for children? It is important that theories such as 'free-flow play' (Bruce 1991), 'involvement' (Laevers 2003) and all the other fascinating ideas which are disseminated in conferences and through other networks are not put into action in over-simplified forms.

That is why I argue in my recent book *Successful Early Years Ofsted Inspections* (Grenier 2016) that we might consider the development of practice in three broad stages:

- Starting with 'practice that works for you'.
- Developing on to 'practice which works for you, and is consistent with the evidence base'.
- Finally, 'developing leading-edge practice'.

It is a mistake to take ideas simplistically from the research, and crudely try to implement them in schools. All too often we end up in an 'emperor's new clothes' situation where there are baffling theoretical explanations for practice which, on a closer look, is quite clearly not working well.

On the other hand, if the basic approach of the school's early years is effective – the quality of talk and engagement is high, parent feedback is positive, and careful assessment shows that children are making strong progress from their different starting points – then the team will be ready to investigate the evidence base with confidence and develop practice further.

Helpfully, it has never been easier to do that – for example, the Education Endowment Fund has produced very helpful and accessible summaries of the evidence base, which can be used to read and learn further.

We must not look at early years from the wrong end of the telescope: as Dr Mary James says, this is not about 'preparation for secondary schools at the age of four'. It is crucial that we consider our choices carefully and get things right for young children in our schools now. ■

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