

Tense times

The approach to teaching literacy and maths in Reception is a key concern of teachers and EYFS leaders, explains *Jan Dubiel*, one of the authors of the recently published *Hundred Review*



This year, Early Excellence carried out a review of Reception (YR), documenting the findings in *The Hundred Review*.⁽¹⁾

The review was partly in response to growing concerns among YR teachers and EYFS leaders about the quality of practice in Reception, and partly in response to the Teaching Schools Council's report, *Effective Primary Teaching Practice*.⁽²⁾ Published at the end of 2016, this report provoked much debate within the EYFS community due to some of its controversial conclusions about 'best practice' in YR.

The *Hundred Review* comprised an online survey, which received more than 4,000 responses, a series of national focus groups, visits to 44 schools and an academic review of what research tells us about pedagogical practice and outcomes in YR.

Its central aims were to establish a clear picture of current YR practice, what outcomes YR teachers strive towards, any pressures on achieving these and how they could be resolved.

In the current climate of increasingly fevered discussion about the

most appropriate approaches to teaching and learning in YR, the review is a robust, evidence-led and significant document that provides a comprehensive and authoritative view of the realities and challenges around appropriate pedagogy in YR.

The review focused on YR in England as it is constantly caught between the pressures of a 'school readiness' agenda that suggests a need for greater formality, and the pressures of what is sometimes described as the 'schoolification of childhood', in which YR is perceived as an emotionally toxic place for young children.

Although neither phrase is helpful or accurate, it is important to acknowledge the origins of these tensions, and the non-educational reasons that children in England start 'school' aged four or five rather than six or seven years old, as they do in most other countries. YR can end up being torn between two educational worlds as both the end of the statutory EYFS phase and the beginning year of primary or infant school.

While the review focused on YR,

for these reasons, some of its findings were equally applicable to other age groups within the EYFS. The problems appeared to be more extreme in YR, and exacerbated by its location within school, but what emerged was a belief that a 'drip down' pressure was also taking place. As a result, some practitioners working with younger children expressed the same concerns as YR teachers.

LITERACY AND MATHS

During the collection of evidence from the various streams, it became clear that one of the most consistent concerns was the role, understanding and status of the Specific Areas of Literacy and Mathematics. Participants in the review identified three main features of the concern:

Specific Areas of Literacy and Mathematics dominate content in YR classes

The EYFS Statutory Framework is quite clear how the seven Areas of Learning and Development should be covered: 'There are seven areas of learning and development that must

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shape educational programmes in early years settings. All areas of learning and development are important and inter-connected. Three areas are particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive. These three areas, the prime areas, are: communication and language, physical development, personal, social and emotional development.⁽³⁾

Participants in the review broadly shared this view: 'In particular, the Prime Areas of Learning were believed to be especially important for children within YR and were consistently identified as the "three most important areas of learning" in YR, providing the appropriate foundations for engagement with all other current, and future learning.'⁽¹⁾

However, when analysing their own practice, a different, less balanced picture emerged: 'Whilst 58% of participants in The Hundred Review survey believe that in YR, all seven Areas of Learning and Development set out in the EYFS Statutory Framework are of equal importance, 84% of respondents do not believe that these areas are presently given equal coverage in classroom practice. Over 90% of respondents stated that Literacy and Mathematics are given greatest prominence within the YR curriculum (Literacy 95%, Maths 91%). This view was endorsed by a number of Teachers and Practitioners participating in The Hundred Review focus groups; "there is an over focus on Literacy and Maths"⁽²⁾

Expectations in literacy and maths are too high

Aligned to this was a general sense that the 'pitch' and expectations of outcomes in these two areas, and in particular the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) that constitute the statutory 'Good Level of Development' for the end of YR, are inappropriate for the age of the children. In contrast, there was a general consensus that the ELGs for the other five Areas were broadly appropriate: 'The outcomes for the Prime Areas of Learning and Development were also considered to be appropriately pitched for children in YR. Survey responses indicated agreement with the pitch of PSED by 95.9% of respondents, for Communication and Language 94.2% and for Physical Development 92.1%.⁽¹⁾

However, in the case of maths and literacy: "Serious and widespread con-

cerns were expressed within The Hundred Review in relation to the ELG outcomes for Literacy – Writing and Mathematics – Number. Both these sets of ELG statements were felt to be pitched at a very high level for children of Reception age, with the result that this compromised and contradicted practice which was supportive of good outcomes. Survey results indicated that 40.3% of respondents considered the ELGs for Literacy were inappropriate, and 34.7% considered that this was true of the ELG expectations for Mathematics.⁽¹⁾

What is perceived to be an unrealistic expectation for the end of the EYFS was also believed to be responsible for a gradual 'ratcheting up' of expectations for younger children.

There is little understanding of how early literacy and maths are taught and learned

Permeating the review was concern about how learning and teaching were understood – or more likely misunderstood – by those outside of the EYFS. Early childhood pedagogy, and how it is most effectively supported in EYFS settings, is seen as a key area in which leaders, and policymakers, have insufficient knowledge and expertise. And it is this ignorance that was blamed for the inappropriate and simplistic views of practice, culminating in the 'drip down' effect on expectations and outcomes that then dominate EYFS practice.

While this is true of many aspects of provision, it was felt that this was particularly pronounced in literacy and maths, given their high profile and the extent to which they provide the basis for accountability. Practitioners reported a complete commitment to helping all children achieve in these two areas, but also



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voiced frustration that how this was achieved in the EYFS in general and YR in particular was not acknowledged or recognised.

Research cited as part of the review was clear that successful outcomes in both literacy and maths are dependent on children having other knowledge, skills and learning behaviours. However, ignorance of these among school leaders invariably appears to have led to settings favouring a more 'didactic' and exclusively formalised model which, ironically, is less likely to secure long-term success.

The review reports: 'The presence of specific curriculum outcomes, especially those in Literacy and Mathematics, often had the tendency to pressurise YR into a more specific and overwhelmingly didactic approach, regardless of the statutory requirements of the EYFS Framework and the developmental level of individual children. In many cases this was felt to contradict effective YR practice and have a potentially negative impact on overall outcomes including, ironically, those for Literacy and Mathematics.'

'The perceived educational cultural folklore that "earlier is better", a phenomenon that is fundamentally challenged by current research, was often stated to be a key source of increased pressure towards delivering specific YR outcomes.'⁽¹⁾

CONCLUSION

One of the key conclusions of *The Hundred Review* establishes both the tension this creates and the need to address it directly: 'The need for children to have a good knowledge and understanding of the skills required for successful Literacy and Mathematics outcomes is unanimously supported by YR Teachers and Practitioners. However, in order for children to attain good outcomes in Literacy and Mathematics, a range of other contributory knowledge, skills, experiences and learning behaviours are equally important, and successful outcomes in these two areas of learning are dependent on more than the acquisition of formal skills. This counter-intuitive approach to early Literacy and Mathematics is often misunderstood or its importance not acknowledged, with a negative effect on the very outcomes that are being worked towards.'⁽¹⁾ ■

Jan Dubiel is national director of Early Excellence



No pressure!

Rather than obsess over whether activities are free-flow, child-led and so on, teachers should consider if they constitute effective learning and empower the child as a learner, says *Jan Dubiel*

Delivering the best outcomes in literacy and maths for children within the EYFS rests on the same principles and pedagogy as other areas of learning. Nothing within the approach needs to change.

As with all aspects of early learning, the successful acquisition of literacy and maths knowledge and skills should be viewed as a process that hinges on practice, repetition and revisiting ideas, so enabling the child to 'internalise' these new concepts and use them in a range of ways.

Success depends too on a child having a range of other skills, knowledge and learning behaviours, principally those within the Prime Areas and the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL). And the long-established early years pedagogy of embedding these skills and knowledge in meaningful contexts and children's interests remains the invaluable means of ensuring success.

Although it may sound counter-intuitive and self-contradictory, good outcomes in literacy are not achieved by the endless drilling of specific skills, such as phonic recognition, the ability to blend and segment, letter formation, and key word recognition – just as success in mathematics doesn't hinge on number recognition, formation and number facts.

Of course, these aspects are important in their own right. However, research included in *The Hundred Review* by Early Excellence^(1, 2) was categorical that long-term success in literacy and maths rests with a child's effective development within the Prime Areas of PSED, Communication and Language and Physical Development, and the CoEL.

Creating confident literate and numerate children is the shared ambition of everyone in education. But the irony of the current pressure within schools is that prioritising specific technical skills and knowledge – especially to the detriment of opportunities to embed aspects of the Prime Areas and CoEL – is much



Much of what happens in EYFS settings could be described as literacy and mathematical learning

less likely to bring success than well-established early years pedagogy.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

What emerged in *The Hundred Review* is that much of the current pressure stems from confusion over what constitutes 'teaching' within early years – despite Ofsted's comprehensive and well-articulated definition of it. Generally, it was found that schools' understanding of 'teaching' was often more aligned to a 'traditionalist' interpretation rather than the Ofsted definition.⁽³⁾ This makes clear that teaching is not purely a 'top down formal model', but rather consists of a range of behaviours and actions that adults use to enable and facilitate children's learning and development.

It is a message that all EYFS practitioners need to embrace – every action taken, every decision made impacts in some way on children's learning and the outcomes that we

wish for them. Adding to the confusion about 'teaching' is practitioners' labelling of learning activities and their efforts to establish a balance between child-initiated ('play') and adult-directed ('teaching') activities.

Unfortunately, what appears to have happened is that anxiety over achieving this elusive 'balance' is sometimes taking precedence over the (Ofsted-defined) teaching that is, or should be, taking place. Too often the 'type' of activity, and the adult's role within it, is given greater attention than establishing its true learning potential and how best to support that learning. In short, 'labelling' activities affects how practitioners respond and react, and this can affect the quality of learning and teaching.

As a result, practitioners have sometimes become reluctant to intervene and give direct instruction in 'play' activities, so missing out on vital moments to extend and develop

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the child's understanding. Or they have become reluctant to deviate from the prescribed objective in activities defined as 'adult directed', even if the child, or group, takes the theme on a different learning trajectory.

In fact, neither of these types of 'controlled' response necessarily delivers effective teaching and learning. Our questions shouldn't be, 'Is this a play activity? An adult-directed activity? Self-initiated? Supported? Facilitated? Free-flow? Objectivised? Child-led?' and so on. Rather we should free ourselves from this restrictive terminology and simply ask, 'Is this effective learning and teaching? Is what I am doing (or not doing) enabling and empowering this child as a learner?'

Such questions are critical in literacy and maths, especially when these subjects dominate the curriculum and are taught by focusing on a set of very specific skills. Otherwise, we run the risk of practitioners both missing opportunities for effective teaching and overplaying the direct instruction of particular skills.

What we urgently need to take on board is that effective teaching and learning, whatever the area of learning, exists on a spectrum that needs the appropriate amount of 'direct instruction' and the appropriate opportunities for the child to make sense of and 'own' that knowledge.

PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

One of the central findings of *The Hundred Review* was the ignorance of early years pedagogy among non-EYFS colleagues and stakeholders. So, for best practice to occur, early years practitioners must gently, but firmly, address those sceptical or critical voices.

We have to cite the research that identifies the key skills and attitudes underpinning effective learning in

literacy and maths. And we need to articulate the sheer volume of what could be described as 'literacy' and 'mathematical' learning and teaching in any EYFS setting:

- The child lifting a huge block to complete a castle is specifically using the gross motor skills that refine into fine motor skills – and this is, in addition to everything else, a handwriting activity.
- The child describing his new hamster, how it feels and how it twitches its nose, is developing his vocabulary, which he will later use in his writing – this is a literacy activity.
- The child carefully allocating a plate to each soft toy in the domestic role-play area for a pretend meal is using their knowledge of one-to-one correspondence – this is a counting activity.
- The child joyfully watching water overflow from a container is exploring the nature of full and empty – this is a capacity activity. And so we could go on. Every day in every setting, an infinite number of these episodes occur. The issue is not that literacy and mathematics learning do not happen, but rather they need to be made visible and their importance acknowledged and stressed – especially to those who have not developed the eyes to see it happening.

Learning environment

For these kinds of episode to take place continually throughout the day, the learning environment needs to be planned and structured carefully and skilfully. Of course, children do not conveniently break down their learning into the three Prime and four Specific Areas. So, continuous provision needs to incorporate lots of



MORE INFORMATION

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3. *Early Years Inspection Handbook* (2015) and *School Inspection Handbook* (2015)

intriguing and open-ended resources and scenarios – that will open up opportunities for developing language and vocabulary, spontaneous storytelling and understanding and using print, but also lend themselves to being counted, measured, weighed and arranged.

Direct teaching

Throughout, it is important that we don't lose sight of the need to teach literacy and mathematics skills and knowledge directly. Our alphabetic and numerical systems have no innate logic, so need to be presented to children in a way that will secure these odd codes in their working memories, for them to then use and to explore.

What is important is that the teaching is effective and practitioners avoid the trap of 'overkill', so:

- Make sessions short, focused and direct. Children will concentrate and their interest is likely to be sustained when they know that instruction times will be short.
- Remain focused on what you are intending to teach. Practitioners can sometimes lose sight of the teaching objective by over-elaborating sessions and introducing too many props.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the activity in supporting good outcomes – rather than what type of activity it is.
- Adopt strategies underpinned by the principles of the EYFS, and avoid fads and gimmicky approaches that have increasingly become a feature of practice in many EYFS settings. Although some of these are relatively harmless and, used in professional ways, may indeed have a positive impact (although no research has been done to validate the claims), they are not in themselves solutions to the challenges of effective teaching.
- Always remember: 'Effective teaching in YR [the Reception year] is a complex process, resulting from the experience of highly skilled and knowledgeable professionals enabled to act in a flexible and responsive way. Good outcomes for children are not achieved when teaching in YR is reduced to a simplistic, linear, cause and effect methodology, nor when YR practice is reliant on purely unstructured access to provision.'⁽¹⁾ ■

