

Broad minded

It is time to reflect on a broad and balanced early years curriculum, and a revised EYFS should support us to think about what our children need, argues **Dr Julian Grenier**



PHOTOS AT SHERINGHAM NURSERY SCHOOL AND CHILDREN'S CENTRE JUSTIN THOMAS

The most important recent event in English early years education was the publication of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* in 2000. Never before had the Government put so much emphasis on the types of experience that children should have in their early years, and what skills and knowledge they should be learning. Two years later, the National Curriculum was extended to include the Foundation Stage. The early years became, in law, as important as any other phase of education.

Since 2000, there have, of course, been substantial changes to what is now known as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). As we

prepare ourselves for yet another revision, perhaps one of the most eye-catching points to consider is this: originally, the whole notion of the phase was led by thinking about the curriculum. Yet the most recent version of the Statutory Framework has just a one mention of the word 'curriculum' in a footnote. So, is this a case of a vanishing curriculum?

In theory, it is up to each early years setting and school to determine its curriculum, supported by the Statutory Framework and guidance. In practice, this seems to be rare. Instead, the focus of practitioners has been on other things: tracking progress, school-readiness and the early learning goals (ELGs), for example. Arguably, the ELGs have now become the curriculum in

Many practitioners are worried about a narrowing of the curriculum in the early years

Reception for many children, with staff focusing relentlessly on these 17 narrow statements of attainment.

ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

As the proportion of children reaching a 'Good Level of Development' in the EYFS Profile rises, it might seem as if early education is improving. Yet when I talk with staff in both the EYFS and Key Stage 1, I hear a different story – concerns about a narrowing of both the nursery and Reception curriculum, about inappropriate formality, and about back-breaking workload around assessment.

Because thinking about the early years curriculum is under-developed, many practitioners struggle. As Sue Finch and I found

in our initial, informal survey of early years assessment and planning for the Celebrating Children's Learning project, practitioners often simply repeat whole chunks from the non-statutory EYFS guidance document *Development Matters* to stand in for assessment and planning.

It is common to see examples like an observational note stating that a child 'seeks out others to share experiences', with next-step planning to 'form a special friendship with another child'. *Development Matters* was never intended to be parroted like this: it can't be the case that every child's unique learning and development can be summed up by those bullet points.

The early years workforce is characterised by a passionate commitment to children, but also by comparatively low levels of qualification and poor access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). That can lead to practitioners grabbing at statements in documents like *Development Matters* (2012) without really thinking about the curriculum.

I am sure that Ofsted's controversial *Bold Beginnings* report is on the right lines in at least this respect, its finding that staff 'confused what they were teaching (the curriculum) with how they thought they were supposed to teach it. This seemed to stem from misinterpreting what the characteristics of effective learning in the... EYFS – "playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically" – required in terms of the curriculum they provided.'

Bold Beginnings also comments that 'except for literacy and mathematics, the schools were not clear about the time they devoted in a typical week to the different areas of learning'. Again, my experience backs up this finding, both in Reception and the rest of the early years phase. Most of us would struggle to say what our curriculum consists of, and how we know whether it is balanced. What does this mean, as we prepare ourselves for a further revision of the EYFS?

TO CHANGE AND NOT TO CHANGE

First, I think that there are many aspects of the Statutory Framework that stand up well, and should be

retained. The commitments to inclusion and to equality remain relevant and important. The EYFS was right in its 2012 revision to focus on how children learn, by specifying the Characteristics of Effective Learning – and the focus in recent research on developing self-regulation has vindicated that. With increasing public concern about children's physical and mental health, again the priority given to these in the 2012 EYFS is fully vindicated – requiring a key person system to support children's emotional well-being and confidence, and making Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development two of the three Prime areas.

Assessment cultures

On the other hand, some of the serious problems with care, teaching and learning in the early years do not stem from the current EYFS. The dreadful workload involved in assessment is ultimately down to the expectations of those managers and school leaders who demand excessive documentation. We need to challenge the EYFS cultures that lead to endless interruptions to record every achievement on an iPad or on yet another Post-it note.

Training

Similarly, the muddles over the respective roles of play, and of child- or adult-initiated learning, are not down to the EYFS. We would not expect guidance on secondary science to tell the teacher how much time in a lesson should be given over to experimentation and investigation, and how much to writing, note-taking and discussion. That will, rightly, be up to the school and to individual teachers to judge.

Likewise, the Statutory Framework should not be expected to make such rulings. Instead, we need to put more emphasis on improving initial training for practitioners, and on CPD that considers the complexities of how young children learn, and the best ways of teaching them.

The attainment gap

Probably one of the biggest early years challenges at the time of writing is the stubborn gap between the attainment of disadvantaged children and the rest. We are not ▶

EYFS timeline

2000 Foundation Stage launched as a distinct phase of education for children aged three to five, and publication of *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*, with six areas of learning:

- Personal, social and emotional development
- Communication, language and literacy
- Mathematical development
- Knowledge and understanding of the world
- Physical development
- Creative development.

Included was guidance on learning, teaching and assessment: 'stepping stones' to aid planning and 'examples of what children do' to aid assessment.

2002 The Education Act 2002 extended the National Curriculum to include the Foundation Stage. The six areas of learning, the goals and use of the curriculum guidance became statutory. The Act also established a single national assessment system, replacing baseline schemes. The FS Profile was introduced in 2002-03.

2002 Publication of *Birth to Three Matters: A framework to support children in their earliest years*.

2006 The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is established under the Childcare Act.

2008 Publication of *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. The guidance:

- introduced the four principles of A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and Learning & Development
- mapped learning over six areas: PSED, CL&L, Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy, K&UW, PD and CD.

2011 Publication of *Tickell Review* of the EYFS.

2012 The revised EYFS framework is launched:

- mapping learning and development across three Prime areas (PD, PSED and C&L) and four Specific areas (Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World and Expressive Arts and Design)
 - introducing the Characteristics of Effective Learning
 - slashing the number of ELGs from 69 to 17.
- Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* was published as non-statutory guidance for implementing the new framework.

2013 DfE published a truncated version of *Development Matters*, entitled *Early Years Outcomes: A non-statutory guide for practitioners and inspectors to help inform understanding of child development through the early years*.

2014-2017 The EYFS Statutory Framework is revised, with changes relating to aspects of safeguarding and welfare.



Children should be offered a rich curriculum in all areas of learning

making any significant progress in addressing this.

In this respect again, making changes in the EYFS framework would be misguided. Far better to consider whether recent policy is intensifying disadvantage for children in poverty, by putting so much money into expanding 30-hours places for children of working parents, while the Children's Centre programme withers and dies.

A rich curriculum

It would, however, make sense to put much more emphasis in a revised EYFS on the curriculum, updating the thinking which made the original *Curriculum Guidance*

for the Foundation Stage so important. It would be a welcome change if a refreshed EYFS supported settings and schools in thinking hard about what type of curriculum will suit the needs of the particular children and families they serve. No-one could argue that a few statements in the early learning goals come close to outlining what a rich early science curriculum should look like. But when was the last time there was a significant focus on science in the early years?

Children have so many competences and areas of interest when they are young: their geographical, historical, scientific and aesthetic learning should

MORE INFORMATION

- *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000), <https://bit.ly/2HBCDKT>
- Finch S and Grenier J (eds) (2018) *Celebrating Children's Learning*. Routledge.
- *Bold Beginnings*, <https://bit.ly/2qKwS3Q>
- *The Rumbold Report*, <https://bit.ly/2HgcemL>
- *Birth To Three Matters*, <https://bit.ly/2qMbBqB>
- *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (2008), <https://bit.ly/2vAbhJK>
- *Development Matters in the EYFS*, <https://bit.ly/1p8aia9>
- *Early Years Outcomes*, <https://bit.ly/2qMbCey>
- Current EYFS framework, <https://bit.ly/2zq9paW>

flourish as they go through their schooling. But instead, too many are offered a poor, thin curriculum in the early years beyond the Prime areas, literacy and maths.

In thinking afresh about the curriculum, we should take the time to learn more about where early learning leads onto in children's education; and likewise, colleagues in Key Stages 1 and 2 need the enrichment of discussions about the early years curriculum to understand how children's learning develops over time.

There are also far too few links between early years settings and schools, where again there is much joint learning to be done about the curriculum.

A HIGHLY SKILLED WORKFORCE

However, beyond outlining the principle of a broad and balanced curriculum, and offering some exemplars, rethinking the early years curriculum is not the job of a new Statutory Framework. Instead, the work needs to occur at grassroots level, with a significant enhancement of CPD opportunities for all practitioners.

If we want well-educated young children who are well-prepared for living and learning in the 21st century, then we must recognise that we need to have a highly skilled, confident, reflective and professional workforce.

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Curriculum: a question of definition

Curriculum and goals

'The early learning goals establish expectations for most children to reach by the end of the EYFS, but are not a curriculum in themselves.'

'Supporting Children's Development and Learning' by Helen Moylett – co-author of Development Matters – in Early Childhood: A guide for students, second edition, edited by Tina Bruce

The curriculum

'The curriculum – which we take to comprise the concepts, knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills that a child needs to develop – can be defined and expressed in a number of different ways. These varying approaches include frameworks based on subjects, resource areas, broad themes or areas of learning. After considering alternatives, we have

adopted for the purposes of this report a framework based on areas of experience and learning.'

The Rumbold Report: Starting with Quality (1990)

An effective curriculum

'To be effective, an early years curriculum should be carefully structured. In that structure, there should be three strands:

- Provision for the different starting points from

which children develop their learning, building on what they can already do.

- Relevant and appropriate content that matches the different levels of young children's needs.
 - Planned and purposeful activity that provides opportunities for teaching and learning, both indoors and outdoors.'
- Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*