

## **Early Childhood Forum's response to the National Curriculum Review**

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) is a coalition of 60 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the well-being, learning and development of young children from birth to eight, their families, and the practitioners who work with them. ECF aims to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to promote inclusion and challenge inequalities, and to champion quality experiences for all young children and families. It is hosted by NCB.

### **Remit**

The Early Childhood Forum welcomes the National Curriculum Review in covering both primary and secondary phases, but believes that early years should have been included so that there is consistency and continuity from birth to 16 and between phases. The early years are the foundation years and most critical, and therefore transition between phases should be as easy and smooth as possible. We would like to ask how this Review will be dovetailing with the recommendations of Dame Clare Tickell's Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

### **Curriculum**

A curriculum for young children should be appropriate to their stage of learning rather than focusing solely on outcomes to be achieved. Young children benefit most from opportunities to learn through finding out about things that are of interest to them, rather than focusing solely on what is determined by others.

ECF strongly welcomes the Early Years Foundation Stage in providing a coherent and consistent universal framework that supports young children's learning and development, irrespective of the type of setting they attend. We support its play-based approach and focus on listening to children.

ECF believes that the six areas of learning from the EYFS and the revisions of these recommended by Dame Clare Tickell<sup>1</sup>, form an appropriate way of organising the primary curriculum throughout Key Stage 1, rather than the current subject based approach, to exploit natural links between subjects and achieve a more integrated curriculum. Cross curriculum learning is better for children and more emphasis needs to be given to other areas including thinking, personal and emotional, and creative skills. Children learn best through practical activity and play, and parents who were consulted acknowledged and appreciated this.

The primary phase must build positive attitudes and a disposition towards learning. Children need to be able work both collaboratively and on their own, engage in problem solving and make choices. Teachers must use observation in the planning for children's learning, create a well planned and stimulating environment as well as work in partnership with parents and other key professionals.

Schools should be encouraged to make use of the freedom they already have to plan and provide a broad based curriculum that meets the particular needs of the children, families and communities they serve. In particular, the school day must allow time for children to play freely

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<sup>1</sup> Three prime areas – communication and language, personal social and emotional development, and physical development with four specific areas in which the prime skills are applied – literacy, mathematics, expressive art and design, and understanding of the world.

with their friends. Young children learn best through play, and as they get older play supports and enriches their learning.

ECF believes that personal, social and emotional development should be a statutory core area throughout the primary years. The materials in the SEAL programme are welcomed and dovetail with the emphasis in the EYFS on personal, social and emotional development. By moving the EYFS framework into Key Stage 1 there would be a stronger and continued emphasis on the development of personal, social and emotional well-being.

### **Play-based learning**

A play based learning framework is essential in early childhood. Play, both indoors and outdoors, is also important for older children and all schools should support and facilitate children's play. Children need opportunities to initiate their own learning, learn from each other and pursue their own interests. Play based learning opportunities enable children to learn with both challenge and enjoyment, and improve their physical and mental health and development.

Play has long been known to have a significant role in building communication and social skills, aesthetic appreciation, creativity and problem solving. It is a significant factor in brain and muscle fibre development and is vital in developing empathy, social altruism and coping with stress.

Research indicates that over-formalised approaches to teaching and learning can cause disaffection with learning. Play must be present in children's school life, to enable them to define their own goals and interests, decide what is success or failure and pursue those goals in their own way. Children's enjoyment through play is linked to the control and choice they are able to exercise.

### **Learning to read and proposed phonics screening check**

ECF strongly believes that children should not be asked to take part in a phonics screening check at the age of six. Children need to develop their spoken language before they learn to read. Enjoying and understanding books is far more important than being able to read individual words out of context.

ECF supports the UK Literacy Association in asking for an evidence-based and informed approach to the teaching of reading. In their recent report, 'Teaching Reading: What the evidence says'<sup>2</sup>, the UKLA stated the following five reasons why focusing on teaching reading through phonics is inappropriate and unwise.

1. English is not written in a consistently 'phonic' way, so learning to read phonically will never teach a child how to read everything.
2. Reading phonically, is not the same as reading. That's to say, we read because it either gives us pleasure or because there is something we want to know. In other words we read for the meaning.
3. The question of whether phonics works as a teaching tool cannot be proved if research methods are faulty or inadequate.(e.g. focusing on too narrow a cohort)

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<sup>2</sup> United Kingdom Literacy Association. Teaching Reading: What the evidence says. University of Leicester: UKLA.

4. There is a huge body of experience and research which tells us that children are very diverse in terms of personality and in terms of what kinds of linguistic and emotional expertise they bring to the classroom where they are learning how to read. They cannot be given a one-size suits-all approach.

5. There is a huge body of experience and research that shows us that if we want long term, long lasting results from teaching children how to read, we have to consider many varied kinds of activities in relation to the written language.

### **Extending the EYFS into Key Stage 1**

ECF would recommend extending the EYFS from birth until the end of Key Stage 1. This would provide children with integrated and balanced learning experiences relevant to their stage of development, which are a vital foundation for their future. It is essential that the ethos of the EYFS continues up to the age of seven and that play-based learning forms the basis of the curriculum across this age range. This would bring England in line with Wales and a number of European countries. The flexibility offered within the EYFS should underpin Key Stage 1, rather than more formal approaches appropriate to learners in Key Stage 2.

### **Transitions**

ECF is concerned by the focus on school readiness as an overall aim for early education. Early years should not purely be seen as a precursor to school but as a vital stage of learning and development in its own right. We welcome Dame Clare Tickell's proposal of considering transitions from the perspective of 'school unreadiness' and what it would mean if children were not developmentally ready to move from nursery to reception class (e.g. toilet trained, get on with other children).

There is no legal requirement for children to attend school before the age of 5. The total number of years spent by children in the EYFS will differ enormously, as children move from the home-learning environment into a nursery setting for the first time at very different ages, varying from just a few months old to 3 or 4.

Being ready for school means different things to children, parents and practitioners. Primary schools should ensure that they are ready for the arrival of all young children by: providing specific EYFS training for staff; meeting with the key workers at the early years settings the children currently attend; liaising with the child's health visitor; communicating effectively with both parents, and ensuring that there is an appropriate learning environment for the children in terms of rooms, furniture and equipment. All this will facilitate and enable a smooth transition for the child, ensuring that, where a child may have a special educational need or be disabled, there is a shared and proactive commitment to working in partnership to provide appropriate and inclusive experiences throughout the EYFS.

The EYFS profile is intended to bring together a holistic picture of children's interests, preferred ways of learning and their development. We welcomed Dame Clare Tickell's recommendation to reduce the number of early learning goals from 69 to 17 and to simplify how children's attainment is recorded to '*emerging, expecting and exceeding*'. It is however not possible to improve continuity and progression for children from EYFS into KS1 without much stronger and effective links between all early years providers in a locality who work with children in the EYFS and Key Stage 1.

We would suggest that a brief summative report takes place when a child leaves the early years setting or childminder where they currently spend the most time, irrespective of their age. This

should be a short report detailing current development/progress and interests relating to the EYFS themes and current 6 areas of learning, based on practitioner's observations and actively listening to the child. This would enable the child's teacher/key worker at their new school or setting to best plan for their arrival. However, written reports should not replace conversations between parents and practitioners, which we would expect to take place to ensure a smooth transition for the child.

## **Inclusion**

The Early Childhood Forum has defined inclusion as '*a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down the barriers to participation and belonging*'. Defining inclusion as a process implies that we continually work through five stages towards the objective of equality, the mechanisms which will enable real inclusion are:

- creating an ethos whereby all children, their families and early years workers feel equally valued
- writing policies that reflect anti-discriminatory regulations and positively respond to diversity and difference
- appointing, training and supporting an individual who is responsible for equality implementation – ensuring that these policies are implemented in practice
- collecting, analysing and evaluating data, (on ethnicity, gender, disability, special needs), to identify any discrimination in employment/ admissions/policies
- ensuring that training and support is available for all workers to make all this possible.

The primary curriculum needs to address inequalities and differentiate learning to meet individual children's needs and enable every child to succeed. ECF believes the well-being of children is central to every aspect of children's learning and that all children are entitled to participation, provision, play and protection, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Consequently, the needs of the child must be placed at the centre of the planning and provision of high quality services, including education.

For very young disabled children and those with SEN, inclusion starts in the home with the inclusion of the whole family. The EYFS confirms that early support for children includes listening to families and taking part in a sensitive two-way exchange of information. The EYFS also confirms that, for children with the most severe and complex additional support needs, adults should work together to plan jointly with everyone who is in contact with the child. This will co-ordinate support through early years consultants and area SENCOs and promote learning as effectively as possible. Knowing when and how to call in specialist help, such as that provided by specialist support services, is another important element of inclusive practice. This means providing any additional support required to include children with known or emerging SEN, using a graduated response.

The role of the SENCO in primary schools and early years settings should be considered one which can offer all practitioners support and opportunity to share effective methods of observation and assessment to inform early identification. Through strong partnership with parents and others offering support to the setting, such as Early Years Area SENCOs, personalised approaches can be designed and implemented to support the on going development and progress of all children.

## **Parental engagement**

Developing strong working relationships between practitioners and families has a positive impact on young children's learning and development, both within settings and the home learning environment. It is already part of the EYFS.

ECF welcomes Dame Clare Tickell's recommendation that '*when a child starts in an early years setting, their parents should be provided with a brief, simple, explanation of what the EYFS is and what they can expect*' and '*to increase the role of parents and carers as partners in their children's learning.*'

Building parental confidence through partnerships is essential in helping parents appreciate that engaging in every day activities at home, such as talking to their children as part of every day life, sharing stories and singing songs will help their children learn. What parents do in their home with their children has a greater impact on intellectual and social development outcomes than parents' own education level, occupation or income (Sylva and others 2004)<sup>3</sup>. Innovative training courses, such as Parents, Early Years and Learning - PEAL (Connor and Wheeler 2009) are enabling practitioners to support parents in their children's learning. Teachers and practitioners must also be aware of the need to develop a range of strategies for involving all parents and carers, including fathers and male carers. The involvement of fathers in their children's learning and schools, whether the father is living together with or apart from the mother, is highly predictive of positive educational outcomes for children. Barriers to fathers being involved in their children's education need to be addressed by primary schools.

We acknowledge that not all parents wish to use formal settings before 3 or 5 years old, often opting for informal care arrangements, such as grandparents or other close relatives. The diversity of parental choice should be respected, reflecting the needs of the 'unique child', different cultures and circumstances. The care of parents at home is key and a priority should be to support parents in meeting their children's developmental needs, whether or not formal settings are used. We recognise that the home environment, consistent parenting and a loving family, supported by good family policies that value the extra responsibilities of parenting, will often provide the strong foundation that children need prior to attending nursery, childminder or school for the first time. Time spent being cared for at home is an important stage in its own right. It is vitally important that parents are not undermined by a culture that presumes the EYFS is the only foundation available to prevent school unreadiness.

The requirements of disabled parents should also be recognised. Services from statutory and voluntary sectors, such as access to employment or education, although variable, are available to disabled parents in their own right. However, parenting support to disabled parents is minimal. Evidence shows that parenting skills would only be supported incidentally if there was practitioner involvement on behalf of their disabled child; and support for those who have a non-disabled child is negligible. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (Morris, 2003) which collated evidence heard by the Task Force on Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role found that people with physical and/or sensory impairments, learning difficulties, mental health difficulties, long term illness or HIV/Aids experience common barriers to receiving appropriate support in their parenting role. A UK study (Olsen and Clarke, 2003) of parenting, disability and mental health which examined the views of parents and children in 75 families found similar barriers to full participation in parenting.

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<sup>3</sup> Sylva, K and others (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project : Final Report*. London:DfES and Institute of Education, University of London

## **Workforce development**

The biggest single factor in determining the quality of early education and childcare is the workforce<sup>4</sup>. We strongly welcome Dame Clare's recommendation that '*the Government retain a focus on the need to upskill the workforce and to maintain the ambition for a graduate led sector*' and that '*the Government review the contents of early years training courses to test the strength and quality of these qualifications*'.

Access to appropriate and relevant high quality EYFS training is essential for all those working with young children, including those inspecting and planning for services. Training courses should include compulsory modules on: child development; children's rights; equality and diversity; inclusion of children with additional needs such as SEN and EAL; health and nutrition; and working with parents. EYFS training should be accredited and linked to sector qualifications and the Integrated Qualifications Framework. Continuing professional development must include up-to-date evidence on how children think and learn, not merely on the introduction of new teaching strategies and government initiatives.

ECF members are seeing a great difference in the provision of an appropriate early years curriculum and environment between teachers who have come through an early years route, - whether it be through an early years degree with a firm underpinning of practice such as Froebel or by following their own interests within an early years MA - and those who are 'parachuted in' after working with Key Stage 2. We do however recognise that there are exceptional people out there who make a huge effort to learn more when placed in reception classes.

All teachers working within the EYFS and KS1 should be qualified and experienced in early years practice as this is essential at this critical period in a child's learning and development. No teacher without training in the EYFS and experience of working with young children should be teaching in nursery or reception classes. We are concerned by the quality and quantity of training provided for reception class teachers. Often newly qualified teachers or teachers more used to working with KS2 children are allocated reception classes with minimal training on how to work within the EYFS. We would like to propose that all teachers taking reception class for the first time are provided with extensive initial EYFS training and on-going CPD, and that all other teachers in the school, including head teachers, are supported to develop a strong understanding of the EYFS and how it relates to later key stages. Links for meaningful learning still need to be based in effective pedagogy i.e. *how we teach not what*.

## **Ratios in reception classes**

ECF supports Dame Clare Tickell's recommendation that '*the Government research as a matter of importance the ratios currently used in reception classes. This should include the use of support staff and identifying and sustaining current good practice if needed.*'

We are concerned that reception class ratios are currently the same as for Key Stage 1. i.e. 1 qualified teacher for 30 children. Reception classes are firmly within the EYFS and should be under the same regulation as nursery classes for 3 and 4 year olds. Therefore, we propose that for reception classes a 1:13 ratio is put in place with the class teacher supported by a suitably qualified staff member, ideally a nursery nurse.

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<sup>4</sup> DFES, DWP, Treasury, DTI (2004) *Choice for Parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy*. HM Treasury

## **ECF members**

4Children  
Action for Children  
Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP)  
Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts (ASPECT)  
Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)  
Black Voices Network  
British Association of Community Child Health (BACCH)  
British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)  
Campaign for Advancement of State Education (CASE)  
Children in Scotland (CiS)  
Children in Wales (CiW)  
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE)  
Council for Disabled Children (CDC)  
Unite / Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association (CPHVA)  
Daycare Trust (DCT)  
Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network  
Early Education  
Early Years (formally NIPPA)  
Early Years Equality (EYE)  
Fatherhood Institute  
Forum for Maintained Nursery Schools  
Full Time Mothers  
High/Scope UK  
ICAN  
KIDS  
Learning Through Landscapes (LTL)  
Local Authority Early Years Network (LAEYN)  
Mencap  
Montessori Education UK  
National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)  
National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)  
National Association of Nurseries in Colleges & Universities (NANCU)  
National Children's Bureau (NCB)  
National Campaign for Nursery Education (NCNE)  
National Childminding Association (NCMA)  
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)  
National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)  
National Literacy Trust (NLT)  
National Network Of Family Information Services (NAFIS)  
National Portage Association (NPA)  
National Union Teachers (NUT)  
Out for Our Children  
Parenting UK  
Parents for Inclusion  
Play England  
Preschool Learning Alliance (PLA)  
REU (formerly Race Equality Unit)  
Refugee Council  
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)  
Save the Children (SCF)

Scope

Special Educational Consortium (SEC)

Special Educational Needs Joint Initiative for Training (SENJIT)

Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF)

Trade Union Congress (TUC)

Training, Advancement & Co-operation in Teaching Young Children (TACTYC)

UNISON

Voice - Union for Education Professionals

What About the Children (WATCH)

World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)