The Tickell Review of the EYFS is not the final word

If first reactions to something new are, indeed, the most telling then I think that two of the initial responses to the Tickell Report are worth emphasizing. First, the sector gave the Review a swift and positive response. There is practically no criticism of the Review to be found - only the smallest quibbles. Second, there is a profound gap between how the EYFS is understood by the early years sector, and how the media sees it. This is most easily summed up by noting that even the quality press - The Times Educational Supplement, The Guardian and The Telegraph, for example - all headlined their reports by describing the EYFS as the “nappy curriculum”. They implied that the EYFS is a largely inappropriate curriculum for babies and toddlers. But the sector told Dame Tickell, amongst the unprecedented 3,300 submissions to her Review, that we generally like the EYFS and think it has made practice for young children more, not less, developmentally appropriate.

The EYFS was implemented in September 2008 and the Report states that “two years on, there is much to be proud of.” There is also a lot to be pleased about in the Report. The main principles of the EYFS are upheld, and overall the EYFS is judged to have improved the quality of early education and care in England. This is important, because it implies that we should continue to evolve practice, and not throw out everything we have been working on for the last few years. There has been so much change in recent years, so much work put in, often in the hardest of circumstances, through heroic feats of unpaid overtime. This is not the time to start all over again.

I think that there are many important messages to be strongly welcomed. A number of agencies, including local authority advisory teams, Ofsted and the National Strategies, have together created a climate of excessive paperwork and monitoring. The Report turns back this creeping culture by clearly stating that practitioners should be spending time with children, not writing up pages of plans, notes, or reports. Few will dislike the proposal that there should be no requirement to risk assess every trip to the shop or park, and I suspect that few will mourn those culled EYFS Profile Scale Points and Early Learning Goals, either.

The Report is clear about young children’s need for emotionally warm care, in safe and secure environments. However, there are no clear proposals about how this is to be managed. Perhaps this...
implies that the key person approach should remain as a requirement in the EYFS. But the comparative lack of focus on how exactly care for children should be organized strikes me as an omission. The key person approach puts its main emphasis on thinking about how the child is experiencing and managing the demands of being in group care. This is an important counterbalance to the language of attainment and outcomes which tends to dominate discussion at the moment.

The Report’s strong support for a better-qualified and more professional workforce has been widely welcomed – rightly so. Yet it is interesting that the report so often chooses general terms: there are lots of references to practitioners and settings, for example, whilst terms like nursery nurse and teacher are rarely used. Whilst this makes the Report inclusive, it can also mask important issues. Research, most notably the EPPE Project, has consistently found that maintained nursery schools, and Children’s Centres based around nursery schools, provide the highest quality early education and care. Yet the importance of preserving the dwindling number of nursery schools is not stated. Kathy Sylva, Professor of Educational Psychology at Oxford University and one of the directors of the EPPE Project, recently noted that “there is a direct relationship between observed quality in early childhood settings and the presence of qualified teachers on the staff.” The Report does not fully grasp this nettle: if we want better quality, then research indicates we need to have more specialist early years teachers, and we need to keep our existing nursery schools and the Children’s Centres based around them.

There has been considerable discussion of the proposal to move away from the current EYFS structure of six equal areas of learning and development. The Report proposes three prime areas which are the foundations for children’s ability to learn and develop healthily: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. I suspect, however, that this will not bring about radical change - early childhood education has prioritised these areas for a long time. One might wonder whether this strengthened commitment to physical development sits well with the lack of requirement for all settings, or even all new settings, to have an outdoor area. The Report also calls for research into the question of how children learning English as an additional language should be helped to develop English in the EYFS. I have not been able to locate any existing research on this question; the main findings from international research focus on the importance of children developing fluency and vocabulary in their first language, and point to the longer term benefits of bilingualism (which are acknowledged in the Report).

On observation and assessment, the Report includes a great deal of good sense, bluntly stated. Although the EYFS does not require shelf-loads of paperwork to be kept, all too often this is exactly what happens. The volumes of detailed observations and assessments, which some practitioners are keeping, might be useful if we were writing biographies of the children in our care; but we are not. The only useful assessments are those that lead to actions – that put something in place for a child, or help to pinpoint a problem. The Report briskly dismisses well intentioned but unhelpful notions, like the “rule” that 80% of assessments should be of child-initiated activity. I think we need to take this discussion further. Have we developed an unbalanced approach to planning and curriculum design which is excessively led by observations of individual children and their interests? If so, this risks undermining a more holistic approach to thinking about what sort of arrangements and environment groups of children will
what sort of experiences and equipment groups of children will benefit from encountering. It makes it difficult to plan for progress in the early years. When we have seen a child playing with cars, and plan more experiences for him with wheeled toys, then the risk is that we fail to widen his horizons. We notice his interests, but fail to think about offering a broad early education.

Similarly, we need to give more thought to the role of play in children’s early learning. I do not find the Report consistently helpful in this respect. The recommendation that “playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically, are highlighted in the EYFS as three characteristics of effective teaching and learning” raises many questions for me. I am not sure what the distinctions between “exploring” and “active learning” are, for example. Where play is thought of hand-in-hand with teaching, I think the report is alluding to the types of “playful teaching” outlined in the Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review. The Literature Review advocates “playful teaching” in contrast to whole-class phonics teaching in the EYFS, stating that “the best approach to phonics appears to be informal activities in a play context … What matters is the skill of the practitioner to do this in a playful way, and his/her use of professional judgment as to when it is appropriate. Thus, phonics instruction may be appropriate in the Foundation Stage for some, but not all, children.”

So the research supports “playful teaching” in some specific contexts. Research does not support a general blurring of teaching and playing. Earlier in April this year, Tina Bruce wrote in Nursery World that “play transforms first-hand, direct sensory experiences and physical movement into rich symbolic experiences”. I think the Report gives little emphasis to this sort of play, which is chosen and led by children.

Finally, it is worth considering that in September this year, many Reception classes will include very young four year olds because of the new single point of entry. The Report makes a sensible recommendation that we need to look again at ratios in Reception, to ensure that children have enough support. It is easy to forget that, as Kathy Sylva recently stated, “international experts are surprised that we have such young children doing academic learning”. One of those experts, Lilian Katz (Professor Emerita of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois), has argued that whilst the EYFS is “a major step in the right direction”, “available research suggests that the benefits of the formal academic instruction for four- and five-year-olds seem to be promising when tested early, but considerably less so in the long term. Indeed, there are some indications that the long-term negative effects of premature academic instruction are more noticeable for boys than for girls.” If we do not think carefully about this now, then we might find ourselves, and our children, paying for our thoughtlessness in the future.

I think that the Tickell Report is to be welcomed. It is a careful piece of work which should stimulate a great deal of further thought and professional dialogue. By this, I mean both informal exploration – talking with colleagues, looking more closely at our work and how it helps or hinders children – and formal research, training and development. The Report opens a new phase in a professional conversation, and we should engage with it accordingly rather than seeing it as the final word for now.

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