Teaching under-fives lawful in schools again, says shock report

Written by Sarah McKinnn

Darre Clare Tickell's report into the EYFS makes interesting reading. Frankly, my expectations of government-commissioned “independent” reports are quite low written, as they tend to be, in formulic, colourless jargon. You read pages and wonder at the end what they have really said, if anything. (Or is that just me?)

In that context, Darre Clare’s style is astonishingly straightforward and her observations are quite rapier sharp:

“...I received feedback from practitioners who are overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork they are obliged to keep.”

“It is clear to me that Ofsted and local authorities should not be asking to see overly detailed records, but rather talking directly to practitioners about their methods for checking children’s progress.”

And:

“I recommend that the EYFS explicitly states that paperwork should be kept to the absolute minimum required to promote children’s successful learning and development.”

Here is someone who tells it as it is.

When I met Dame Clare during the consultation process I said quite simply that our message was: “Slash and Burn”. We recognise that there is a lot of value in the EYFS. We do not object to the 6 areas of learning; they exemplify what association schools have been doing outstandingly well for years. Our schools meet the ratio and welfare requirements. But the pettifogging bureaucracy has to go!

And this is what Dame Clare has recommended. The Early Learning Goals need to be slashed from 69 to 17. The 117 scale-points of the Profile should be reduced to 20. (I like the economical: “Research tells us that many practitioners consider that 117 scale-points are more than they are able to work with.”) Goals should be removed “which are not easily observed, not sufficiently distinct and...not unique to age five as a particular stage of development”. Goodbye, then, to scale-points such as: “Understands what is right and what is wrong, and why,” and, my personal favourite for the under-fives: “Understands that there need to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people and children, to work together harmoniously.”

Dame Clare has also tackled the play/teach confusion central to EYFS. While some ISC schools had been reprimanded by Ofsted for providing a measure of age-appropriate teaching, on the basis that EYFS is “child-led” and a “play-based” curriculum, some child-minders had received the equal and opposite reprimand for not pushing young children towards the 69 goals in the six areas of learning. In the Tickell report, however; “teach” and “teaching” are no longer dirty words nor does she want toddlers woken from their nap to be force-fed learning goals. Rather, Dame Clare recognises that all interactions between children and adults can be described as learning or teaching and she supports the use of “play-based approaches combined with instructional yet playful teaching”. “The key element here,” she says, “is the adoption by professionals of a flexible approach to teaching, based on the level of development of the individual child.”

Most interestingly to schools in ISC member associations, is Chapter Two. The report recognises the politically incorrect fact:

“While a number of different types of provider argue that they have philosophical objections to delivering the learning and development requirements of the EYFS, the difference with independent schools is that inspection results show that these tend to be of consistently higher quality.”

Many ISC schools making provision for early years were judged by Ofsted to be “outstanding” before EYFS was ever conceived. Under ISI inspections of the early years framework, this remains the case.

We have consistently submitted to Ministers since 2008 in letters, briefing papers, consultation responses and meetings, that the EYFS is superfluous for
excellent schools. In fact, it is damaging as the natural dynamic of creative interaction is diverted when records need to be kept to "prove" compliance with prescribed requirements. We have suggested several ways out of this; exempting outstanding schools, exempting schools which do not take the EY funding, or exempting all independent schools.

Dame Clare has opted for the first of these. She recommends that the framework continues to apply to all providers but that the Government consider whether the learning and development exemptions be opened to independent schools which meet a quality threshold. She suggests allowing professional organisations representing groups of independent schools to seek exemptions on behalf of their members who do not wish to deliver the learning and development requirements. This is to apply where the professional organisations can show parental support and how quality would be maintained in the absence of the framework. The thinking seems to be a recognition that as the early years sector matures, a time will come when there is a place for greater self-regulation.

As schools in the ISC associations are inspected by ISI, we have a ready mechanism for maintaining quality. Associations also have their gate-keeping requirements and on-going professional support for members. This is, therefore, potentially a great opportunity for our schools to reduce bureaucracy.

The details will have to be thrashed out, however, when the formal consultation begins towards the summer. I can see some immediate issues: Would ISI have to continue to inspect against the EYFS in order to show that schools continue to meet it, even if they have been granted an exemption? Or would inspection against the Standards be adequate? Would LAs still "moderate the profile" or would the profile and its moderation all fall away for an exempted school?

Presumably one benefit of an exemption from the learning and development requirements would be that schools will no longer have to shoehorn their curriculum into the EYFS "areas of learning" straight-jacket, although this is likely to become more flexible anyway. Where some LAs have found it difficult to recognise the value of dancing, music and French lessons, that issue might fall away. Schools would be freer to stretch the most able pupils and to tailor their curriculum to lead into their own Year One curriculum better.

But, if a setting continued to take the free-entitlement funding, would this allow the LAs to maintain their interference with schools thereby removing the benefit of an exemption?

We await the government's response to this insightful report and look forward to receiving your comments and working with our members to achieve an outcome which benefits our pupils.

Link:
www.education.gov.uk/tickellreview

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4 Responses to “Teaching under-fives lawful in schools again, says shock report”

1. April 6th, 2011 at 9:18 pm
insure4all.co.uk Says:
My wife is going to be an NQT this year. She is struggling with the workload that she is subjected to. Are there any hints & tips to help her progress her career.

2. April 17th, 2011 at 12:58 pm
Wyne-Jones-Tucker Says:
I like the informative, clear, no nonsense approach in your article. It strikes me that balance is what is missing from EYFS education - I know it is in the framework but teachers and practitioners find it incredibly difficult to strike it. The revised framework will have to be very explicit about expectations around playful learning and teaching - the profession always falters when it is over inspected as it leads to a loss of confidence.

3. April 20th, 2011 at 3:56 pm
RachelHurn Says:
Dear supportive husband,

Is your wife an NQT already, or is she about to begin her NQT year? All NQs are entitled by law to receive an extra 10% non-contact time (compared to non NQs) which should be used to help them establish themselves in their teaching career. NQs also benefit from having a mentor, with whom they should be able to discuss any concerns including time-management and requests for further support.
If you have further concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards,
Rachel Hurn
Induction Support Officer
ISC Teacher Induction Panel

4. April 21st, 2011 at 9:13 am
Sarah McKimm Says:
Thank you for your message. We share your concerns about balance and over-inspection of early years, (long story - Ofsted/ISI are the real inspectors but LAs also “inspect” as a condition of funding and also moderate the Profile). But would it not be better for the revised framework to leave scope for professional judgement rather than being explicit? Otherwise, won’t it just replace one framework with another at a time when we are pressing the new administration to de-regulate? Also, the right balance between play and teaching must presumably vary from one class, and indeed one child, to another, which is where there skill of the teacher comes in. And on top of that in our sector, we have one eye to what the parents are paying for in terms of play/teaching. So schools also need to be clear about their own ethos and approach when promoting their early years.

I am not sure, therefore, that it would be feasible for a written framework to be very explicit on this while still catering for every child. Interested to hear your view.

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