Primary Policy Watch – The Tickell Report
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‘Things should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.’ (Albert Einstein)

This quote, included in Dame Clare Tickell’s report The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning, sums up her approach to the challenge of reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage. After sifting through more than 3000 responses to the call for evidence, Dame Clare believes that the EYFS is valued by early years practitioners and by parents, but that it needs to be simplified and focused on the aspects of development that really affect children’s life chances.

That simplification is most obvious in the much-reported recommendation that the early learning goals be reduced from 69 to 17, and that the number of pieces of assessment information required by the EYFS profile be reduced from 117 to 20. But the report is more than just a numbers game. It contains several other recommendations which, if implemented, could make a significant difference to early years provision in primary schools.

Universality

The report is clear that, despite a number of calls to make the EYFS voluntary, there should continue to be a framework that applies to all providers. Just under one in three early years providers are judged inadequate or ‘merely satisfactory’ by Ofsted, suggesting that ‘we have not yet reached the point where the skills and capacities of the early years workforce have developed far enough for greater self-regulation to become viable’

However, Dame Clare continues to leave the door open for providers to opt out of the EYFS, so long as they have the DfE’s permission to do so. Organisations with fundamental objections to some of the early learning goals, such as Steiner schools, are already able to secure such an exemption. Dame Clare recommends that this option be extended to all independent schools, providing they can demonstrate both support from parents and how they would continue to ensure high quality early years provision.

Prime and specific areas of learning

One of the ways in which the report proposes to help practitioners prioritise the most important developmental milestones is by dividing the current areas of learning into two rather opaque named categories: prime and specific. Personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development should be prime areas of learning. Literacy, maths, understanding of the world, and expressive arts should be the specific areas of learning in which these prime skills are applied. Practitioners working with the youngest children should focus on the prime areas. As children approach five, the balance should shift towards a more equal focus across all seven areas.

The importance of appropriate pedagogy

Dame Clare is clear that practitioners should be skilled in how children learn, as well as knowing what they should learn. She believes that the characteristics of effective teaching and learning – playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically – should all be explicitly highlighted in the EYFS, in order to encourage the spread of good practice.

She believes that the focus on play as the route through which the areas of learning should be delivered should be retained. She cautions against, however, any suggestion...
that this means that adult direction or teaching should be discouraged, believing that to do so would increase the risk of children not being ready for the move to Key Stage 1.

**Assessment**

Dame Clare recommends no changes to the requirements on formative assessment. She is concerned, however, that the assessment requirements of the EYFS are sometimes misunderstood, with practitioners thinking they need to keep more detailed written records of children's development than is actually the case. She recommends that the EYFS should explicitly state that paperwork should be kept to the absolute minimum required to promote children's successful learning and development.

She is less impressed with the EYFS profile – the formal summative assessment of children's development at age five. This, she believes, should be radically simplified and, as mentioned above, reduced in size from 117 pieces of information to 20. These assessment pieces should map onto the early learning goals to indicate whether a child's learning and development is 'emerging', 'expected' or 'exceeding' against the descriptors for each goal.

**Transition from EYFS to Key Stage 1**

One of the key issues highlighted in the call for evidence was the perceived disconnect between the EYFS and Key Stage 1. Dame Clare recommends that her revised early learning goals should form part of the thinking of the expert panel reviewing the National Curriculum, and that they should align with expectations set out in the new programmes of study for Key Stage 1.

The report also considers the question of whether there should be more than one person to 30 children in Reception. Dame Clare feels that the evidence for this is inconclusive, and the government should investigate this further as a matter of priority.

**Responses**

The report has, on the whole, been warmly received by the sector. The Daycare Trust supported moves to simplify the EYFS, and particularly welcomed the emphasis on making it more accessible to parents. The NUT called the reduction in the number of early learning goals 'a victory for common sense', but cautioned that cuts to local authority budgets could negate some of the benefits of the EYFS, particularly with regard to social equality.

The most controversial take on the report was in a front page article in the TES, which claimed that phonics had been 'knocked off [its] perch' by the Tickell review. The article asserted that 'in contrast to the Government’s promotion of phonics', the review recommended 'reception teachers should use a wide range of approaches when preparing children to read'. Dame Clare was quick to respond to the suggestion that she was contradicting wider government views on phonics, stating that 'I have not recommended that phonics should be downgraded. Phonics is one of the most robust and recognised ways of helping children to learn to read and write ... The fact there is no longer a separate section labelled 'linking sounds and letters' does not mean I have deprioritised phonics – merging this section into 'reading' and 'writing' is one of the ways I have slimmed down and simplified the EYFS.'

**What next?**

Children's Minister Sarah Teather welcomed the report's focus on 'what really matters', but a formal government response isn't expected until the end of April. Any changes made as a result will be for implementation from September 2012.

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