



Early Childhood Action

Unhurried Pathways: A New Framework for Early Childhood

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document, *Unhurried Pathways*, sets out an approach to early childhood which aims to shift the discourse about young children away from a statutory, ‘politics-centred’ approach, and towards one in which professionals working in the field reclaim their autonomy and professionalism – such that early years practice can be grounded in unique local contexts, with diversity actively welcomed and embraced, rather than being undermined by an ideology of uniformity, mechanical compliance and ‘normalisation’.

The document begins with some detailed background about the *Early Childhood Action* organisation, and the *raison d’être* behind its founding in early 2012. The new framework document, *Unhurried Pathways*, is then presented, with key sections on Overarching Concepts, Principles, Ways of Understanding Children, Engaging with a Range of Different Theories, and Learning Competencies and Aspirations (rather than ‘Learning Goals’ and normative developmental templates). Young children are seen as contributing to a world full of change, in which learning should be enabled to occur in inclusive ways, and with children’s expression of a diversity of experience being of central importance. The theme of ‘Living in a Sustainable World’ is therefore a key aspect of this framework, with the focus of *Unhurried Pathways* being far more that of preparing young children *for life* rather than for school.

The new framework has two key features. First, it is not an ‘oppositional’ document, but one which constructively advocates what ECA’s supporters believe to be the key themes of early development and learning which should be at the centre of practice. Secondly, it is a living, emerging document, which we wish the early years field to take ownership of, and contribute to, as it develops through informed and thoughtful input from those practitioners, academics, parents and citizens who wish to feed into its ongoing development and improvement.

Finally, a Foreword and Afterword are provided, respectively, by **Professor Janet Moyles** and **Margaret Edgington**.

FOREWORD

By Professor Janet Moyles

Young children, we know, are all different, even when brought up in the same household and community. Their personalities are different; their approaches to life are different; their ways of learning and understanding are different; their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development differ. So why do policy-makers seem to believe that they can impose a 'one-size-fits-all' model on the early years?

That the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) enforced by the English government on early years pedagogy and curriculum is top-down and economically driven is a key factor in prompting the alternative model for children's learning and development that is *Unhurried Pathways: A New Framework for Early Childhood*. This document encourages everyone to consider children in their own right as interested and interesting young citizens who have so much to give, and yet much still to experience and understand. It recognises that children are worthy of carefully considered early years education and care practices and practitioners who understand the processes of children's learning and development. Moreover, children's right to an early childhood that encompasses the importance of spontaneous play, in all its many manifestations and diversities,¹ is emphasised in this new document in powerful and persuasive ways.

Children in England enter school at a far earlier age than their European counterparts: Early Childhood Action rightly argues that four years of age is too young to expose children to formally assessed, 'school' curriculum environments. With high quality nursery education preceding it, a school starting age of at least six years would be far more appropriate and, importantly, would raise the learning potential and positive learning dispositions of young children. This is a foundational principle of *Unhurried Pathways*; a curriculum and pedagogy which favours a nurturing, supportive and playful approach to the early years, devoid of constant assessment, measurement and monitoring. It is imperative that very young children are not labelled 'failures' (through premature emphasis on unachievable goals) which not only puts pressure on children but on their parents and practitioners too. This new curriculum and pedagogy approach respects all children of whatever aptitude and background, and represents true equality across diverse cultures, abilities and capabilities.

It is so easy with a standardised and imposed curriculum such as the EYFS for some practitioners to be influenced into uncritical, homogenised and routinised strategies for learning and teaching, when their principles and values suggest a much more informed,

creative and playful approach as necessary to inspire and cherish young children.²*Unhurried Pathways* will promote and foster in practitioners a deeper reflection, not only in relation to children but also about their own beliefs, ideals and practices which underpin and inform their professional lives. Being reflective means analysing, evaluating, reviewing and, where necessary, changing practices to meet current children's learning and development needs, health and well-being.³ This is a given, whatever the curriculum and pedagogies which are being followed and maintained.

Being 'unpolitical' has long been the norm in early childhood: practitioners rightly want autonomy, and to get on with the job of educating and caring for our youngest citizens. However, political intervention is abundant now in relation to early years, and it is vital that educators, including parents, raise necessary questions about the experiences their children are exposed to in the name of early years curriculum and pedagogy, such as readiness for school at age four.⁴ The emphasis from government always appears to be on it being the children's, parents' and pre-schools' 'responsibility' to make children 'ready', but what about the schools' responsibilities to ensure they are ready to receive young children, and educate and care for them in a developmentally appropriate way? I would argue that this is a far more appropriate way to consider young children's education and care, and values young children in their own right in their early years, rather than as merely future school pupils. A key aim of the flexible *Unhurried Pathways* is to 'galvanise the sector around an alternative framework to which all practitioners can enthusiastically subscribe ... a strong message to the government that the sector really does have a collective "mind of its own", and will no longer passively accept whatever is imposed upon it'. Now is the time for all those involved in the education and care of young children to reflect upon what are the most appropriate early experiences for our birth-to-six year olds and act accordingly, which means arguing against the 'too much too soon' mentality currently existing.

I sincerely believe that *Early Childhood Action's* document – with its clear rationale and empathetic perspectives on young children – will pave the way towards a more caring and compassionate early childhood curriculum and pedagogy.

Notes and References

- 1 Moyles, J. (2012) *A-Z of Play in Early Childhood*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- 2 Moyles, J. and Worthington, M. (2011) 'The Early Years Foundation Stage through the daily experiences of children', Occasional Paper 1, TACTYC: Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators, UK; available at <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/occasional-papers/occasional-paper1.pdf>
- 3 Moyles, J. (2010) 'Practitioner reflection on play and playful pedagogies', in J. Moyles (ed.), *Thinking about Play: Developing a Reflective Approach*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp.13–29
- 4 Whitebread, D. and Bingham, S. (2011) 'School Readiness: A Critical Review of Perspectives and Evidence', Occasional Paper 2, TACTYC: Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators, UK; available at <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/occasional-papers/occasional-paper2.pdf>

INTRODUCTION

[Children] must not be hindered from being Children, or from playing, or doing as children...; all other liberty is to be allowed to them –**John Locke** (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1693, sect 63–9)

Childhood has its way of seeing, thinking and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs –**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (*Émile*, 1762, p. 90)

Rather than making sure the child is ready for school, wouldn't it be better to make school ready for children?
–**Caroline Sharp** (2002)

In this document, Early Childhood Action presents a framework for early childhood work which proposes a 'new paradigm' for early childhood professionals and practitioners. The motivation for this new framework document is concern about England's Early Years Foundation Stage 'curriculum', and the disquiet which aspects of this statutory framework has generated across the sector since 2007. As such, the following document can both serve as an 'alternative approach' to England's Early Years Foundation Stage 'curriculum' for those who are seeking such a choice, and it can also *sit alongside* the revised EYFS, so that practitioners who currently have no choice but to work within the statutory EYFS can bring an informed and critical viewpoint to their pedagogy and work with young children – and, hopefully, find ways of preserving the core principles of their practice, notwithstanding the countervailing demands that the EYFS, at its worst, can make upon them.

The document is very much an emergent one; and for future editions, we welcome formative feedback from practitioners across the early childhood field – whether it be professional, academic, policy-making or parental – which could further enhance these initial attempts (see the end of the document for our contact details).

The process of creating this document has been complex and, at times, somewhat conflictual. However, we have managed to 'hold' and work with the creative tensions involved in this challenging process, and the undersigned members of ECA all stand behind this document. We have been determined to avoid an anodyne, lowest-common-denominator effort, and we hope we've succeeded in producing a cutting-edge framework to which all progressive practitioners will feel able to subscribe. We commend this text to the field, in the hope that it can contribute to an urgently needed paradigm shift through which we can collectively *find a better way* in our dedicated work with young children's development and learning.

Please note, finally, that this document makes no comment or recommendations about *welfare requirements*: these are comparatively uncontroversial, and most would concur with the kinds of regulations set out in the EYFS. In this document, therefore, we are solely concerned with learning and development, and not with welfare.

MARIE-LOUISE CHARLTON, MIRIAM GIUGNI, GRETHE HOOPER HANSEN, RICHARD HOUSE,
JAYNE OSGOOD, SUE PALMER and KIM SIMPSON – *Early Childhood Action*

CONTEXT OF A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

Just some of the *cultural backdrop* to this new document is provided by:

- Globalisation, and the increasingly fluid movement of ideas, people and approaches across cultures and continents
- Early childhood educators needing to develop the capacities and skills to work with diversity, and the difference and challenges it can generate in their work
- The need to find ways for a diversity of pedagogical approaches to thrive within an increasingly multidisciplinary approach to early years education
- The need for practitioners to work with the specific cultural context of children's lives and the communities in which they live them
- The need to engage with current social and political issues, and how they affect children, and practitioners' work with children.

The main *political backdrop* is the policy-making framework of England's revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the extent to which practitioners really genuinely accept the tacit world-view that underpins its statutory practices, and the unacknowledged social and political *anxiety* that has arguably been a major factor driving early years policy-making since the late 1990s (Osgood, 2010a) –with its associated 'audit culture' practices (Power, 1999) encroaching ever more deeply into the early years sphere. An anxiety-driven agenda (whether for economic or developmental motivations) rarely if ever makes for good policy-making, and the current document attempts to move beyond such unhelpful influences, and to offer a framework which is mature, economical and professionally empowering.

In addition, a narrative of 'school readiness', with an associated trend towards the 'schoolification' of early childhood, has begun to dominate early childhood policy documents and pronouncement – a development which threatens the field's hard-won understanding that early childhood is a phase of development *in its own right*, and should not be defined and thought about merely in terms of the future 'goal' of readiness for school. This trend is a symptom of a 'too much, too soon' ideology, which assumes that it is helpful for adults to attempt to speed up young children's cognitive development, encouraging them to acquire specific skills (such as literacy and numeracy skills) at an ever-earlier age, quite possibly at the expense of social and emotional development. There exists no evidence base for such a view – and a great deal of evidence to the

contrary. Indeed, many ECA supporters argue that the age at which children begin formal education in the UK should be raised to 6 or even 7 years of age.

The *institutional backdrop* to this document includes the recent emphasis on standardising the various training pathways of the early years workforce, and the momentum towards a graduate ‘profession’. The discourse of ‘professionalisation’ is one which requires a critical gaze (e.g. Osgood, 2011), as an institutional professionalisation process is by no means necessarily synonymous with improved quality. Moreover, overlaying all of this are the multiple vested interests that the EYFS has generated with its associated ‘industry’, and the conservative (small ‘c’) forces that any suggestion of significant change almost inevitably unleashes. The difficulties this raises for providers are apparent in current moves towards selective deregulation of the sector. It would be tragic if this resulted merely in the simplistic marketing of different approaches to early years practice, without regard for the well-being of children in general.

What Is ‘Early Childhood Action’?

Early Childhood Action was formed in early 2012 as a new alliance of early years individuals and organisations, with the aim of campaigning intensively to influence England’s revised Early Years Foundation Stage. ECA is a hierarchically ‘flat’ organisation; that is, it is not dominated or controlled by any particular organisation(s) or individual(s), and all ‘voices’ aligning themselves in good faith with ECA have equal respect and potential influence. Our first conference, held at the University of Winchester in October 2012, aimed to bring ‘like minds’ together to cement the momentum already achieved by the movement. ECA is also taking forward the admirable campaigning work of Open EYE, which organisation has, since 2007, raised a number of principled concerns about aspects of England’s statutory EYFS curriculum.

ECA’s medium-term vision is to create a major alliance or ‘coalition’ of authoritative voices from across the early years sector, who believe that what collectively unites us is far more important than any ‘local’ differences we might have. ECA is strictly non party-political, and has as its overriding aim *the well-being and flourishing of all young children, from whatever background, in developmentally appropriate environments which are free of pre-ordained learning or developmental goals.*

A key aim of this document is to galvanise the sector around an alternative framework to which all practitioners can enthusiastically subscribe, and which aims to avoid the worst aspects of England’s current statutory curriculum. ECA is giving a strong message to the government that the sector really does have a collective ‘mind of its own’, and will no longer passively accept whatever is imposed upon it, however inappropriate.

Our Raison d’être

What brings us together is the shared conviction that key aspects of the government’s statutory EYFS curriculum are wrong in principle, and that the current government shows few signs of rectifying the errors that were enshrined in the original EYFS from its

implementation in September 2008. Given that repeated representations to ministers about these issues since 2007 have had no discernible effect, we have drawn upon experience and expertise across the sector to create (independent of government) our own framework document. This document will be circulated throughout the field in England and beyond, with the intention of influencing the thinking of early years leaders, managers, parents and policy-makers, thus making a major contribution to the fundamental ‘paradigm change’ that we believe is urgently needed in England’s early years sector.

We also share a conviction that a kind of paralysing fear currently dominates the early years sector in England. We know of many principled practitioners, and even parents, who simply dare not speak out in public about what they know to be problematic about the EYFS and the Ofsted inspection process, lest it should adversely affect their future career prospects, their working lives, or their own children. We also know of practitioners and academics who strongly support one or several aspects of the EYFS, but who dare not speak out about what they know to be wrong about it, lest their rightly coveted ‘babies’ get thrown out with the rest of the EYFS ‘bathwater’. This does not need to be an either/or situation, however, as the current document will show.

We also wish to highlight:

- the *mentality of compliance* that a statutorily-imposed curriculum inevitably generates in practitioners; and
- the ‘learned helplessness’ that so easily flows from this, making it exceedingly difficult for many practitioners to **speak professional truth to political power**.

The alternative framework will show practitioners that there *is* another (and better) way, hopefully helping to empower them to stand up against imposed pedagogical practices that they know in their hearts to be wrong, and which are likely to affect adversely at least some of the children in their care.

ECA’s Underpinning ‘Manifesto’

When launched, ECA’s ‘Manifesto for action’ consisted of the following key points – all of which have an important influence upon our framework document:

- The recognition that free imaginative play should be at the centre of young children’s experience and learning.
- A strong belief that the over-assessment and excessive monitoring of young children, with their accompanying ‘audit culture’ mentality, must not come to dominate, or significantly influence, early years practice, and the diverse ways in which practitioners work with children.
- A conviction that the EYFS’s statutory ‘Early Learning Goals’ (ELGs) require a radical overhaul, if not complete abolition, with the age-inappropriate demands of the overly-cognitive literacy and mathematics ELGs requiring drastic attention.

- That the new framework document should recognise the prominence that needs to be accorded to young children's right to be active, to access the outdoors and to continuing *physical* development; to the importance of early attachment processes and the Key Person approach; and to children's right to access artistic experiences in many forms.
- Children who are born prematurely can be placed at a disadvantage if they are legally forced to enter school based on birth date rather than expected date of birth. There needs to be much greater flexibility in the school-entry framework for a number of reasons, including the importance of every child having the necessary time to achieve emotional and social readiness for more formal learning. *All children should have the right to have their school starting date deferred at least until the legal date of entry, and without losing any of the rights accorded to other families.* Parents also should not be pressurised in any way to bring forward school commencement before statutory school age, and they should have the right to reserve their child's place in the school of their choice and not jeopardise this right by making a choice for a later start.
- We recognise that there are highly contrasting principled views held about early years ICT and screen-based technologies, with strong supporters of what is viewed as their creative and socially co-operative usage on one side of the argument, and on the other, substantial concerns relating to what is seen as an over-emphasis on their benefits, and their compromising impact on the quality of early play and social interactions. In our view practitioners need to be left free to reach their own informed decisions about these technologies, and with no (Ofsted monitored) statutory guidelines or targets being set for ICT and screen-based technologies.
- The early years environment needs to be free of all commercial interference, whether directly or indirectly targeted at children and those who care for them.
- The statutory nature of the EYFS framework needs to be urgently re-visited, with only those aspects of the framework that are widely regarded as being uncontroversial and essential remaining statutory, and the rest becoming voluntary 'guidance only'.
- Government and policy-makers need to find creative and effective ways to address inequality which do not involve indiscriminately imposed policies and normalising curricular frameworks that 'catch' all young children in their wake. A complex balance needs to be struck between the wish for equality, and the statutory imposition of inappropriate early interventions which can all too easily generate long-term harm.

THE FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

Overarching Concepts

A key overarching concept for this new Early Years Framework (EYF) is a clear recognition of the ‘worlds’ children are inhabiting and to which they are contributing. In modern technological society, these worlds are many, diverse, and complex. Today’s children are growing up in an age of ever-escalating global movement, increasing access to all kinds of technologies, and global challenges such as climate change. These and related factors are significantly shaping the worlds in which children live.

Early years practitioners should consider the kind of access children have to these worlds – in terms of possible educational benefits and the need to protect them from developmentally inappropriate experience. This new EYF takes account of these important contemporary concerns, and adopts an inclusive approach to early years care and learning that protects diversity and pluralism of practice from the juggernaut of ‘normalising’ standardisation.

From this perspective, the (legislated) existence of just one (government) perspective on early years education disadvantages many children, not least because practitioners’ autonomous professional flexibility for working responsively for the children in their care is hopelessly compromised. In contrast, an inclusive set of diverse perspectives about how children learn, who they can become and how they might contribute to the world – which this framework document strongly champions – is better for children’s well-being, and better reflects the greatly differing contexts in which today’s children live and learn.

Existing knowledges which children have about themselves and the worlds in which they live, along with the agency they can exercise in negotiating them, is easily side-lined or silenced by a ‘one-size-fits-all’ curricular approach. Early years care and learning can and should not simply reflect, but be critically engaged with, the cultures of children, and the communities in which they live.

This new EYF does not seek to exclude one approach in the interest of another; instead, it seeks to support setting design and informed pedagogical practices that facilitate the learning, well-being, health, empowerment, happiness, inclusion, and worldly experience of young children.

Finally, this document explicitly subscribes to a ‘less is more’ simplicity, on which view it is at best unnecessary, and at worst positively harmful, to burden early years workers with lengthy ‘thou shalt not...’ documentation that can only disempower and de-professionalise them. In this sense, we not only make no apology for the comparative brevity of this document, but we proclaim it as *a positive virtue* for the ‘new paradigm’ for early childhood which we are advocating.

Ways to Understand Children

There are many ways to understand children, including their learning and development; and it might well be that the capacity for *open emotional commitment* to seeking such understanding is at least as important as the theoretical *content* of given understandings. Possessing informed and coherent understandings of children is crucial to building relationships that enable rich learning in the early years.

There is a welcome trend in early childhood research that encourages practitioners to draw upon a variety of theoretical perspectives and pedagogic traditions to understand children. The process of openly working with the differences that a range of perspectives can offer does not at all imply that educators must draw upon them all, but instead that they can begin to notice and engage with the effects, benefits, limitations etc. of any given theoretical – or policy-making – perspective.

There is often a perception that in the early years field, theory is quite separate from practice, and that practice is far more important than theory. Yet the ‘approaches’ that are used in early years education are in reality all based upon one theoretical perspective or another, whether this be explicit or implicit. Some theories are less familiar than others, often depending on cultural and geographical factors, but this does not necessarily render them any less useful in setting practice. This document argues for the importance of both practice and theory, and that to privilege one over the other is a potential error that can, at worst, limit the quality and depth of our work with young children.

Theoretical Perspectives

Although rarely formulated as such, one of the most well-known theories is that of ‘**child development**’ itself. Many approaches in the early years are based on this theoretical perspective. Sometimes it may seem that child development is not a theory because it is so taken for granted, and so seamlessly built into the vocabulary we use to describe children’s learning and our pedagogical practice, along with the environments we set up to enable learning and teaching.

Child development theories can be very useful if one starts from the assumption that *individuality* is a central aspect of early human development. The EYFS has rightly used the principle of ‘A Unique Child’ as an over-arching theme (cf. Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), even if many of its Early Learning Goals flagrantly contradict that very principle. Taking this presumption of uniqueness as a pre-requisite, the following questions may help practitioners think deeply and productively about their own work with young children:

- How can I begin to recognise and reflect upon the ways children negotiate autonomy in their everyday relationships?
- How do I negotiate issues of autonomy and power in my everyday relationships with children and educators, and what are the effects of this?

- From a more psychoanalytic perspective, how can I begin to recognise the significance of *purpose* and *desire* in children's learning and development? (And how can I, as a professional, begin to understand, make sense of, and manage my own sense of purpose and desire?)
- How do the environments I create for children's learning enable exploration and experimentation in a way which creatively fosters positive dispositions and attitudes towards learning?

Some early childhood approaches offer what is an *explicitly unhurried approach* to young children's experience, in which key aims are to respect and protect the boundaries of early childhood. These approaches commonly define 'the early years' as extending to the age of six or seven, when children begin to gain conscious control of their thought processes. These approaches base their attitudes to pedagogy on the understanding of child development in the years from three to seven, carefully gearing learning opportunities to young children's emerging consciousness. They recognise the damage that can be caused by developmental imbalance, especially wishing to avoid too premature or precocious an *intellectual* development in the child, at the expense of physical, emotional and social development (e.g. Goddard Blythe, 2004; Bingham and Whitebread, 2012).

In a **STEINER WALDORF APPROACH**, for example (quoting Steiner Kindergarten teacher-trainer Lynne Oldfield – Oldfield, 2012) – 'The unhurried mood surrounds everything that we do [in the Steiner Kindergarten] – how we present activities, the structure of our day, the attention to detail, the caring for child and environment. It minimises stress in both child and teacher (and children are particularly sensitive to stress in adults). It also gives the educator the time to establish a strong foundation for later formal schooling. In a Waldorf kindergarten we have time –and the young developing child senses that at the deepest level.'

Children are in mixed age groups between the age of 3 and 6, and in ideal circumstances they remain with one teacher throughout the Kindergarten years. Oldfield again: 'This GIFT OF TIME together allows a valuable connection to be made between child and teacher, child and child, which finds its resonance in attachment theory.' Four key features of the approach are that it is a *hands first*, not a 'head start' approach; it is language rich, rather than print filled; it is authentically play based and activity rich; and the Kindergarten environment aims to provide a calm, nurturing experience in which the children learn emotional regulation in a naturalistic, non-didactic way. The importance of rhythm, imitation and example are also central to the Steiner Waldorf early childhood approach (see also Nicol and Taplin, 2012).

AMONTESSORI APPROACH offers a broad vision of education as an aid to life. It is designed to help children with their task of inner construction as they grow from childhood to maturity. It succeeds because it draws its principles from the natural development of the child. Its flexibility provides a matrix within which each individual child's inner directives freely guide the child toward wholesome growth and a natural joy in learning. The harmonious development of the personality, the first great creative work of childhood, needs an enabling environment for exercising all the potentials – emotional,

intellectual, social, physical and spiritual. The key to this development is intrinsic in the child and, given the right conditions, it will unfold naturally; and for this to occur, 'freedom' is essential.

The development of the teacher, so often indicated as vital by Maria Montessori, is not a selfish quest. Any personal, intellectual or spiritual development undertaken by adults not only enriches their own journey, but the journey of everyone they come into contact with; not the least of which is the child. As Montessori says in *The Absorbent Mind*: 'Whoever directs others, must have transformed himself. No one can ever be a leader or a guide, who has not been prepared for that work.'

Montessori education does not view each child's development goal by goal, but as a unified whole. Value is placed more importantly on the process involved in arriving at any given 'norms', rather than on those norms themselves. The whole person is seen as being 'in process'.

Montessorians need to question whether the statutory EYFS goals genuinely reflect appropriate aspirations and expectations for children of this age, as there is a requirement that these goals provide the basis for planning. Such requirements inevitably compromise each child's scope for inner direction and independence, with adults retaining control and direction of the curriculum, thus it is they who direct the learning process rather than the child.

The **FOREST SCHOOL MOVEMENT** originated in Denmark in the 1980s, and forest schools quickly became popular in all Scandinavian countries, and then proceeded to make an impact on early years philosophy in the United Kingdom. Valuing the outdoors as a place where children should play and develop was not a new concept, since historically, this had been strongly advocated by Froebel, Macmillan, Isaacs and others; but in Denmark, research had been undertaken to indicate just how valuable being in the outdoors actually is to young children.

Children who were allowed to develop in the natural rich environments of the forest schools with few pressures were found to be less stressed, more confident (especially in the area of taking calculated risks), had better communication skills, were more creative, showed better emotional well-being, suffered less ill health, and had better concentration on entering formal education. If one considers these advantages individually, it is not hard to imagine why this should be so. Outside, children can be active and learn through movement and all of their senses (nothing can be right in asking young children to sit still at a time in their lives when they are biologically geared to be most active), and consequently stress levels must be lower.

Surrounded by the richly diverse materials of a natural environment, creativity in all aspects of children's work is likely to be enhanced, not least in communication as outdoors children are less likely to feel under pressure. Viruses and germs are not as likely to be shared in the outdoors, the prospect of early obesity is reduced and the heart pumps healthily with more physical activity. It is an altogether healthier environment, and

helps children appreciate a world which they ultimately have to care for. As Tina Bruce has said, it is a bizarre assumption that children learn better indoors. But in fact this is just not true. Children forced to stay indoors may also suffer ‘nature deficit syndrome’ (Louv, 2008) because they are not in touch with the natural world and with the rhythms of nature (Charlton and House, 2012).

The **REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH** has the many different ways in which children learn and develop at its heart: the hundred languages of children, as perceived by the originator, Malaguzzi (Edwards et al., 1998). It views young children as competent, confident and independent learners who have as much to teach the adults as the adults have to teach the children. This is a pedagogy that emphasises self-awareness in relation to others and the resolving (rather than avoidance) of conflict. This is a relational pedagogy and not a measurable outcomes-driven pedagogy: the individual child is valued and supported through collective endeavours and effort.

Children work and play through projects which have meaning and relevance to them and which they, together with the educators, have planned and implemented. Systematic documentation captures the voices of children, and reflection on and about action allows the early educators to articulate and theorise the advisability and suitability of their practices and equips them with confidence to articulate their values and philosophies. Adults in the RE approach are trained in situ by a ‘pedagogista’ and there is a resident ‘atelierista’ who guides and supports creative and artistic development.

Like other, more flexible approaches, Reggio Emilia practices see learning as *a process* (rather than a product), although children in Reggio settings often produce amazing art work as a result of their experiences and the encouragement given by the adults. Those advocating a Reggio Emilia approach would find the statutory EYFS and its goals anathema: children are respected for their innate creative abilities, existing learning and developmental potential, and only comprehensive documentation of children’s experiences (including children’s own outcomes, both the physical and the observed) is used to monitor progress and achievement. [With thanks to Professor **Janet Moyles** for this contribution on Reggio.]

What we have tried to do in the foregoing is to illustrate a small sample of the rich diversity of early years approaches and perspectives (we could just as easily have discussed Froebelian practice, High Scope and so on). It is singularly unhelpful to get caught up in a debate about which approach is ‘right’ and which ‘wrong’. By acknowledging that each comes from a particular tradition and culture, we see that there are many ways for adults to support children’s early learning and development, and to serve the best interests of ‘the unique child’, depending on specific circumstances and contexts. Perhaps the *process* of early childhood pedagogy is far more important than the *content* of the various approaches – and it is a great tragedy that an audit-driven paradigm (typified by the statutory EYFS discourse and the pernicious profile scores) cannot begin to comprehend this kind of richly pluralistic, non-didactic perspective which we are placing at the core of this document.

Engaging with a Range of Different Theories

Another way of engaging with different theoretical perspectives is to take a given event of children's learning and 'read it' through the lenses of different theoretical perspectives. Here are some questions that might help practitioners begin to learn about and choose from a range of different theoretical perspectives, in order to discover which approach (or aspects of approaches) suit or match their own informed convictions about child development and learning:

- What role do you see a given theory playing in our work, and/or what do you need a theory to do?
- What do you wish to learn about children?
- How do you want to see children?
- How might different theories help us 'see' and experience children differently?
- How might different theoretical perspectives enable us to 'see' children who don't fit the 'norm', differently – and how might this benefit them?
- How might using a range of different theoretical perspectives enable you to 'assess' children's development and learning in ways that capture their best capacities, skills and agency, rather than merely to satisfy an external demand for 'data'?

Principles

This EYF is based on a suite of principles, which include:

- All children deserve successful life experiences that recognise what we call their existing 'worldliness' (e.g. Haraway, 2008).
- Children can learn in myriad different ways, although always in relation to something or someone else.
- Any assessment of children's learning can and should be negotiated with their families and communities to enable successful experiences for all children, and should not necessarily be standardised according to unhelpful 'developmental norms'.
- If felt to be appropriate and helpful, 'learning goals' (which we prefer to call 'learning competencies and aspirations') should more appropriately be focused on *what children offer to the world now*, as well as having a future orientation. Learning 'competencies and aspirations' are also just as important for practitioners as they are for children – an equivalence that, when acknowledged and embraced, will help to eradicate what we see as the damage done by the didactic imposition of adult-centric 'learning goals' on to young children. (See also the next section.)

- Inclusive education draws from a range of different perspectives and approaches to seek out the best in and for children, and how their best contributes to their current and future worlds.
- Children should have access to the outdoors and the real world as a right, and should be allowed to be active as their physical needs dictate.
- Children’s creativity should be allowed to flourish in all situations, and children should have access to the arts in many forms.
- Emotional well-being and social competence are of core importance, and all basic needs should be met in order to ensure that all children can achieve emotional well-being.

Learning Competencies and Aspirations

How do we want this, and future generations, of children to remember us?

(Martin, 2005, p. 39)

Where felt to be appropriate, Learning Competencies and Aspirations for children should draw upon the cultural and contextual capacities, skills and agency that children already possess. As we know only too well from repeated EYFS experiences, the manner by which any ‘goals’ are set, assessed and rated can routinely restrict both our own diverse understandings of young children, and the ways in which they themselves can and do develop – thereby, at worst, setting them up to fail.

Learning aspirations will tend to stretch across all ‘areas of learning’, such as communication, literacy, numeracy, physical development, personal social and emotional development. These learning aspirations are not limited to one of these ‘areas of learning’ but instead set out to describe the ways in which children’s learning integrates such skills. In turn, this then better prepares them as critical and creative thinkers and worldly subjects.

Becoming Worldly

When children have the space to explore the worlds in which they live in supported and enabling ways, they are able to generate knowledge about the people, places and the events in which they are immersed. This will tend to include a subliminal (i.e. non-intellectualised) recognition of the *relational interdependence* that human beings have with places, animals and objects, and the shared contribution that this interdependence generates (Taylor and Giugni, 2012). In a 21st century global cultural context, children’s knowledge of and relationship with their local environments, and with the world more generally, become critical. Considerations such as these will clearly have implications for the learning opportunities that connect with these issues – including the learning materials and resources that are selected, and the ‘politics’ associated with them. It may

also include attention being given to the kind of environments that are created with and for children's learning. Such informed professional choices are not limited to one theoretical perspective or pedagogical approach; rather, they are principles that can help inform practitioners' selection of particular perspectives and approaches to help children learn.

Contributing to a World Full of Change

The recognition of children's current abilities, knowledges and agency is critical if children are to feel like valued members of their communities and society. Children's contributions to a changing world rely upon practitioners and professionals creating spaces for *a culture of childhood* to thrive. This might include recognition of the ways in which children can learn through play, construct their own learning contexts, and participate in learning with and from others—although we must be careful not to uncritically assume and impose Western cultural 'norms' in what is an increasingly multi-cultural world.

The acknowledgement of a culture of childhood also enables alternative ways of 'assessing' learning. Accepting the significance of children's abilities, knowledges and agencies allows a broader view of what children can do, and also allows us to take a broader view of their overall development than that prescribed by a 'curriculum' predicated on school readiness. Then the culture of childhood as a significant part of life can more easily be recognised and celebrated.

Learning in Inclusive Ways

With the fast-pace global movement of ideas, people and technology etc., a new kind of inclusive practice becomes necessary for children of all nations, with inclusive practices therefore being necessary for all children. Such rich diversity of practice and theory means, in turn, that assessment urgently needs to be thought about differently. When children's learning is limited to an externally prescribed and imposed set of standardizing criteria, this will inevitably favour some children, and will be a major disadvantage to others. Not only is the much-vaunted 'equity' that governments claim to be seeking then inevitably compromised, but the possibility of all children routinely succeeding, having a positive attitude to learning, and being interested in the learning of others is also stymied. If, on the other hand, children's learning is generated in inclusive ways, privileging pluralism and diversity of approach as *foundational principles*, then all kinds of potentialities will be enabled to arise in how children can make contributions to their changing worlds and establish a significant place in the world as children.

Put differently, **learning in inclusive ways necessitates assessment in inclusive ways**. As professionals in the early years expand their repertoire of possible perspectives and approaches, then the potential for more inclusive ways of 'seeing' and understanding children becomes possible. In turn, the possibilities for what gets assessed, and how, can be undertaken more inclusively, in ways that are locally and culturally embedded (and

justified), rather than being subject to externally imposed standardising developmental templates which violate individual difference and diversity. We all know that early experiences set children up for their ensuing engagement (or otherwise) with education and learning. If young children are set up as successful learners in living cultural contexts by autonomous and locally empowered practitioners, then the likelihood that their remaining educational experience will be positive will be greatly enhanced.

Expression of Experiences

When children are offered a range of ways for expressing themselves and their experiences, it is more likely that the learning they undertake will become visible in various ways. If children are limited to the confines of a universal, one-size-fits-all approach to how they can express their capacities, skills and knowledge, there will be a significant loss of unknown and unrecognised potential. If, on the other hand, children have a plethora of possibilities to express themselves and their experiences, whether individually or collectively, new learning about children and what they can do, *which will sometimes take us by surprise*, becomes highly possible.

When, via their own lifelong personal and professional development, early years practitioners have an openness to the many kinds of children's expression that exist, whether through creative and visual arts, movement, music, interaction with natural environments, technology and so on, the potentialities for children's learning is inevitably increased. This will require practitioners who possess the capacity to thoughtfully embrace different theoretical approaches that can shape their decision making. When a rich variety of expressions of experience are valued equally and flexibly, children are more likely to engage in and create successful experiences. **The frameworks through which we 'see' and understand make a significant, possibly decisive difference to whom we can allow children to be and become.**

Living in a Sustainable World

A central theme of young children's learning must be about the sustainability of their lives, the lives of others (human and non-human) and the world (Taylor and Giugni, 2012). The learning of the individual child is relationally interdependent to everything and everyone. If children (and professionals) are engaged in learning processes and environments that are narrow, universalised, limiting and excessively monitored, young children's living and learning will not be sustainable, and will be a pale shadow of what it could be.

In the current highly uncertain political and cultural climate, early years development and learning that focuses on sustainable living and learning is necessary more than it has ever been. This in turn requires different, creative and critical approaches to early years experience that consider the actualities of the world in which children live, and the best ways to create learning milieux that attend to these realities.

Conclusion

This Early Years Framework is a very long way from being a ‘manual of practice’, and it will likely disappoint those who are looking for such a document. As the great scientist and humanitarian Albert Einstein once poignantly wrote, ‘The world we have created is a product of our thinking. If we want to change the world, we have to change our thinking.... *We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.*’ (our italics) Thus, to have uncritically ‘bought into’ the curricular, stipulatory ideology of the EYFS by creating a ‘better EYFS’ would have been to merely reinforce the current malaise, rather than aspiring to transcend it.

Many people are now striving to embrace a new paradigm, but ways of thinking can take much longer to change; after all, most of us have been strongly conditioned into ‘separative’ and compartmentalised thinking. To give an example, we may recognise that play is nature’s fundamental mode of learning, but to speak of ‘directed’ or ‘structured’ play could be construed as a contradiction of that understanding. In the early years at least, it is important for there to be a clearer understanding of what is meant by ‘learning through play’, where the multiple engagements of the child are given central place in showing the best way forward. Play might then be defined as all those activities which evoke in the young child a sense of well-being, which are related to potential, and which are seen to satisfy their internal developmental wishes and drives – even though to us, these may still be mysterious.

This document intentionally possesses an inherent *flexibility*: it could, and hopefully will, exist as an early years framework document in its own right for those fortunate enough to be working in permissive, non-statutory professional environments; and it can also be used *alongside* other curricular documents in order to galvanise and inspire practitioners to temper the worst aspects of such didactic, professionally disempowering approaches. It is also very much an *emerging* document, in whose future development we would wish all practitioners, academics etc. to feel able to participate – in other words, a *living* document which will always be ‘in process’. For we do not believe that anyone (including ourselves) has either the right or the capability to lay down a didactic, universal document that will effectively capture all that is germane to the subtle, complex and sometime mysterious world of early childhood.

At the very least, we commend *Unhurried Pathways* as one possible, thoughtful contribution towards an urgently needed ‘new paradigm’ for early childhood. Half a century, to the year, after the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s seminal book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in which the term ‘paradigm’ was first coined, for Early Childhood Action and its many supporters, such a new paradigm cannot come soon enough.

AFTERWORD

By **Margaret Edgington**, independent early years consultant

This document proposes, and sets out, some principles and aspirations to underpin early childhood care and education, and stresses the importance of drawing from a diverse range of theories and practices, to meet the needs of **all** children. It encourages practitioners to reflect, and to decide for themselves what is appropriate for the children they work with, in the context of their community (providing some useful questions to start this process). This is the opposite of what the EYFS, with its statutory learning and development requirements and ‘expected’ goals, promotes and, sadly, its effect has been to damage the creativity of both practitioners and children, as they try to cover, or achieve, often unrealistic, targets.

If we were truly to embrace the concept of the Unique Child in England, we would recognise that young children’s learning cannot, and should not, be compartmentalised or prescribed. Instead, we should celebrate their unique ways of behaving and thinking and join them on their voyage of discovery, as they strive to make sense of the world in which they live. Instead of trying to fit children into the same mould and completing pointless data collection exercises, we could be observing, documenting and developing our understanding of the unique learning journeys that each child embarks on, within the context of the environment and experiences we offer them. We could be starting from their ideas and goals, rather than those that have been imposed on us.

The Early Childhood Action group makes it clear that this document is a first step towards an alternative framework for early childhood practice and that it is a work in progress. They challenge practitioners to contribute to the process of developing it further. However, they also acknowledge that many practitioners may find this difficult, as they have learned to look to others for answers and may have lost confidence in their own ideas. Despite this, I hope it is not the case, and that many practitioners and parents will take up the challenge and think hard about what they want for young children in England. Maybe one possible starting point could be to ask, ‘What might young children themselves say they wanted if they were able to articulate their needs to our policy makers?’.

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Note for Readers:

We would very much welcome your feedback and suggestions for improving this document.

You can contact us at info@earlychildhoodaction.com

APPENDIX I

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The Revised EYFS: *Still* ‘Too Much, Too Young’

by **Dr Richard House, Dr Jayne Osgood and Kim Simpson**

Early Childhood Action Core Group

Since 2007, a number of childhood organisations have raised major concerns about the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework which have never been satisfactorily responded to, and often barely even acknowledged, by our legislators. Organisations like the Open EYE campaign, the Alliance for Childhood and, more latterly, Early Childhood Action (ECA) have raised concerns which include: prematurely imposed, developmentally inappropriate cognitive (e.g. literacy) learning; the degradation of authentic free play; the statutory imposition of unrealistic ‘normalising’ developmental regimes, including so-called ‘Early Learning Goals’, on to the rich diversity of early experience; the importing of a technocratic ‘audit culture’ and a near obsessive-compulsive assessment mentality into early childhood; the deprofessionalising of early years practitioners; and the infringement of the parental right to choose the kind of milieu which they wish their children to experience, with such rights being significantly compromised by the unwarranted imposition of a mandatory framework, underpinned by legal statute, on children’s early development and learning.

Appearing in late March, the government’s revised EYFS has been published somewhat earlier than had been trailed. It always was the government’s intention to review the EYFS framework two years after its 2008 implementation; and, with a new, fresh government in power that was less identified with the EYFS, and which publicly agreed with at least some of EYFS critics’ concerns when in political opposition, there was until quite recently some optimism across the sector that the most central shortcomings of the original EYFS framework might be substantively addressed. Though it came as little surprise to those who closely read the government’s December 2011 response to Dame Clare Tickell’s 2011 EYFS Review, the recently published revised EYFS falls considerably short of addressing the above-mentioned shortcomings, and as such it is a huge disappointment. Of course the news is not all bad. The revised framework does at least strive to reduce the EYFS’s notorious ‘low-trust’ bureaucratic burden; and in addition, the continued underpinning by the four EYFS themes and principles, and the recognition of the three Prime Areas of learning and development which recognise the centrality of personal, social, emotional, physical and language development, are to be welcomed. Moreover, in what is a notable shift, the new framework does not contain any statutory rules about the presence of ICT in early years settings, restoring to professionals and parents the discretion to make such complex and controversial decisions for themselves. We warmly welcome these positive aspects of the revised framework.

However, the good news ends abruptly at this point. In general terms, we are greatly concerned, first, about the continuing existence of statutory, normalising ‘learning goals’ and ‘learning and development requirements’ being summarily imposed upon children whose rates of development and learning styles are widely agreed to be enormously diverse, and certainly not amenable to normalising templates. Nowhere in the revised EYFS, incidentally, is there any attempt to engage with the flagrant contradiction that exists between this normalising approach, on the one hand, and on the other, the eminently sensible view expressed on page 3 of the new framework, that ‘children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates’.

Another concern is the essentially unmodified introduction of overly cognitive demands on very young children through literacy and numeracy ‘learning goals’ for which there is absolutely no evidence base, and which many authorities believe to tax at least some children in ways that distort their natural development, and set up cultures of failure and low self-esteem at a very young age.

Moreover, we now also have to contend with compulsory 'progress checks' at 2 (which polls have shown to be opposed by 9 in 10 parents). It is important to add that children under 3 already receive 'voluntary' health checks by their local health visitors, during which areas of real concern can be, and are, picked up, without the need to develop another bureaucratic normalising culture which can only feed parents' anxieties and paranoia at an age when children's developmental journeys are so diverse anyway.

We also still have to contend with 'expected' levels of development that children are meant to have achieved at the end of the reception (with some such children being nearly *a year younger* than their peers). These statutory learning 'requirements' and 'expected' developmental templates would be criminal, if they weren't so tragic for the children concerned; and at some point, future historians of early childhood will surely recognise them as such – with those guilty of imposing these child-inappropriate experiences by legal statute having a great deal to answer for.

It seems unambiguously clear from both the revised EYFS itself and from repeated ministerial statements that the government is self-consciously pursuing an unashamedly 'school readiness' agenda. Very early in the document (p. 2), for example, we read that the revised EYFS 'promotes *teaching* and learning *to ensure children's "school readiness"*', and of '...areas of learning and development which *must* shape activities and experiences (*educational programmes*)' (our added italics). Such an approach, with its teaching- and education-driven discourse, fundamentally contradicts the viewpoint of many if not most in the field, who view early childhood as a delicate, subtle and highly complex period in its own right, which needs to be proactively protected from values and practices which appropriately belong to another, older phase of childhood. On this view, as soon as 'schoolifying' pressures are exerted on to professionals, parents, children and local authorities, the delicate quality of early experience is unavoidably compromised, and at worst, damaged beyond repair. On this scenario, everyone and everything will suffer – including (government please note) both the country's long-term well-being *and* GNP indexes.

England's absurdly low school starting age of 4 is almost unique in Europe, and is the regular butt of incredulous comments when our more enlightened European colleagues and parents witness what we are doing to England's young children, and then talk to us about it (commonly when they have to reside here, and witness their own children suffering in the system). This situation has come about through a toxic combination of economy-driven expediency, historical 'policy creep' and inertia, and a 'modernist', anxiety-driven 'earlier is necessarily better' ideology that has no evidence base, and which it should be government's responsibility to understand and manage appropriately, and certainly not abjectly collude with. But it's too easy just to blame politicians. Rather, the fact that a 'too much, too soon' ideology has surreptitiously come to dominate England's early childhood experience is something for which we must *all* take our share of responsibility, and do all that we can to challenge in every conceivable way, before any more damage is done. Let's look in a bit more detail at the revised EYFS document itself. One of the first things that jumps out at the reader is the tell-tale issue of *style*. With well over 200 instances of the word 'must' occurring in just 26 pages of text, amounting to an average 8–9 'musts' *on every page*, and all couched within a statutory framework that repeatedly speaks of practitioners' likelihood of 'committing an offence', such a discourse cannot but generate a chronic deprofessionalising of practitioners, leading to a kind of abject compliance and 'learned helplessness'. This in turn can only generate polarisation, either through mindless, *unthinking* compliance to government diktat, or else through rebellious *defiance*.

Those responsible for drafting this document clearly don't possess even a modicum of understanding of the psychological dynamics that this chosen discourse will generate in practitioners. Certainly, a Foucauldian perspective along the lines described by Jayne Osgood (in her recent book *Narratives from the Nursery: Negotiating Professional Identities in Early Childhood*, Routledge, 2011), Gaile Cannella and Glenda Mac Naughton would have much to say about the controlling, *disciplinary* function of such a discourse. The danger, of course, is that under such a regime of control, it is the very practitioner qualities so important in early years work – creativity, innovation, imagination, emotional warmth and autonomy – that will be the first to be extinguished.

The grass-roots organisation Early Childhood Action (see www.earlychildhoodaction.com), which we hastily formed in February, has now picked up the baton in defence of early childhood, through its drafting of an early years framework document that will be formally published later in the Spring, and which will constitute a direct ideological alternative to the revised EYFS. ECA's founding group itself models the very diversity which it argues should be a central feature of the early years landscape. Our Drafting Committee is made up of experienced authorities on early childhood from a wide range of pedagogical approaches and professional backgrounds, who are collectively striving to honour the massive groundswell of support from right across the sector for a different, principled approach to early childhood that is rooted in a fundamentally different paradigm.

Without wishing to pre-empt the results of their deliberations, it seems likely that ECA will move altogether beyond the idea of a standard 'curriculum', and towards a framework which maximises children's well-being and learning potentials *in unhurried, developmentally informed ways* which privilege and celebrate socio-cultural diversity. A key strength of Early Childhood Action is that a number of progressive early learning approaches – Montessori, Steiner, humanism, post-structuralism, etc. – are being drawn upon and are coalescing into an emerging pedagogy which can 'hold' this rich diversity, and creatively draw upon the many strengths of these diverse traditions. ECA's approach is therefore far more attuned to young children's experience and natural ways of learning than is the 'schoolifying', audit-driven agenda of the government, which is in turn the inevitable consequence of England's unconscionably early school starting age.

As our psychological understanding of the complexities and subtleties of early development and learning advance, the tendency in at least some, more enlightened countries is to relax educational control, and to allow children to unfold in an unforced way. Waiting patiently for 'windows of development' to open – rather than uncritically assuming, as in England, that earlier development and learning is somehow necessarily better – results in the long run in both higher educational standards *and* in happier, more rounded children, as the experience of our wiser Nordic European neighbours has conclusively and consistently demonstrated. In conclusion then, in our view, only an approach to early childhood experience that enshrines the principles of *professional empowerment* and *diversity of practice* at its core can hope to generate the kind of fundamental paradigm change that we believe to be essential, if we are to avoid a noxious 'too much, too soon' ideology damaging a generation of England's children. Certainly, in the brave new world of the revised EYFS, the struggle for the heart of young children's well-being will continue apace. And those who hold that young children's well-being must be non-negotiable, and fiercely protected from political expediency, ambition and ignorance, simply aren't going away until a decisive sea-change has occurred in early childhood policy-making.

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APPENDIX II

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<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/1111210/Why-I-believe-plans-EYFS-reform-dont-grade/?DCMP=ILC-SEARCH>

Policy and Politics

Why the plans for EYFS reform don't make the grade

Richard House, *Nursery World*, 10 January 2012

A Critical Commentary on Reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage (the EYFS): Government Response to Consultation (publ. 20 Dec 2011)

Background

The Government's response to its EYFS consultation was published on the 20th December, when few practitioners will have been expecting important Government pronouncements. The document, *Reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage*, can be found [here](#). I believe the document to be ill-thought through and inadequate, and it deserves to be strongly contested.

(1) Introduction

The introduction of reductions in bureaucratic EYFS demands and a more workable exemptions process is welcome. However, it is mystifying why the principle of professional autonomy is conceded for risk assessment, yet is denied in other professional pedagogical areas. The Department's (DfE) claim that 'The EYFS framework has helped improve outcomes for children' is highly problematic, as the term 'improved outcome' denotes children developing certain 'capabilities' sooner rather than later (in order to be 'ready for school'). Yet many argue this 'earlier is better' ideology to be severely compromising of young children's age-appropriate development.

(2) Nomenclature

We read of 'the expected level of the goals', thereby advocating the holding of 'expectations' about how young children should develop. There is also the now perennial misrepresentation of play, with the DfE referring to 'adult-led play' and 'guided play' – again, geared to a 'schoolifying' agenda.

(3) Programmatic 'Development'

If the schooling system is to function manageably, practitioners must ensure that children reach what the system deems to be acceptable development and 'school readiness' by age 4. The needs of the schooling system therefore determine expected developmental pathways, rather than the system being responsive to children's natural and diverse development. There is an inherent incompatibility between 'responding to each child as an individual learner' and statutorily laying-down 'expected levels of development' by 5. The new 'development chart' from birth to age five will feed this programmatic approach to development; and there are also grave dangers of pathologically labelling children at age 2.

(4) 'School Readiness'

The DfE claims that respondents' concerns about the 'school readiness' emphasis are 'unwarranted', as 'school readiness should be understood in a broad sense'. Yet this strategic widening of the definition does not remove or ameliorate the content of what is currently happening under the 'school readiness' umbrella, and which critics strongly question. That pre-school children 'need to be introduced to formal learning' is a view which many authorities reject.

(5) Diversity, and a Fundamentally Split Field

Detailed analysis of responses reveals a field fundamentally split on a range of key issues, rendering inappropriate the Government's determination to impose a single legislative framework. Given such fundamental disagreement, it is very difficult to justify imposing a standardised statutory curriculum.

(6) Supplementary Information and Practice Guidance

'Many respondents felt that there was a need for supplementary information and practice guidance...', with these proposed documents all designed to render the EYFS more 'deliverable'. Yet many practitioners contest significant

aspects of the EYFS; and the list of new planned materials amounts to a roll-call for all that is most controversial in the EYFS – e.g. instructing practitioners on how to ‘deliver’ the widely contested Profile more effectively; and codifying child development with a ‘chart’.

(7) ‘Revision’ of the Early Learning Goals

Most disturbingly of all, the DfE claims to be responding to consultees’ concerns about the content of the literacy and numeracy ELGs, assuring us that ‘these have been the main focus of further consideration and revision’. Regarding literacy, ‘respondents suggested there was too much emphasis on reading and writing at too young an age.’ Yet scandalously, this unambiguous consultation finding bears no relation to the changes the DfE is proposing. Far from the literacy goals being reigned back in response to consultees’ concerns, in reality they will be at least as onerous and developmentally inappropriate as the previous goals – and quite possibly more so.

Regarding mathematics, no pretext, based on respondents’ views, is provided to support the proposed changes. The term ‘experts’ is repeatedly used, and we are entitled to know who these anonymous ‘experts’ are exerting such an influence on the DfE. Overall, the DfE has substantially ratcheted up the ‘left-brain’ cognitive demands being foisted on to young children through their proposed changes to the Mathematics ELGs.

(8) Assessment: The EYFS Profile and the Progress Check

‘Some respondents expressed concern that categorising children under the three terms “emerging”, “expected” and “exceeding” was labelling them unnecessarily’. The DfE invokes ‘discussions with parents, teachers and experts in workshops’ to allay these concerns, yet they make no attempt to respond to the substance of the concerns. The DfE takes ‘widespread calls for greater exemplification and explanation about how to use the new EYFSP to assess children’ as justification for the existence of the Profile, rather than seeing these requests as symptomatic of the Profile itself being flawed, with the consequence being anxiety-driven calls from practitioners who find it unworkable.

Regarding the ‘progress check’ at 2, ‘Online consultation feedback was mixed, but in workshops where this issue was addressed there was strong support for the progress check...’. This is a totally inadequate response to concerns raised by respondents – as if those principled concerns can be simply ignored by invoking un-minuted ‘workshop conversations’ in which departmental officials no doubt orchestrated the discussion in their required direction.

(9) Ofsted

To the question, ‘...Should the Government introduce a system similar to Welfare Notices for breaches of the learning and development requirements?’, we find under one-third of respondents agreeing to Ofsted having these powers. Yet the Department construes this clear negative result as denoting ‘no clear consensus of opinion on this issue...’! The DfE will clearly have its way, willy-nilly, making no attempt to inquire into the reasons for such disquiet in the sector about these proposals.

(10) Deafening Silence in Relation to ICT

Finally, it is a major dereliction of the DfE’s duty of care that no reference is made to ICT’s inclusion in the compulsory EYFS curriculum. It is mystifying that no reference is made to this issue, when many authorities believe that these technologies harm young children, supported by a wide range of corroborative research evidence.

A much longer version can be sent on request. Contact Richard House, MA (Oxon), Ph.D., C.Psychol., AFBPsS, Cert.Couns. University of Winchester; Email: Richard.House@winchester.ac.uk