The Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum in England: a missed opportunity?

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Chapter 2 The Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum in England: A Missed Opportunity?

Carolyn Helena Silberfeld and Karen Horsley.

“There’s no time to talk about fish fingers and ‘standy up’ yoghurts because we are too busy doing literacy, maths and reading!” (Mia, aged 5)

Chapter Overview

This chapter explores the potential for alternative interpretations of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which demonstrate how young children’s learning and development can be encouraged, sustained and extended within the contexts of children’s lived experiences. It will interrogate the context in which the EYFS was introduced as a statutory curriculum in 2008, having been driven by different demands and agendas of stakeholders and will discuss the implications for early years professional practice in the new streamlined EYFS implemented in September 2012. It will explore alternative pathways to understanding and facilitating children’s learning and development within early years settings both nationally and internationally. This chapter will explore the value and purpose of the EYFS in terms of how it supports children’s learning and development in early years settings. Missed opportunity can occur as practitioners strive to meet very different and complex myriad
of demands placed on them by society, policy makers and regulatory bodies.

KEY THEMES

- Developments in the EYFS and the way in which children's learning and development can be encouraged
- Different interpretations of the EYFS which can lead to missed opportunities.
- The complexity of decision making and meeting the recommendations of the EYFS
- Cross cultural examples of early years practice

WHAT DID YOU DO AT NURSERY TODAY?

'Well, first I sat at the dough table and rolled the dough in my hands. Lucy said hers was a snake and mine, mine was a worm. Mrs. Pitt talked about long ones and short ones, fat ones and thin ones and Mummy; Katie rolled her dough so long it went right over the end of the table. And nobody said, “What are you going to make? A cake would be nice.”’

“Yes but then what did you do?”
'I played on the climbing frame and, do you know mummy, I climbed to the very top and had great fun sliding down and Mrs. Crompton gave me a clap and said “Well done!”'

“Yes but did you do anything today?”

Megan and I went to the paint table. It was lovely and gooey and we made lots of patterns with our fingers and hands. Megan had yellow paint and I had red, and mummy, Miss Howard said, “I wonder what would happen if your paint got mixed up?” and mummy, do you know what, the paint went orange! And no-one said, “What a mess you've made.”

“Yes but what else have you done?”

'At milk time we sat in a circle and talked about our friends. Mummy, I told Mrs. Crompton that my best friend is Luke because he came to see if I was alright when I fell and hurt my knee outside. And do you know, Mummy, after that Luke smiled at me a lot.'

“And then did you do anything?”

'I made lovely trayl patterns in the sand and Daniel and I had a race to see who could build a sand castle quickest.'

“But then did you do anything?”

'At story time I was tired so I sat on Miss. Howard's knee and the story was about a caterpillar and do you know mummy, caterpillars turn into beautiful butterflies.'

“So did you do anything today?”
'We sang Happy birthday to Jack and counted the candles on his cake. Oh, and I helped Hannah find her coat because it was on the wrong peg so she was a bit upset.'

“But did you do anything today?”

'Well, when Mrs. Crompton asked us to tidy up, I quickly painted you a picture, 'cos I knew you'd say, “What did you do at nursery today?”'

(Heard, 1993)

There is widespread acceptance that early childhood is an important time for children’s learning and that what takes place during this period is not only of paramount importance in the child’s development but also lays the foundation for lifelong learning (Miller & Deveraux, 2003; Fisher, 2002; Anning and Edwards 2006; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000; Bruce, 2004; Fawcett, 2009). Heard (1990) highlights the way in which children’s learning can be outcome driven, not only by practitioners but also by society in general. There can be a disinterest in the process in the hurry to discover the outcome, yet it is the process of the learning experience that can be the most informative in relation to developing, sustaining and extending children’s learning. We have begun with Heard’s poem because we thought that it is a great contrast to the monosyllabic response many children would give when asked ‘what did you do today?’ in our experience many children may respond with, either ‘nothing’, ‘do I have
to?’, ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I don’t want to tell you!’ This maybe because children do not necessarily themselves perceive that the outcome is more important than the process. This is an example of an adult imposed construct of the response they would expect i.e. the child telling them all about their day. Sometimes children may give a response in order to get something they want such as ‘I tell you if I can have a sweet’. This links to behavioural approaches found in many early years settings with children being rewarded for meeting adult’s expectations, ‘if you do your worksheet then you can go and play’, meaning ‘if you don’t do your worksheet you won’t be able to play’; thus embedding a culture of compliance in children. Although Bruce (2004, p. 29) acknowledges that, ‘because we think that children ought to learn something, it does not mean that we can make them learn it’, we would suggest that compliance remains an implicit necessity for children’s learning within the new EYFS. In contrast, Robinson & Aronica (2010) warn that an expectation of compliance as preparation for school readiness and employability can potentially damage children’s love of learning and stifle their burgeoning interests and talents. Interesting enough, there is a greater emphasis on the need for school readiness in the new EYFS (DfE, 2012) despite concerns regarding what children are being prepared for. Robinson & Aronica (2010) suggest that very little has changed in terms of schooling since the beginning of the twentieth century despite an era of rapid changes making it difficult to predict what will be necessary for children’s
to learn for the future. There is also further evidence that that children are not necessarily ready at such a young age to be preparing for formal school (House, 2011).

There are parallels with Taguchi (2010, p.17) in terms of a ‘pre-decided’ curriculum where the direction is “vertical and hierarchical, with ‘the one who already knows’ in a position over and above ‘the one who does not already know’ and is to be educated” These examples highlight the dichotomies between adult’s thinking and children’s thinking; and between process and outcome. Heard’s poem suggests that young children are quite well aware of these and some will navigate them successfully and in the process will be able to develop a ‘voice’ within the parameters of the EYFS and the child’s own cultural context. By this we mean the child’s capacity and ability to understand and comply with adult expectations whilst being able to put forward their own interpretation of their experiences and ways of doing things.

In the review of the EYFS (Tickell, 2011) there were clear recommendations to reduce the number of learning outcomes from 69 to 17. There was also recognition that practitioners are burdened with paperwork which takes them away from valuable time spent engaging with and listening to children. However, the philosophy which underpins the new EYFS continues to encourage the child to have their own
individuality and identity as long as it ‘fits in’ with the age and stage requirements of the four themes: ‘A Unique Child’; ‘Positive Relationships’; ‘Enabling Environments’; ‘Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates’ which are set out in discrete compartments within the documentation (DfE, 2012). Although we recognise the constructive nature of this approach which remains unchanged since 2008, this delineation of what is required is still at odds with the original spirit of the EYFS which stated ‘whatever children bring is an indication of their current interest and should be supported’ (DCSF, 2008, p.7). There continues to be an apparent lack of trust in practitioners’ ability to support children’s learning and development without specific direction. This seems to be evident in the contradictory language used within the framework which makes explicit that practitioners ‘should’ and ‘must’ deliver the required learning expectations of the curriculum. Similarly, the over prescriptive ways in which children are required to meet the intended learning goals does not suggest a sense of trust in children’s capacities and may even stifle the development of their cultural, social, emotional and intellectual capital. The unintended consequence of this is that the voice of the child may be ‘silenced’ through the interpretation and implementation of the EYFS. However,

‘...children show us they know how to walk along the path to understanding. Once children are helped to perceive themselves as authors or inventors, once they are helped to discover the pleasure of
inquiry, their motivation and interest explode. The age of childhood, more than the ages that follow, is characterized by such expectations.’

(Malaguzzi, 1998 in Edwards et. al., 1998, p. 67)

Embedded within the EYFS is an assumption that adults know what is best, and how children should ‘enjoy and achieve’ (DfE, 2012) through the experiences they are offered. Adults tend to lead children down pathways rather than enabling the children to carve out their own because the EYFS lays the foundations for what children need to know and experience without the recognition that children know their own minds and have their own cultures.

The following example from practice highlights different competencies and capacities of young children as architects, authors and creators of their own learning and development. It is a reflection of the intentions which underpinned the EYFS (DCSF, 2008, p.11) as a play based curriculum where ‘children are competent learners from birth and develop and learn in a wide variety of ways’. The approach of the practitioner has been to draw upon and support ‘children’s current interests’ (EYFS). Lily asked Karen to help her draw a rainbow with the chalks. They each chose different colours to draw the arcs. When they had drawn the rainbow other children joined them to help (Robbie, Izzie, Harry, Millie and Ellie)
Lily drew the sun, Karen began on the clouds, Harry drew a butterfly near the sun. Lily announced that they needed flowers, Izzie drew stems but left them, later Lily and Karen began the flowers. Robbie was right by Karen’s side adding his part and saying how much he was enjoying it. There was a comfortable ease as children joined and left at various points. Similarly Lily and Karen built the picture, Lily being very relaxed as to how it developed. There was a lot of laughter when Harry fell into the small empty sand tray at the edge of the drawing. Daniel and Robbie also did the same as the three sat where they landed there was lots of laughter.

Later on Robbie asked Karen to help him draw a rainbow. Robbie wanted a picture of Karen and him and his family inside the rainbow (below). He drew all of this family and Anjali’s family too. He made the heads, arms and legs. Robbie said that he loved doing the chalks. At the end Robbie drew a line between Karen and him; pausing to think about whether or not to ask Robbie about this, she asked what the line was for and he said ‘it’s so no one can get us..’ he added more lines over his family too.
Meanwhile the children had drawn a symbolic path to walk along. The line extended beyond the immediate drawing area. It appeared to have a definite start line and led to the rainbow. In contrast to the outcome driven nature of the EYFS, this was not a planned activity with a specific outcome, because it was an open day for new children and families. However the valuable learning that had taken place during this child-initiated purposeful activity developed their interests as well as bringing together the children’s complex experiences, feelings, thoughts and understandings.

Contemporary definitions of curriculum (Miller et al, 2003; Anning, 1998; Young, 1996) usually relate to the context in which learning is taking place. Although curricula often focus on planned activities designed to achieve particular developmental and educational aims, educationalists such as Blenkin & Kelly (1994) have called into question what is considered appropriate for inclusion in an early years curriculum. Recognition has been given that learning is contextual - ‘children learn best from their own experiences’ (Young,1996 :19) - and that young children’s learning needs change as their development progresses.

According to David (2001:56) "the fundamental building blocks of a curriculum can be seen as the knowledge (facts), skills, concepts/understandings and attitudes to be acquired." This is a much broader definition and indicates that the curriculum can be delivered anywhere the child is, whether at home or in an early years setting. It
implies that the curriculum is about more than knowledge and skills; it includes a "hidden curriculum" from which children learn social skills, attitudes and behaviours.

The EYFS encouraged practitioners to recognise the importance of listening to the choices and decisions that children make (DCSF, 2008, p.26). In practice this may not be straightforward as the subjective perspectives of adults and children may be different as the following example demonstrates. Sujey, aged 2 years was in the bookshop with her aunt, waiting for her mother to arrive. They were looking at books together. Sujey selected a book from the bottom shelf and sat on the floor to look at it. The book was about witches and it was very dark in colour. Sujey’s aunt found a very colourful book and showed it to Sujey, swapping it with the book about witches, which she replaced on the shelf. Sujey looked at the colourful book for about two minutes and then placed it on the floor next to her. She reached for the book about witches which had been replaced on the shelf and began looking through the pages. Sujey continued looking at the book for the next 15 minutes until her mother arrived. She seemed absolutely engrossed in it. When her mother arrived, Sujey’s aunt asked if she would like her to buy the colourful book, which was still lying next to her on the floor. Sujey stood up and said that she wanted the book about witches. Although her aunt couldn’t really understand what Sujey liked about the book, she agreed to get it for her. It was important to recognise that Sujey was developing her autonomy.
and learning to express her choice and to know that this is valued. Although the EYFS encourages practitioners to support the decisions that children make (DSCF, 2008, p27) they will invariably influence their decision making the ways in which the choice of materials are offered to them. These may be quite subtle cues such as tone of voice, facial expression or gesture that indicates the adult’s perception of what they think the child will enjoy. Although practitioners would like to think they encourage children to make their own decisions, they do not necessarily recognise the extent to which young children have the capacity to participate in decisions that affect them (Miller, 2003). This may be one of the reasons why the concept of adults listening to young children does not have prominence in the new EYFS (DfE, 2012). Instead, there seems to be an emphasis on making sure children listen.

When adults influence choices for children there is potentially a danger of missing out on how much young children can tell us themselves about their own understanding of their learning and development that they have achieved through a wide range of different learning experiences. David (2001) also suggests that different cultural groups have differing expectations of their children, and these are imposed on them from an early age, in an unwritten curriculum. This therefore suggests that whichever curriculum is employed needs to retain cultural diversity. It is important to recognise that different types of curricula have different purposes; which are ‘underpinned by different values and principles and are informed by different assumptions and beliefs about children.’ David
The Early Years Curriculum

(2001:59). The early years curriculum in Turkey also has an emphasis on learning and development but aims to facilitate children and families’ participation in the learning journey. It has been influenced by the early years curricula in Reggio Emilia and views ‘creativity as a social good’ (Banaji et al, 2006, p. 24) to be embraced collectively by the whole community.

In one of the nurseries which we visited in Ankara, the large entrance hall is viewed as an important social space which facilitates the interaction of children, parents and practitioners. The walls are covered with interesting things for the children to look at and examples (words and pictures of their work and what they have said). One question the children (aged 3-6) have been asked is ‘What is a human?’ The children’s answers e.g. ‘I don’t know but I am one’ are written by the staff and put on the wall.

Children learn spelling by another technique using words attached to parachutes, which are placed at the top of the notice board. As time goes by and the children learn the words, they are moved down the board and new ones take their place. This therefore caters for all the children – those who grasp words quickly and those who take a little more time, thus mirroring the EYFS principle of learning and development which ‘recognises that children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates’ (DfE, 2012, p.3).
The EYFS has developed from The Foundation Stage Curriculum, a centralised curriculum framework that provided guidance to early childhood practitioners and teachers to enable them to prepare children for the next stage of schooling. It was defined as "everything children do, see, hear, or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned" (QCA, 2000, p1). The curriculum promoted learning and development through the use of learning goals and stepping stones, thus indicating that the Foundation Stage was based on a developmental model dominated by the theories of developmental psychology (David et. al., 2000) The guidance to the Foundation Stage recognised that children develop through certain stages, hence the stepping stones, but it stated that not all children will follow them in a particular sequence, and that all children would move along them at different rates (QCA, 2000, p27). It, therefore, recognised children as individuals who had different experiences in their childhood, before starting the Foundation Stage, which would affect their development.

Using a similar approach the EYFS combined Birth to Three Matters; the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage and the National Standards for Under 8’s Daycare and Childminding into one coherent framework which was underpinned by the Government’s key policy ‘Every Child Matters’. There is an emphasis on linking the child’s home experiences with their experiences in the early years setting. This reflects a shift in the Government’s approach to children and families and the recognition
that the wellbeing of children and families needed to be given a higher priority with greater investment. Children’s development is viewed holistically and much more broadly than merely as a preparation for school, whilst recognising the value of capacities already developed from birth to three.

In the 2008 EYFS, ‘the overarching aim of the EYFS was to help young children achieve the five Every Child Matters outcomes of staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being...’ (DCSF, 2008 p.7). This theme continues in the new EYFS (DfE, 2012) with the aim ‘to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe’ (DfE, 2012, p.2).

Despite an attempt to view children more holistically, ongoing assessment is still seen as ‘an integral part of the learning and development process’ (DfE, 2012, p.10). Observations of the child are matched to the early learning goals using 13 sets of assessment scales, although it was never intended that these should be used as a checklist (Beckley et. Al., 2009). The EYFS profile provides a record of the child’s learning and achievements which may be shared between parents and practitioners, and may be used to support the child’s learning and development. However the continued move towards the requirement of academic goals for very young children, in the EYFS, remains of great concern to many early years educators (Nutbrown, 2011). The focus of this concern is that
the attempt to meet assessment outcomes may inhibit, rather than encourage young children’s autonomy, creativity and sense of mastery, and may indeed be a contributory factor to England’s persistent record of under achievement (Nutbrown, 2011), for example, with the over-prescription in relation to language, literacy and numeracy.

The following example from practice exemplifies a preoccupation with assessing progress in literacy and numeracy rather than tuning into the child’s interests. Under the cover of a green army camouflage canopy a large tray had been set out by staff with lots of plastic minibeasts, leaves, logs, butterflies, magnifying glasses and information books. There was an array of texts stapled on the wall with photos and information about the minibeasts. Harry was looking at minibeasts though a magnifying glass. One by one he examined them in his hand, he held the magnifying glass at varying distances from the bug, ‘this one’s got spots on’, he said, ‘1,2,3,4,5,6’. Harry took the small ladybird over to a nearby table. The table had been set out previously with Eric Carle mini stories, the Very Hungry Caterpillar and the foods he eats in the story, cloth butterflies of different sizes which with adult eyes looked appealing and related to other activities in the nursery. However Harry cleared his own space in the middle of this. As he carefully placed the bug down on the green cloth he announced that the ladybird was going in his workshop. One by one he went back and forth from the workshop to the tray, each time carefully examining an assortment of bugs until he had a collection of them in his
workshop. He carefully set them down one at a time in a horizontal row in his workshop until the practitioner came and approached the area and said, ‘come on Harry, come and do your number line’.

What the teacher had not recognised is that Harry was engaged in a highly creative literacy and numeracy activity which was meeting the requirements of the curriculum. Unlike successful systems in other countries, which move children slowly from the concrete and representational with the focus on developing confidence in spoken language, the English system moves quickly into abstract letters and words. This does not support evidence from research (Donaldson, 1978; Whitehead, 1990; Kress, 1997) that children have developing capacities to think at abstract levels unless the tasks presented to them are embedded in contexts which make sense to them on an everyday concrete level. Harry had constructed a creative activity that enabled him to develop representational thinking from a concrete context which could have been developed further by the teacher. Taking Harry away to do an abstract numeracy activity missed the opportunity for the practitioner to sustain and extend Harry’s knowledge and understanding as well as being a missed opportunity for the teacher to observe and learn more about Harry than his ‘number-line’.

Despite being interrupted from what he was engrossed with and being move to another area of the nursery, Harry managed to cope with the unexpected transition to meet the expectations of the teacher. Whereas
brighter children and those from more privileged backgrounds may cope with these demands less culturally competent children, in an education context, could lose confidence and might never recover (Anning & Edwards, 1999). Tom, who had been identified as potentially needing language support, had chosen a pale skin colour to represent himself on his father’s day card. Next to him was his father whom he coloured in green. When the teacher walked past she said, ‘why is your Daddy green Tom, is he an alien?!’ Tom had no answer to this bewildering question but it could potentially have influenced his pride in what he had created.

There remains an implicit assumption in the EYFS that there is a level playing field for all children in the way that it suggests leaders will be able to ‘ignite (sic) children’s curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn’ (DfE, 2012, p.4). Similarly in ‘inclusive practices that promote and value diversity and difference’ (DfE, 2012, p.26), there is also an assumption that all children bring with them the necessary social and cultural capital to respond similarly to the learning opportunities provided. There is no acknowledgement that children bring differing levels of social and cultural capital and that one’s cultural identity can be shaped by, and can shape, other cultural identities. In reality some cultural identities, such as the middle class in England, are more powerful than others and can therefore become more dominant. In a similar way, giving individuals
a right to their culture does not, by itself ensure cultural diversity. Practitioners need to recognise that within cultural groups there are also differences depending on individuals’ experiences (Ang, 2010).

Cousins (1999, p.10) writes very evocatively about four year old Sonnyboy who could be considered at a social and cultural disadvantage because of his background, but has the capacity to ‘jolt adult’s into thinking’. Sonnyboy questions ‘irritating interruptions’ with, ‘why’d’you interrupt us so?’ For example on hearing the bell at playtime he said, ‘That don’t make no sense...I just got to the interesting bit. I don’t care about the time, that’s plain stupid...time’s as long as it takes.’ (Cousins,1999, p.36).

Fear of interruption stops children from choosing or starting some activities. This doesn’t only relate to specific activities it can also relate to the child’s creativity, dispositions and ‘threads of thinking’ (Nutbrown, 2011). Learning can be extended differently depending on the time and context. The themes, ideas, interests and interpretations will vary for different children at different times.

The children were writing (structured activity) at the table. Mia began to move from side to side in her seat. ‘Conga, conga, conga...’ she sang. Mia stopped writing, stood up and danced the Conga around the classroom singing as she went. Her teacher made her a sticker with a smiley face on
it and the words, ‘I am the Conga Queen!’ Later on she said she just felt like doing the conga!

As a practitioner it is important to recognize that differences can be very complex in order to develop, sustain and extend children’s learning and that learning doesn’t happen in a linear way (Nutbrown, 2011). In the EYFS there appears to be an emphasis on products and progression rather than using children’s interests and capacities to facilitate continuity of learning and the development of themes that are of importance and relevance to children.

Sujey was an avid reader from a very early age. Her reading ability was noted to be excellent by her class teacher. All the children in the class were asked to keep a reading record book. They were told to read a passage from the book they were reading (the amount depended on the reading ability) and then analyse what they had read. Instead of developing her reading skills, reading became a chore for Sujey. Although she didn’t mind the exercise at the beginning, the continual analysis started to interrupt her reading pattern and more importantly, her enjoyment of the texts themselves. She read less and was not inclined to do the ‘homework’. One weekend she unintentionally left the reading record with her aunt, who lived far from her. Sujey’s mother and aunt discussed this and decided that the record was inhibiting her reading and her enjoyment. Sujey’s mother spoke with her teacher who agreed that Sujey would not have to keep a reading record for the next week or so.
Sujej started reading again with the enjoyment she had always shown. She did not keep a reading record again and no-one mentioned that she should.

This example demonstrates how interpreting the curriculum also has an impact on the role of the practitioner as early years carer and educator. Abbott (2001, p.70) describes this as the difference between teaching and learning. By setting out areas of learning and learning goals that the teachers have to work towards helping the children to achieve, there is a risk that the EYFS can become prescriptive, unless there is an appreciation of children’s individual differences. The way the EYFS is structured with assessed outcomes lessens the opportunities for practitioners to evaluate their observations of children using prior knowledge and experience. This, in effect, may lead to practitioners feeling deskilled. Having to conform to a set of standards may in turn make them less likely to recognise the individual competencies and capabilities of children.

This potential deskilling of the practitioner has implications for workforce development, training and qualifications. “The evidence is clear on how a well-qualified and appropriately skilled early years workforce makes a real difference to the quality of provision and outcomes for young children” (Tickell, 2011, p.42). Eaude (2011) suggests that pedagogically there is currently an emphasis on the transfer of knowledge rather than the development of children’s thinking. In order to facilitate this approach to
the learning process practitioners need to be reflective and have good knowledge and understanding of research and underpinning theoretical perspectives (Duffy, 2010).

Without this knowledge and understanding there is the risk of a shift in the perceived priorities of the way in which children’s learning and development can be supported. The following example demonstrates how by focusing on one practicality a practitioner, acting as a mentor, missed the richness of a learning opportunity, and failed to recognise and acknowledge the student’s good practice. Sharaz, an undergraduate at the end of his second year, was nervous about being observed by his tutor. He planned a creative painting activity with small groups of children. Not all the children wanted to be involved in the activity but Sharaz started off with a group of four children. One of the nursery staff was also sitting at the table with Sharaz and the children. Sharaz facilitated the activity well and encouraged the children to mix the paints and combine colours as they wished. Sammy, aged 4 years, wanted to do more mixing than painting so Sharaz allowed him to do this for a couple of minutes before encouraging him to put brush to paper. Sammy painted for several minutes, using several different colours. When Sharaz asked him what the picture was meant to be Sammy said he did not know but he liked the colours. After another minute of mixing more colours, Sammy decided to paint over what he had done with the colour black. The practitioner said. ‘Oh, Sammy, now you have spoilt your picture’. Sammy
looked surprised and said ‘No, I haven’t’ He got up from the table leaving his picture behind. Sharaz asked if he would like to take the painting home. Sammy said yes and Sharaz wrote his name on the painting. Janice, who previously had not wanted to do the painting activity, took Sammy’s place at the table. She eagerly started mixing paints and putting brush strokes on the paper. Sharaz was praising her, as he had done with all the children. He suddenly realised that Janice was not wearing a waterproof apron. He gently encouraged Janice to put one on, although it took some time for Janice to comply with the request. At the end of the activity, when the practitioner was giving feedback to Sharaz, the first thing she said was that Sharaz must always make sure that the children were wearing aprons before allowing them to paint.

Although it is important to make sure that the children’s clothing is protected when carrying out ‘messy’ activities, the focus on feedback should have been the way in which Sharaz had developed the activity in response to the children’s own pathways to understanding. He encouraged the children to have the space to make their decisions. He understood that Sammy was enjoying the process of mixing the paints together rather than be concerned with the final outcome or product of the painting. This is another good example of the difference in perception between the child and the vocationally qualified practitioner (NVQ3) where there is a tension between process and outcome. The focus on the practicalities may have been because the practitioner did not recognise the depth and richness of the learning taking place in the development of
the children and Sharaz. This is not to say that qualified teachers do not miss these highly meaningful learning opportunities, often being constrained by extraneous influences whether internal or external.

The children were sitting four at a table in the Reception class busy drawing and colouring. The teacher and teaching assistant were going round the tables discussing the drawings with the children. Alice was drawing some flowers. She was colouring the leaves purple. The teacher told Alice she was using the wrong colour and that she should use the colour green. When the teacher was asked why she had encouraged Alice to change the colour she was using without discussing it, as this seemed to diminish Alice’s creative actions, the teacher replied that it was the parents who would have complained that their children were not drawing and colouring properly.

Alderson (2003) questions the value and purpose of schooling and the extent to which children shape or are shaped by societal needs and expectations. The findings in a recent evaluation of practitioners’ experiences of implementing EYFS (Brooker et al, 2010) suggested that practitioners considered it to be highly influential in their practice and welcomed the ‘play-based and child-led framework’ of EYFS. They felt it was more appropriate for the learning and development of young children than the previous frameworks, which were focused more on children’s ‘preparation’ for school. In principle, they thought that the areas of learning were appropriate and that the EYFS encouraged a better
partnership with parents. However there were causes for concern by some of the practitioners’ responses. These include the potential labelling of children rather than celebration of the ‘Unique Child’; the level of assessment required which did not necessarily reflect the real learning and development of the children in all types of settings; the difference in the interpretation and implementation of the assessment practices themselves; the relationship between parents and practitioners; and the ‘significant variations’ in the education and training of professionals and practitioners which influenced the way in which the EYFS was interpreted and implemented.

“There is so much pressure on parents and practitioners to follow approved procedures and meet targets that we can get side-tracked into focusing on young children’s skills and capabilities rather than on the child themselves” (Morton, 2009, p.42)

Through the entrance hall of the Ankara nursery (previously referred to on Page 13) there are two displays – work done by the children at home with their families, based on an identified theme. There are other ways in which parents are included in their child’s experience of nursery. The parents write notes for their children and put them in a box so that the children have a strong link between home and the setting.

The concept of a ‘Unique Child’ within the EYFS encourages practitioners to focus on what children should be doing at a particular time in a
particular context. McDowall Clark (2010, p.46) suggests that practitioners should consider the curriculum as a ‘dynamic process rather than as expectations to be met’. Despite the rhetoric of supporting a ‘Unique Child’ the EYFS may be interpreted as portraying the ‘Homogenous Child’ that has access to high quality, ideal environments with ample resources, which in itself is questionable. There is a danger of the child being homogenised in the rhetoric of the ‘overarching principles’ (DfE, 2012, p3) of the EYFS which seeks to ‘achieve’ the five outcomes put forward by Every Child Matters, without recognising that children do not have similar equality of opportunity to high quality learning environments. The aspirational policy outcomes of ‘staying safe’, ‘being healthy’, ‘enjoying and achieving’, ‘making a positive contribution’ and ‘achieving economic wellbeing’ lack an agreed definition on their meaning in the context of children’s lived experiences. There remains an emphasis on the adult’s interpretation of what children are doing rather than the facilitation of the children’s own reflections and interpretations of their learning and development.

In the Ankara nursery children are given the opportunity to reflect on and learn about themselves and the world around them. In one activity the children were asked to decide collectively what was important to them. They needed to come up with one thing once a day for 100 days and pictorial representations would be placed on the wall each day. The children chose things like family, friends, sleep, food etc. On the
hundredth day the choice was ‘surprises’! They are also introduced to democratic decision-making. Each week the children have to vote on an issue by using ballot boxes. One week, it was which cake they should have that Friday and another week it was which new logo should be used for the setting. In each case the children were given a choice of three. These approaches to learning help give children a sense of real participation and completion. By being given the time to complete an activity all children are motivated to engage with further pursuits.

This is in contrast to the EYFS which encourages practitioners to work towards more rigid timelines for the children to meet the numerous curriculum requirements. In the hurry to meet numerous outcomes, the EYFS has the potential to develop into what Dadds (2002) refers to as the ‘Hurry-along’ curriculum. When there isn’t enough time for children to complete what they want to there is a lack of an important sense of achievement. This can potentially lead to children being demotivated if they do not believe they will meet the required learning outcomes, thus the developing a self-fulfilling prophesy of ‘learning to be stupid’ (Holt, 1995).

Despite the good intentions of the EYFS there still remains a great disparity in how it is being interpreted and implemented. From the examples discussed in this chapter it can be seen that different interpretations either encourage or stifle children’s learning and development. Concerns remain with the prescriptive nature of the EYFS.
In reality it does not support true partnerships based on dialogue and mutual interests between children, families and settings. There is still an assumption that children need to learn from adults, rather than adults learning from observations of children and through listening to their discussions. The intrinsic nature of play still needs to be recognised as an excellent source for children’s learning and development. Rather than developing activities to meet the requirements of the curriculum, it may be more beneficial for practitioners to look at what the child is doing and then see how the children’s own constructs meet the necessary requirements.

It is not always necessary to use assessment proformas when observing children. It may be more effective to observe the children on a number of occasions in different contexts before making decisions about their developmental capabilities. This approach facilitates knowledge and understanding about children in a much more holistic way. This can enable the practitioner to recognise what children themselves contribute to the learning process which can help them to better understand, support and scaffold children’s learning and development. It can be easy to forget that if they are enjoying what they are doing and it is fun they will want to learn.

Children really do know their own minds!
Reflective Questions

1. How can listening to and observing children help to ‘capture the moments’ which can become the missed opportunities? Why might this be challenging?

2. How can the EYFS help to connect creativity with social empowerment?

3. Why has House (2011) described the EYFS as being ‘too much, too soon’ in the push towards children’s readiness for school?

4. How can children and families’ diverse linguistic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds be embraced by the EYFS?

5. Why is it important for professionals and practitioners to develop their understanding and interpretation of the EYFS through continuing professional development?
The Early Years Curriculum

References


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