

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Revised early years foundation stage (EYFS) (Learning and development requirements) (amendment) order 2012

(Early learning goals)

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

19 January 2012

ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

ATL policy

ATL's education policy is underpinned by the professionalism of teachers. Teachers should be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in promoting social justice. Development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders and assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools should work collaboratively to provide excellent teaching and learning with a broad and balanced curriculum, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. This means that mechanisms must be developed that ensure a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, and which supports collaboration rather than competition.

ATL response

ATL made a full response to the 2011 consultation on the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage, in which we argued that:

- ♦ Early education is a place where children and families come together with professionals to build a vibrant community of learning.
- ♦ Quality and consistency in early years provision comes from having well-qualified professionals, properly paid and supported with high

quality professional development; sustainable funding for provision planned across local authority areas; and collaboration not competition between settings, including schools.

- ♦ EYFS approaches to learning – particularly child-initiated learning through play, talk, sustained shared thinking and real world experiences should not stop when children start school. We support the EYFS taking place in schools and recommend that the EYFS approach should extend to age 7.
- ♦ Curriculum in the early years should be broad and balanced. Children do not learn in neat 'subject' categories. The areas of learning are all equally important and intertwined and should not be split into smaller groups, particularly if this will lead to a focus on one set at the expense of another.
- ♦ Learning is a social activity, and children learn best when they learn with peers and with children who are older and younger than them.
- ♦ Young children are already active learners who need broad and exciting opportunities to continue learning with enthusiasm.

Areas of learning and educational programmes

We do not agree that the description of educational programmes and areas of learning summarises clearly what is involved.

We continue to disagree with splitting areas of learning into 'prime' and 'specific'. All areas of learning are equally important and interconnected, particularly for young children. We do welcome the way in which communication and language has been disengaged from literacy, potentially promoting its development throughout other areas of learning, although this possibility is diminished by the removal of much 'language for thinking' or questioning within the programmes and goals.

It is interesting to note what has been removed from the educational programmes. In general, what is missing includes mention of learning for 'a range of purposes' or in a 'broad range of contexts' and 'real-life situations'; any notion of dispositions, including a 'positive disposition to learn'; children knowing themselves and what they can do; and mention of children extending their creativity, developing their imagination or indeed talking about their developing understanding. We believe that this leads to a focus on instrumental learning at the expense of expanding opportunities for children's development.

More specifically:

Literacy involves 'encouraging children to read and write ... through ... being encouraged to begin to read and write for themselves'. This is surely a tautology. However, there is a further difficulty with this goal, implying as it does that listening to others reading has the sole purpose of encouraging children to read and write. Really hearing stories is vital for developing a love of language and the sound of language, increasing vocabulary, developing imagination. It should be encouraged throughout primary school and beyond, and should not be seen purely as a means to 'get children reading'. We suggest that the 'wide range of reading materials' does not need to be spelt out to professional educators. Properly qualified practitioners will understand that this might include books, and will also realise that books can include a wide range of

materials including fiction and non-fiction, graphic/picture books, short and longer stories, and poems.

The educational programme for mathematics has removed any mention of using mathematical language, developing mathematical reasoning and gaining confidence in their use, and has reduced 'problem solving' to 'simple addition and subtraction problems'. This opens the door to maths schemes which will teach you all the skills of numeracy without exploring their uses in the real world. This in turn will mean children do not understand when it is appropriate to 'think mathematically' beyond school.

Changing the title of 'creative development' to 'expressive arts and design' removes any idea that creativity is important throughout education and life.

We would want to see much more clearly articulated the need to develop children's thinking (creatively, symbolically, logically), their skills for learning (independently and socially), their abilities to question and to be active citizens within the school and their communities. This should include specific opportunities within communication and language development not only for children to speak and listen, but for them to be properly heard on things that matter to them, opportunities for sustained shared thinking.

Early Learning Goals

It is still not clear to us how redesigning the early learning goals as broad descriptors will work in practice. It is not clear whether this is a 'best fit' model, or if children will have to meet every aspect of the goal in order to 'succeed'. 'Best fit' descriptors can be a better tool to support professional judgement, but ATL members continue to query whether we should now expect prescriptive 'guidance' and examples of what meeting or exceeding the goals might look like.

Again, those bullet points which have been removed from the new 'goals' include the following:

- ♦ enjoyment of language,
- ♦ being interested and excited,
- ♦ extending vocabulary,
- ♦ understanding about stories and characters,
- ♦ knowing how to find information,
- ♦ writing for (their own?) purposes,
- ♦ using mathematical ideas and methods (not just numbers) to solve problems,
- ♦ talking about features they like and dislike,
- ♦ using their imagination.

Comments on particular goals:

- ♦ In 'listening and attention', it is not clear what responding 'appropriately' when engaged in another activity would mean. As adults, our 'appropriate' response to such interruptions might include telling someone not to interrupt, asking for respect for our own activity, judging the interruption and deciding whether it is worth noting, and possibly ignoring the interruption. Will children be encouraged to consider what is 'appropriate' in this situation, or is this in fact an aspect of behaviour code rather than a goal for listening?

- ◆ Members are concerned that speaking in past and future tenses is a higher level skill than many others in the goals.
- ◆ It is not clear in the goals for writing whether 'emergent' writing is acceptable (where children's letters are not always correctly formed) as long as the children themselves know what they have written.
- ◆ Children take 'changes in routine in their stride' (personal, social and emotional development): many children (some of whom will still only be 4 at this point) find changes in routine extremely disruptive, particularly if their home lives have little routine.
- ◆ The goals for understanding the world no longer require children to investigate or to ask questions.
- ◆ The goals for mathematics have been made more challenging, moving from counting from 1-10 to counting from 1-20, adding and subtracting 2 single-digit numbers (rather than counting on or back one), and solving problems using doubling, halving and sharing. Although data may show that more children are meeting these more challenging goals, we would like to see the educational evidence underpinning these changes. Just because children can achieve higher standards does not mean that the concepts underpinning these skills are embedded. On a more general note, we are disappointed to see quite so starkly how when children do not meet national expectations (for example in the year 1 phonics check), it is the children who are at fault, and yet when many children exceed the expectations, it is those expectations which are deemed wrong.

Conclusion

Many of these changes are very small, and could be dismissed as semantic. We believe however that they highlight the change in attitude from this government away from expanding children's horizons towards making children fit the school system at ever younger ages.