

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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**Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage
Call for Evidence
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
30 September 2010**

ATL, the education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that professionals working within schools, children's centres and other services must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, both at the level of the individual and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Teachers have a particular role to play across all early years provision. Within light national parameters, development of the education system, in its widest sense, should take place at a local level, with increasing emphasis on collaboration and supporting well-being across a local area: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Early years

ATL believes that:

- ♦ Children are entitled to high quality provision where their needs and interests should take precedence, regardless of the setting in which they access their education and care. .
- ♦ A well-qualified, highly skilled workforce with access to continuing professional development is central to the provision of high quality early education and childcare.
- ♦ Quality of provision must be consistent, regardless of the methods used to support providers or hold them accountable.

In our position statement, *Early Education and Childcare*¹, we state: *It is vital that policies for childcare and early education focus on the needs and interests of children, both in terms of their present needs and what they will need in order to live fulfilling lives in the future. Of course, services for young children must also take into account the needs and views of parents and carers, but where the needs of children and the changing patterns of employment conflict it is important that the needs of children take precedence.*

We believe that high quality early education depends on four factors:

- ♦ well-qualified, knowledgeable and skilled staff who have access to continuing professional development
- ♦ well-resourced learning environments which are stimulating, exciting and safe, which promote children's imagination and curiosity and which acknowledge the importance of play
- ♦ routines and procedures which are centred around the child
- ♦ parents and carers who are valued as partners with a crucial role to play in their children's education and care.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

ATL supports the EYFS, in particular its commitment to play-based provision, based on the needs and interests of each child. However, we believe that the framework is too detailed, and driven too much by the early learning goals. We have particular concerns about the level of some of the goals; staffing ratios and qualifications; and requirements for outdoor play. We also believe that the review should consider issues of transition and school starting age: the suggestion that EYFS is preparation for 'formal schooling' is unhelpful and should not drive this review. More attention should be given to making schools ready for children, by extending the EYFS to the end of KS1.

ATL response

Scope of regulation

A single framework

ATL believes that the EYFS should ensure the same standard of provision for children wherever they are. The EYFS has been instrumental in encouraging integration of care and education, both in practice and in policy development. This has not always been successful, but it is vital that the EYFS continues to bring together both the welfare and the learning and development requirements for all settings, including schools.

We recognise that there are arguments for greater flexibility within the EYFS to vary practice to suit the philosophy of the provider. We believe that this stems from a rigidity within the paperwork of the EYFS which leads to a belief that there is only one way to approach 'teaching and learning'. All providers would benefit from a greater flexibility to observe, record and support children's play in ways that best suit the children, rather than in ways which fit the paperwork. We are concerned that some requests for exemption may be made so that providers can impose a more formal curriculum on younger children. The EYFS must continue to

¹ ATL (2005) *Early Education and Childcare*

demand a play-based pedagogy based on the needs and interests of children.

Question 16 in this review highlights for us one of the major difficulties at the heart of education policy development. The EYFS should not be about a requirement to '*deliver the things that Government thinks are important*'. This leads to impositions based on ideology, rather than the development of practices based on good quality research and professional judgement. We do believe that government-funding should mean that children and parents can expect consistent and high quality provision, and that professionals can expect consistent and high quality support and resources to develop their practice. This leads to the conclusion that there should be a single framework for all those in receipt of government funding, including Academies, 'free schools' and the EYFS in the independent sector.

Themes, principles and aims

We agree that the four themes (*A unique child; Positive relationships; Enabling environments; Learning and development*) should set the context for the EYFS requirements. We are concerned about how quickly the emphasis falls on 'learning and development'. The first three are all vital to children's learning and development, but can be lost when schools and settings begin to focus on the six areas of learning. All early years settings, including schools, should use the four themes and their underpinning principles both to plan and to evaluate the quality of provision.

While we agree with the overarching aim of the EYFS to improve children's development outcomes, the skewed emphasis of the EYFSP on communication, language and literacy as the measure of children and settings means that 'developmental outcomes' too quickly become focussed on one aspect— children's academic development.

Objectives

ATL agrees broadly with the stated objectives for the EYFS:

- 1) set the standards for early years providers
- 2) provide for equality of opportunity
- 3) create the framework for partnership working
- 4) improve quality and consistency
- 5) lay a secure foundation for future learning

We are concerned that objective 5 implies that the EYFS is a preparation stage. Instead, the EYFS should celebrate children's ability and motivation to learn from birth, upon which future learning should build.

The objectives are interlinked and it is difficult to choose one as a priority. We do believe however that it is vital for the EYFS to improve quality and consistency across provision. High quality must mean consistently high standards for all providers, working in partnership to support children's learning. And it must mean promoting equality of opportunity, including supporting children to learn positive attitudes to difference, and working to counter the inequalities embedded in society.

It is difficult to see how consistent high quality can be maintained when ratios, professional development, qualifications and pay of staff are so varied across provision. We have particular concerns about the implied

equivalence of Early Years Professional (EYP) status and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). We believe that teachers with QTS must be involved with all EYFS group settings. This may need a consideration of the content of Initial Teacher Training for teachers who specialise in the early years.

The extent of the EYFS

ATL members believe that the EYFS does not go far enough. Our research on the foundation stage² points out that the reception class is often much more like key stage 1 than like good nursery provision, even though it is part of the foundation stage. We believe that this has much to do with the insidious nature of the accountability framework within which schools operate, in particular the priority placed on KS2 SATs and league tables. This is supported by evidence from the Cambridge Primary Review³. More than this, we believe that children of 5, 6 and 7 benefit from a play-based curriculum, with informed adult intervention based on sustained shared thinking, talk and real-world experiences. There is ample evidence that countries in which children do not start school until they are six or seven, and who are not formally taught to read and write until then, catch up with and overtake children in England who are taught formally from an earlier age. We would argue that the principles and the pedagogy of the EYFS should continue through the early years of school, at least to the end of key stage 1, with thought given to the transition into KS2. We hope that this review will be studying carefully the development and implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales.

We are concerned too about school starting age. Following a resolution at our annual Conference, ATL is developing policy on appropriate provision for young children, including the age at which children should start school. In our submission⁴ to the previous government's consultation on school starting age, we suggested that schools have many different ways of supporting children to start school, and it is likely that a single point of entry is too inflexible to support the majority of children. Whatever the outcome of our own policy development, it is likely that ATL will call for greater flexibility in the ways in which children transfer from one provision to another throughout the EYFS.

Learning and development requirements

ATL members, in common with many early years professionals, broadly welcome the EYFS with its six areas of learning and early learning goals. It is however a very detailed framework, with a vast array of stepping stones, and 'helpful hints' about what to look for, and how to teach, plan and resource each area. Although this detail is intended to be helpful, it suggests three unhelpful and untrue propositions: that young children learn in a straightforward, linear progression; that all young children learn in this predictable fashion, with some merely needing additional support to move forward to the next step; and that early years practitioners need step by step instruction in order to 'deliver' this education. Properly qualified and well supported professionals do not need the level of detail

² Adams S, Alexander E, Drummond M J and Moyles J (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage, Recreating the Reception Year* London: ATL

³ Alexander R et al (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge,

⁴ ATL (2009) Independent Review of Primary Curriculum – recommendation 14(1) – points of entry into reception class: Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

currently set out in the EYFS. We believe that providers would benefit from a simplified EYFS framework, and that government should trust professionals to interpret broader guidelines within the six areas of learning.

ATL's policy on curriculum⁵ states that *There should be a light national curriculum framework setting out the skills and attitudes which pupils need now and in the future for employment, caring roles and citizenship... the curriculum, as taught, should be designed locally. It should be based upon a needs analysis which is set in the context of a national entitlement and strategy but is rooted in local circumstances.* We believe that this is as appropriate for the EYFS as it is throughout the later key stages.

Priorities

ATL believes that it is important to retain the six areas of learning, and to reiterate strongly that those areas are interlinked. Some members have attempted to prioritise the areas of learning, suggesting a focus on personal, social and emotional development and communication skills in particular. ATL's curriculum publication⁶ highlights physical skills as an often overlooked but vitally important area of learning. Whatever the priorities of the day, it is impossible to develop these skills in a vacuum; the other areas of learning provide a context for this vital learning.

ATL disagrees however with the priorities which have grown within the areas of learning. The EYFSP (and the literacy strategy) encourages practitioners to focus on sounds and letters with very young children, often at the expense of oracy. Focussing on ensuring that every aspect of knowledge and understanding is covered can get in the way of promoting a child's concentration, their ability to undertake their own learning projects, their relationships with their peers and adults.

Dispositions

What is most important in setting out learning and development requirements is to be clear about the purposes of early education. In a recent ATL survey, members particularly identified the following:

- ◆ socialisation/the development of social and emotional skills
- ◆ learning through play in a safe environment
- ◆ learning skills, acquiring a love of learning/a curiosity to know more about the world
- ◆ communication/language skills

In addition, we believe that children need to develop their strengths so that they experience success and to help them to persevere with difficulties without being made to feel failures. Unfortunately, many of our members believe that *children are not enjoyed for who they are but are constantly reminded that they are not good enough.*

Evidence-based policy

We are concerned about the selective use of research to support policy-making, in particular the way the review quotes findings from

⁵ ATL (2006) *Subject to Change: New Thinking on the Curriculum*

⁶ Johnson M et al (2007) *Subject to Change: New Thinking on the Curriculum* London: ATL (p80)

neuroscience which are contested even by neuroscientists themselves. It is vital that early years practice is based on the best of evidence about how children learn, but it is not the place for written guidance to set in stone what that evidence is. Instead, we believe that professional development should enable practitioners to judge whether and how to use research to inform their practice. Properly trained practitioners, who engage in continuing professional development, are also best placed to decide how to tailor the areas of learning for specific ages and stages. Attempting to use policy and/or guidance to set out how to teach children of different ages and abilities only leads to increased bureaucracy and overcomplicated paperwork.

Pedagogy

We believe that the most important aspect of the EYFS, which must not be lost in this review, is the focus on how children learn, and how adults support that learning. ATL's early years research⁷ sets out the importance of

- ♦ sustained, shared and purposeful talk
- ♦ sustained, complex imaginative play
- ♦ authentic, engaging, first-hand experiences.

Members also point out the importance of enabling children to 'wallow', to spend as much time as they need in exploring, playing, working things out for themselves.

Children need to learn through play, building on their own experiences and interests. In particular they need to play outdoors in all weathers, and it is vital that the regulations stipulate the need for all settings to have permanent access to outdoor areas.

Early Learning Goals

ATL agrees that there should be a structure for practitioners to use in planning for children's learning. This is vital if there is to be consistency within the sector. However, the early learning goals should not be the structure – this is to place the focus on outcomes instead of on children. Instead, the areas of learning should be the structure within which practitioners plan and teach.

Our members tell us that there are too many goals, and the goals combined with the pressure of SATs and the accountability regime for schools mean that the focus is very quickly on the goals for 'literacy' and 'numeracy'. In particular, we continue to believe that certain of the goals are pitched too high, and in attempting to get 'most children' to achieve them, teaching becomes too focussed on the building blocks of language and numbers, and not enough engaged with children's understanding of the real world of language and numbers. In particular, members suggest that the following goals are difficult for 5 year olds.

- ♦ *Write their own names and other things such as labels and captions, and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation*
- ♦ *Use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.*

⁷ Adams S, Alexander E, Drummond M J and Moyles J (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage, Recreating the Reception Year* London: ATL

Evidence from data on EYFSP too suggests that these goals are developmentally inappropriate. The problem is that pressure to achieve them, combined with the implications within some goals of 'best practice' (for example the use of phonic knowledge which leads to the privileging of phonics to the detriment of other strategies for learning to read and write), can lead to unhelpful teaching of formal skills too early. There are also difficulties in interpreting some of the goals, which could lead to less experienced practitioners (or indeed headteachers without an early years background) expecting inappropriately high levels of practice or understanding, for example where children are expected to:

- ♦ *attempt writing for different purposes, using features of different forms such as lists, stories and instructions.*
- ♦ *have a developing respect for their own cultures and beliefs and those of other people*
- ♦ *use language such as more or less to compare two numbers*

It is absolutely right that there are aspirational outcomes for children and settings to work towards. However, the original goals quickly became numerical scores through the EYFSP, and as with Level 4 at Key Stage 2, the aspirational (or the average) becomes the expected level very quickly.

Differentiation

We are concerned with the suggestion that the six areas of learning might be watered down for 'disadvantaged children'. Well qualified and well supported early years professionals will use their judgement to decide what support, encouragement and enrichment each unique child needs. This needs a strong and continually updated understanding of child development, and knowledge of subject content and the ways in which children come to understand concepts. We believe that smaller class sizes, increased opportunities for evidence-based training and development, and better adult:child ratios are what makes it possible to meet the needs of each child, and close the gaps in children's achievement, attitudes and understanding which are already apparent when children start school.

Evidence⁸ suggests that approximately 85% of the variation in pupil achievement is due to factors external to the school, and the brightest children in Britain's poorest homes are outperformed by the less able children from wealthy homes by the age of seven. The low attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, therefore, is driven more by a combination of factors related to poverty and deprivation than ability.⁹ Teachers, schools and the curriculum cannot be expected to compensate for the effects of disadvantage on education which is outside their scope of expertise. The EYFS should be seen as a whole and holistic framework which includes multi-agency support for children and parents. What is vital is that funding is made available to ensure access to quality EYFS provision for all children, and in particular that funding formulae do not lead to the closure of high quality provision such as nursery schools.

⁸ See for example Cassen R. & Kingdon G. (2007) *Tackling Low Achievement*, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁹ ATL, *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, position statement (2008).

Parents and carers

As the EYFS states, parents/carers are children's first educators. It is vital that parents and practitioners work together to support children's learning and development in its broadest sense. This is about much more than '*working with parents to help improve children's learning and development at home*' but unfortunately this is how much government rhetoric appears to operate, and how many parents see the relationship between school and home.

Real partnership with parents means time and space for teachers to talk to parents about their 'unique child', their interests and backgrounds, as well as their needs. It means flexibility within the days and weeks to focus on that 'unique child' and to plan play activities which make sense to the child in the context of their unique family backgrounds. It may mean multi-agency support.

It also means talking to parents about what happens at school and how they might support their children to cope with the school environment. This might include helping parents to understand the behaviour policy of the school, so that they can reinforce similar 'good' behaviours. It may include explaining to parents about play-based learning, so that they are not concerned that their children are 'just playing' and do not push for overformal teaching. It might include encouraging parents to read with their children, to draw out learning from real activities like cooking, shopping, socialising with friends. It should not include expecting parents to use flashcards, fill out worksheets or support school-work at home.

Assessment arrangements

Teacher assessment

ATL has proposed¹⁰, across the education system, *an assessment system based on teacher formative and summative assessment*. For young children this must be based on observation of their everyday activities, should be underpinned by EYFS principles, and should not be focussed exclusively on outcomes. 'Listen, look, note' is a useful guide to good observational assessment. Unfortunately, many members point to the fact that the EYFSP colours all other assessment. So, rather than observing and noting what a child can do, practitioners are instead using ticklists of statements to decide whether a child can yet do something that the guidelines say they should be able to, if they are to reach the early learning goals.

The other major problem with observational assessment, which many of our members find, is that requirements around it grow. Teachers and support staff find that, instead of 'listen, look, note', assessment can become 'listen, look, collect all the evidence and then write it out in ways that can be shared with parents, can back up your judgements, and can inform the next steps of learning'. This can lead to immense amounts of paperwork. It is important for schools to agree the purposes of assessment, and to limit the associated workload.

Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

Summative assessment, through the EYFSP, can be even more time-consuming, and provide even less useful information to parents and Key

¹⁰ ATL (2008) *Assessing to learn: teachers at the heart of assessment*

Stage 1 teachers. Providing data to KS1 teachers does not give them useful information on which to base their teaching. The Profile statements do not necessarily always link with the KS1 statements. And the achievement of a particular scale point does not give a teacher the whole picture of what a child can do, and how a child learns, that would be useful for planning the next stage.

The use of the data from EYFSP for setting targets, even locally, puts undue pressure on schools to focus on narrow attainment rather than the whole of children's development, with detrimental impact on practice. Too many schools focus on the tiny details of language, the letters and sounds, so that they can tick those particular goals, at the expense of broader literacy and language work, communication and personal skills. This is of course not only the fault of EYFSP, but also of the accountability culture in primary schools which is based around reading, writing and mathematics, and a flawed understanding of learning that suggests that the earlier you teach formal skills the better.

The EYFSP itself is not particularly well-loved by ATL members. Whatever its intentions, it is seen as overly bureaucratic, requiring reams of unnecessary paperwork and in too many instances the moderation processes place huge demands on teachers to provide unhelpful evidence. The EYFSP scales privilege certain areas of learning (there are four scales for language and literacy for example and only one for creative development), which can lead to an imbalance in curriculum provision. And the expectation that the majority of children will achieve the early learning goals in all six areas of learning does not acknowledge either the different starting points of children in reception classes, nor the fact that there can be almost a year's difference in their ages.

Assessment at key points of transition

Our members have a range of concerns about the use of summative assessment at specified points of transition. Although it can be useful to have some assessment of children as they begin school, the fact that children can come from so many different settings (as well as straight from home) means that assessments may be inconsistent. There is no point in expecting settings to assess children as they leave if teachers have no time to read the paperwork, or if the quality of assessment is inconsistent. However, reception teachers' experiences of 'baseline assessment' as developed by QCA prior to the EYFSP, show how easily such assessments become an exercise in ticking boxes rather than getting to know the children.

Where members have experienced useful assessments, they suggest the importance of talking to parents about what they know about their children, and to use that as the basis of professional observational assessment as children begin the new provision.

Welfare requirements

Adult:child ratios

In order to develop effective early years practice, including sensitive intervention in children's play, useful observational assessment and opportunities for sustained talk, we need to review the adult:child ratios particularly in the reception class. It is legally possible for a reception class to be staffed by one qualified teacher with 30 children. ATL has

argued in the past for a ratio of 2 adults to 26 children, where one is a qualified teacher and one an early years qualified teaching assistant. However, even this makes it difficult for adults to sustain meaningful relationships with very young children. In our submission on school starting ages, we recommended that adult:child ratios should be closer to 1:8 in reception classes.

Conclusion

ATL has welcomed the EYFS. We believe that there should be a single framework across the early years age range which covers both children's welfare and their learning and development. Some details of the current framework, and a great deal of the accompanying paperwork should be changed or simplified. But it is absolutely vital that the EYFS supports consistently high quality provision for children in whatever setting they attend.

ATL recommends that:

The EYFS framework should be based on sound principles and play-based practice, and should extend to at least age 7 (the end of KS1).

The review should consider the initial and continuing professional development needs of early years staff, including teachers and support staff, as well as school leaders. This must include play-based learning, flexible curriculum planning, observation and assessment and developing sustained shared thinking.

Support must be made available to ensure high quality provision across reception classes – this should include a review of class sizes, better adult:child ratios (closer to 1:8), and better resources for the youngest children.

Time and space must be available for teachers, other early years professionals, schools and settings to share and reflect on their own practices, across local schools and more widely.