

## ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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### **Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation stage**

#### ***Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers***

***30 September 2011***

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 believes that early education is not about shaping children for school. It 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. While it is important that children who are struggling are identified and given support, along with their families, it is unhelpful in the extreme to develop a framework of 'expected levels' within which children as young as 2 must conform or catch-up.

### ***EYFS Aims and principles***

ATL believes that it is fundamentally important to agree aims and principles of education before setting out to develop a curriculum framework. What is needed however is agreed aims and principles that underpin the whole education system and curriculum framework rather than piecemeal aims for small sections of the system. We are extremely disappointed that the EYFS and national curriculum reviews are carried out and reported separately.

The four overarching principles of the EYFS could underpin the whole of the education system. Every child and young person is unique, learning takes place in a context of positive relationships and supportive environments, everyone learns differently and all areas of learning are important and interconnected, whatever your age.

However, subtle changes to the principles have moved the EYFS away from children's agency, creativity and skills to adult-led provision based on what children can't yet do. For example, the new principles suggest that children can 'become' resilient, capable, confident and self-assured, where the old principles point out that children can be all of those things and are in fact 'competent learners' from birth. The new principles also point to an environment in which 'children's experiences are planned to reflect their needs' which focuses teaching on 'things children will do' rather than on the cognitive demands of learning. As ATL's foundation stage research points out, this betrays *an underlying assumption that children cannot think of interesting and intriguing things to do for themselves.*<sup>1</sup>

ATL does not support the emphasis in the EYFS on 'school-readiness', which is underpinned by the subtle changes to the principles. Early Years education should be a stage in its own right, from which the broad school curriculum should develop. Instead, this framework takes strong, confident, enthusiastic learners and starts the process of controlling them

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, S et al (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage*; recreating the reception year, London: ATL (p74)

and moulding them into compliant pupils. The picture of school as a place where 'learning opportunities [will be] presented to' children shows a model of learning which is passive, adult-directed; what Chris Watkins<sup>2</sup> calls 'Learning is being taught', based on the *deep-seated cultural beliefs ... that teaching is telling and learning is listening*. While this is part of the picture, focussing on it exclusively means that we miss out on models of learning as 'individual sense-making' and 'building knowledge as part of doing things with others'<sup>3</sup>. Both teaching and learning will be constrained by this view of school.

ATL is also concerned that the framework talks of EYFS as 'pre-school'. School nursery and reception classes are also part of the EYFS and should be based on strong early years principles and practice. We strongly oppose any move to formal, adult-directed learning when children are 3, 4 and 5.

### ***Learning and development requirements***

ATL disagrees with the requirement for the year before the reception year to be viewed as a 'transition' year. Foundation stage principles and practice should be followed for children through until at least 7 years of age.

We do not agree with the split in areas of learning into 'prime' and 'specific'. All areas of learning are equally important, particularly for young children. While personal, social and emotional, physical and communication development are vital in the early years, it is equally valid to argue that mathematical development underpins logical thinking and reasoning, creative development is vital for encouraging curiosity and enthusiasm, and it is difficult to ignite enthusiasm without helping children to engage with the world around them. It is possible to view the 'prime' and 'specific' areas of learning as a sort of woven mat, interlinked with the principles (as is a feature of 'te whariki' in New Zealand), but not if the stated intention is to focus on the 'prime' areas initially and only open up the 'specific' areas for the older children.

We welcome the specific outline of characteristics of effective teaching and learning in the early years (playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically). These characteristics should guide practice throughout the EYFS and beyond. It is entirely inappropriate to move towards more 'adult-led' approaches in nursery (for children who are 3) or reception (when children are still only 4), when the evidence shows that young children learn best through play, talk and real-world experiences, and in particular through sustained shared thinking with adults.

If the characteristics of effective learning are only deemed appropriate for the youngest children in the EYFS, then many schools will encourage teachers to move towards much more formal teaching in order to achieve the early learning goals. There is very little in the framework itself to encourage links between areas of learning. 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

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<sup>2</sup> Watkins, C (2010) *Learning a sense-maker's guide*, London: ATL

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

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.

We are not convinced by the proposal to reduce the number of early learning goals from 69 to 17. The 'reduction' is in fact an exercise in grouping the 69 bullet points into 17 broad descriptors. Very few of the bullet points have been removed. 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'. While we believe that 'best fit' descriptors can be a better tool to support professional judgement, it is disingenuous to suggest that grouping the goals reduces bureaucracy. ATL members query whether we should now expect prescriptive 'guidance' and examples of what meeting or exceeding the goals might look like.

Those bullet points which have been removed from the new 'goals' include those regarding 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 10) to solve problems, talking about features they like and dislike, using their imagination.

Members have commented on particular goals:

- ♦ 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.
- ♦ 'Children know about and can make healthy choices in relation to healthy eating...' (physical development): members question whose version of a healthy diet, recognising that different cultures will prioritise different aspects.
- ♦ 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.

ATL welcomes the encouragement to support children's home languages in their play and learning, and the recommendation that practitioners should explore home language development in order to establish whether there is language delay if appropriate. Teachers will need support in the home language(s) if they are to develop opportunities for children and have useful discussions with parents.

We welcome the description of the characteristics of effective teaching and learning: young children learn best through play, active learning, creating, reflecting and thinking critically. While there is a balance to be struck between child-initiated and adult-led activity, ATL believes that balance is much too far towards adult-led. What is needed is a profession that is confident to support children's play, to develop sustained shared thinking, to promote children's purposeful talk (and not just answering the teacher's questions) and to engage in real world activities with children. If adult-led means planning the learning objectives, providing resources and

opportunities for children to find their own ways of meeting those objectives, and working with children's initiated activities providing increasing levels of challenge to ensure that objectives are met, then it is appropriate that all early years provision has elements of adult-led learning. This kind of learning should also take place in key stage 1. However, as ATL's research into reception class practice showed<sup>4</sup>, adult-led learning is usually interpreted to mean adult-directed activity, children sitting on the carpet or being given 'playful' activities where all children make the same puppet or colour in neatly. This will not enable children to become self-assured, confident and purposeful learners.

### **Assessment**

Effective adult-leadership of children's learning, through support for children's own play, is entirely dependent on good, on-going assessment through observation. Formative assessment through observation is not an additional task, but an integral part of teaching. It is how teachers know what learning objectives are relevant, and how they will plan. It is a vital skill which should be at the heart of all professional practice, initial training and on-going development. Any paperwork associated with formative assessment should be relevant to the teachers concerned in order to help with planning and with discussions with parents and carers. Unfortunately, in situations where practitioners have little training in assessment practice, or where leadership teams have little understanding of early years assessment, and where reporting data is becoming the only way of 'proving effectiveness', a single paragraph in a framework will not improve assessment practice. The framework needs to support an approach in which assessment is a positive process, rather than a measurement against 'expected' levels of development which leaves those who don't 'measure up' as failures at five.

We welcome the acknowledgement that formative assessment does not require excessive paperwork, this needs to be clearly specified by Ofsted, and included in training for all school leaders, managers of settings and early years staff.

Members have generally welcomed the use of 'emerging', 'expected' and 'exceeding' bands within the early years foundation stage profile. However, it is not clear what a completed profile will look like: if practitioners are expected merely to note whether children sit within the emerging, expected or exceeding bands for each of the goals then this says nothing of progress, nor does it provide useful information for parents or year 1 teachers. But if practitioners are expected to write notes on each child's attainment in each of the goals, this becomes an extremely bureaucratic and time-consuming exercise.

The section on assessing children with special educational needs merely states the obvious. Without support from trained specialists it will be very difficult to support, teach or assess children with particular needs.

### **Staffing**

ATL welcomes the clear acknowledgement that nursery and reception classes in schools must be led by a qualified teacher. However, it remains the case within this framework that a reception class in a maintained or

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<sup>4</sup> Adams, S et al (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage*; recreating the reception year, London: ATL

independent school could contain 30 four and five year olds and only one adult. This is entirely unacceptable if safe play-based, child-initiated learning is to take place.

We are concerned that the Early years professional status and qualified teacher status are deemed equal just because they are both level 6 qualifications. The skills, knowledge and expertise of an early years professional are different from and complementary to those of a teacher, particularly in the areas of pedagogy including assessment. ATL believes that from age three, the education element of early years provision should be teacher-led.

### ***Conclusion***

ATL does not believe that the revised framework provides clear support and guidance to improve children's experiences of their early education. The document itself needs more reference to play, more emphasis on equality and inclusion, and more pointers to relevant documentation on principles, on working with parents, and on children's development and learning. It must be much clearer that reception is a full part of the EYFS.

However, frameworks and guidance documents may be necessary but are never sufficient. What is needed in addition is a properly qualified workforce, entitled to high quality opportunities for reflective professional development; adequate funding for provision; and a range of services offering specific support for parents and families, for children with particular needs including SEN, and for children for whom English is an additional language.

We are deeply disappointed with the vision of early education and childhood represented by the revised framework. If the children's minister really believes that we should give children time to be children, then the early years framework must allow them to play, and learn through play, for as long as possible. It must not move them towards an adult and school-led agenda at the age of 3.