

A Summary of Critical Commentary on *Reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage (the EYFS): Government Response to Consultation* (Published 20 December 2011)

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The government's response document was published on the 20th December when it is unlikely that many of those in early education will have been concentrating on government pronouncements. However, it's worthwhile taking time to read the document, *Reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage (the EYFS): Government response to consultation*, which can be found at

[http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/Government%20response%20doc%20191211%201630%20finaltext%20KM%20CB%201808\(v2\).pdf](http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/Government%20response%20doc%20191211%201630%20finaltext%20KM%20CB%201808(v2).pdf)

Below I give a summary of my views on what I perceive to be an ill-thought through response by the government, which needs contesting.

1. Introduction and Background

Some aspects of the Government's document are to be welcomed; however it is mystifying as to why the principle of professional autonomy is deemed to be allowable in the case of risk assessment, yet is systematically denied in a whole host of other professional pedagogical areas. The Department's claim that 'The EYFS framework has helped improve outcomes for children' is argued to be highly problematic, as for the Department, the term 'improved outcome' connotes children developing certain 'capabilities' sooner rather than later (in order to be 'ready for school'). However, this ideology of 'earlier is better' in young children's development is one that is fundamentally challenged by a large number of respected authorities across the early years field (cf. section 15, below), and is arguably severely compromising young children's healthy, age-appropriate development.

2. Tell-tale Language

This section looks briefly at the language used in the report, and what it betrays about the DfE's ideological position in relation to key early childhood themes. Thus, we repeatedly read the phrase 'early *education*' (italics added), which is not only a term which is only rarely found in the early years literature, but which coheres with the document's emphasis

on 'school readiness' (cf. section 5, below). We also read of 'the *expected* level of the goals' (italics added), which quite unambiguously conveys that the DfE, and therefore practitioners, should hold 'expectations' about how young children should develop. Concerning again is the continuing (bordering on wilful) misrepresentation of the nature of play, with the DfE's invoking of so-called '*adult-led play*' and '*guided play*' – and again geared to a 'schoolifying' agenda, of course.

3. Too Much, Too Soon

This brief section looks at several places in the document where its preferred ideology of 'earlier is better' becomes transparent.

4. The Toxic Ideology of Programmatic 'Developmentalism'

This section looks at the way in which assumptions are repeatedly made in the document about the programmatic, allegedly predictable nature of early development. Despite statements in the EYFS supporting the 'Unique Child' theme, if the conventional English schooling system is going to function manageably, with its very early school starting age, then the early-years sector will have to ensure that the vast majority of children have reached what *the system* deems to be an acceptable level of development and 'school readiness'. Thus do the needs of the schooling system determine the developmental trajectory that is expected of young children, rather than the system being responsive to young children's natural developmental pathways. Moreover, just how being 'flexible in their approach, responding to each child as an individual learner' is compatible with the statutory laying-down of 'levels of development that most children can be *expected* to reach by age five' is very difficult to fathom. In this context, the lip-service being paid to 'the unique child' is little more than politically fashionable but ultimately empty rhetoric. The new 'development chart' from birth to age five also raises major concerns about how these kinds of 'charts' or 'tables' are uncritically and programmatically used by practitioners. The whole mentality favoured by this approach is one of categorisation and developmental standardisation, no matter what the countervailing departmental rhetoric might try to claim. Finally, the grave dangers of the early pathologising labelling of children at age 2 is also highlighted.

5. The 'School Readiness' Issue

This DfE attempts to neutralise the concerns of many consultation respondents about the DfE's emphasis on 'school readiness', arguing that such 'anxiety' is 'unwarranted', as 'school readiness should be understood in a broad sense'. However, this strategic

widening of the definition of ‘school readiness’ does not in any way remove or ameliorate the *content* of what is currently happening under the ‘school readiness’ umbrella and which critics are strongly questioning, with developmentally inappropriate content being smuggled into early years practice under the ‘school readiness’ label. The DfE unambiguously tells us that *pre-school* children ‘need to be introduced to *formal* learning’ (italics added) – a view which many if not most early years authorities simply reject as wrong. It is difficult not to conclude that the Government’s attempt at reassurance on this issue holds no substance, seductively persuasive though its rhetoric might be.

6. Diversity and a Fundamentally Split Field

Detailed analysis of the consultation responses reveals a field which is fundamentally split on a whole range of key early years issue, which in itself makes the Government’s determination to impose a single legislative framework on the field highly problematic. With such fundamental disagreement existing across the sector, it is very difficult to see how any Government can conceivably justify imposing a standardised *statutory* curricular framework. Take school readiness (cf. section 5), for example. We are told that a third of respondents were concerned with the term ‘school readiness’, believing that it ‘compromised the assertion that the EYFS is an important phase in its own right rather than being preparation for school’ – thus illustrating what is just one of the considerable schisms across the sector.

7. Supplementary Information and Practice Guidance

We read that ‘many respondents felt that there was a need for supplementary information and practice guidance...’, with these proposed documents (see below) all being designed to make the EYFS more ‘deliverable’. Thus, they presuppose and assume that the EYFS is beneficent in principle, and then instruct practitioners on how to ‘deliver’ it more efficiently. This is highly problematic for practitioners who do not agree with significant aspects of the EYFS; but even more importantly, the content of the list of new planned materials includes guidance and exemplification for teachers on completing the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, and best practice models for presenting information from the progress check at age two. The list of new materials constitutes a roll-call for all that is arguably most problematic and controversial in the EYFS – e.g. instructing practitioners on how to ‘deliver’ the widely contested Profile more effectively; and codifying child development in terms of a ‘chart’.

8. ‘Revision’ of the Early Learning Goals, and Misleading Media Reporting

In many ways this is by far the most important and disturbing section in this paper. The DfE *claims* to be responding to consultees' expressed concerns about the content of the literacy (and numeracy) ELGs (against which Open EYE and others have consistently campaigned), assuring us that 'As a result, these have been the main focus of further consideration and revision'. However, in relation to mathematics, no pretext, *based on the views of consultation respondents themselves*, is provided to support the DfE's proposed changes. These proposed *statutory* changes are placing many practitioners in a quite intolerable situation, whereby they are being made legally responsible for exposing young children to learning experiences that professionals believe to be harming those same children. Overall, the DfE has substantially *ratcheted up* the left-brain cognitive demands that are being inappropriately foisted on to young children through these changes.

In relation to literacy, 'respondents suggested there was too much emphasis on reading and writing at too young an age.' Yet scandalously, this unambiguous consultation finding bears little if any relation to the changes that the DfE is proposing to make to the literacy ELG. Far from the literacy goals having been reigned back in response to consultees' expressed concerns, in reality they will be *at least* as onerous and developmentally inappropriate as the previous goals, and arguably even more so. *Either* the Department is being deliberately disingenuous, and is misleading the sector under the pretence of doing the opposite of what they're actually doing; *or* the insidious ideology of 'schoolification' and 'too much too soon' has so infiltrated the psyches of policy-makers that they don't even realise what they're doing.

9. Assessment: The EYFS Profile and the Progress Check

We read that 'Some respondents expressed concern that categorising children under the three terms 'emerging', 'expected' and 'exceeding' was labelling them unnecessarily' (it would be very interesting to know precisely how many expressed this view). The DfE's response to this is to invoke 'discussions with parents, teachers and experts in workshops' to allay these concerns and so kick them into the long grass. Yet the Government makes no attempt to respond to the substance of the expressed concerns, but merely invokes 'workshop discussions' to reassure us about this issue. This is seen as the laziest of policy-making, not remotely doing justice to the depth of concerns expressed by respondents.

The way in which these 'workshops' were set up and orchestrated by the Department is also questioned. In terms of the assessment Profile, at no point are practitioners given the

opportunity to say whether they think the Profile is *in principle* a good thing or whether we would be better off without it. The DfE takes ‘widespread calls for greater exemplification and explanation about how to use the new EYFSP to assess children’ as justification for the existence of the assessment Profile, rather than seeing them as symptomatic of the fact that *the Profile itself* is fundamentally flawed, and so as a result generates all manner of anxiety-driven calls from practitioners who (understandably) find it unworkable.

In terms of the ‘progress check’ at age 2, we read that ‘Online consultation feedback was mixed, but in workshops where this issue was addressed there was strong support for the progress check, *when parents and practitioners had the opportunity to explore the idea and understand its purpose*’ (italics added) Again, this is a totally inadequate response to concerns raised by respondents to the written consultation – as if those principled concerns can be wiped out and thus ignored by invoking un-minuted ‘workshop conversations’ in which departmental officials no doubt guided and ‘massaged’ the discussion in the required direction to reach the conclusion they were wanting.

10. Ofsted

To the question, ‘The Government would also welcome views whether Ofsted’s powers are sufficient in the area of learning and development. Should the Government introduce a system similar to Welfare Notices for breaches of the learning and development requirements?’, if, as seems eminently reasonable, we take not being sure as an effective ‘no’, then we have *under one-third* of respondents agreeing to Ofsted having these powers, and an overwhelming 70% not. Yet the Department construes this clear negative result thus – ‘There was no clear consensus of opinion on this issue...!’ We are also told that for those who supported the proposal, ‘introducing notices was envisaged as encouraging providers to place greater value on learning along with ensuring rigour and driving up standards across the early years sector’ (p. 29). I have never heard a single early years practitioner use this alien discourse. Either the DfE needs to ‘come clean’ on just how many consultation respondents expressed this view – or it will be difficult not to conclude that this statement is far more to do with manipulative spin, than it is a dispassionate empirical description of what respondents actually said about these controversial proposals. It certainly seems that the DfE will have its way by hook or by crook, and has no intention of making any attempt to inquire into the reasons why there is so much disquiet in the sector about these proposals for ‘driving up’ standards in young children’s development.

11. Childminders

We are told that 'We consider that it is important that those seeking to be registered as childminders should have completed relevant training on the EYFS to increase their effectiveness and impact in supporting children when they start practising.' This is simply presented as an assertion, with no corroborating argumentation or evidence to support it, and with no reference being made either to the many thousands of registered childminders who have been lost to the field since the introduction of the EYFS in September 2008, Thus, there is a total lack of engagement with the nuanced complexity of the issues and arguments.

12. Deafening Silence in Relation to ICT and Computers in the Nursery

It is a major dereliction of the duty of care which the Department has for young children's well-being that no reference whatsoever is made in their document to ICT and computer technology, and its inclusion in the compulsory EYFS curriculum. The DfE needs to be robustly challenged as to why they make no reference whatsoever to this issue in this document, when a significant number of prominent authorities in the field believe these technologies to be perpetrating substantial harm on young children, and have repeatedly made these arguments in print over a number of years.

13. The Minister Speaks

This section analyses a recent public statement from early years Minister Sarah Teather (uploaded on to the Nursery World website on 21 December 2011). It is clear from this that an agenda of 'making sure' children are 'ready to learn when they enter Year 1' prevails. This section also challenges the highly questionable notion of young children 'falling behind'; and the only reference to play in the minister's statement being one which is directly coupled with 'how to read and write and use numbers'.

14. Welcome to the 'Paradigm War': 'Modernity' in its Death Throes?

In this section a contextualising cultural perspective is introduced, as an aid to locating and critically understanding within a wider historical and evolutionary context the current preoccupations of the EYFS and its 'modernist' perspectives on young children's learning and development.

15. Dr. Maria Robinson on 'Too Much Too Soon' and Developmental Inappropriateness in Early Learning

This final section presents some corroborating verbatim quotations from a recently published book on early childhood development written by early years consultant Maria Robinson. This text gives the lie to the sometimes propagated view that the views developed in this paper, and by Open EYE, are somehow 'extreme', or not part of mainstream thinking. On the contrary, I would argue that it is EYFS statutory policy intrusions that can be appropriately labelled as 'extreme' in a range of ways, not least in the way in which it removes practitioners' professional autonomy through non-evidence-based statutory intrusions into practice, and the way in which it arrogantly ignores, and rides rough-shod over, the deep perennial wisdom about children and childhood that has been built up in this field since the nineteenth century.