

Just before Christmas, the government launched a paper called 'Early Years Foundation Stage ~ Direction of Travel' . Some of you may have seen it but some will not have done.

JANET MOYLES was interviewed about her thoughts on the new EYFS ~ DoT paper and we thought it might be interesting for you to see some of the questions and responses.

Here they are

1. *What do you think about the document in general terms?*

The vision is generally to be applauded. Young children and their families deserve the kind of consistency and co-ordination of initiatives outlined in this part of the document. I also like the notion that there will be no kind of formal assessments for children 5 and under – this is totally appropriate to the age group and should also apply fully to those under at least 8 years of age. Practitioners can learn much from observation of children's play and this appears to be emphasised as a suitable method in this document. It's also good to know that the exemplary material will not focus on specific activities or aspects but allow practitioners to develop their own ideas about effective practice. The exemplar principles (pp.6/7) appear to be the beginnings of a very useful set of guidances for the early years. I hope there will be more like this in the final document.

The notion that parents will be more involved with practitioners in the assessment of their children is a strong feature – I do hope that practitioners will be given the time to undertake this important aspect. It takes much time (and effort for some) as well as training, to really engage with parents, however worthwhile it seems to be.

It is absolutely vital (as stated in the document) that OfSTED inspectors are appropriately trained in the kinds of practices outlined. For too long practitioners have lived in fear of OfSTED inspections because many inspectors don't appear to understand the needs of the youngest children. Hopefully new training within a revised framework will sufficiently help the inspectors to match their inspections to effective early years practices. I'm not sure, however, that OfSTED inspection is consistent with the notion that the new arrangements will be put in place 'without any formal prescription beyond the contents of the EYFS'. It seems clear that, given the Rose Report (comments below), there will definitely BE prescription. In addition, whatever OfSTED appears to approve of will be what practitioners will do.

I'm slightly concerned that the writers of the DOT document are equating good early years care and education with 'the things which good parents do'. This has a hint about it that caring for, loving and treating children well is sufficient in early years education. There must also be a main element in 'teaching' (as indicated elsewhere in DOT document) – this is not to deny that parents teach their children many things, but that level of relative 'casualness' is inconsistent with the kind of structures and assessment indicated in this, and other early years documents. We must be rigorous in our pedagogy as well as caring for young children – after all the workforce is being paid to do just that!

I think there's a lost opportunity here to include in the new EYFS document something about curriculum content relating to multi-cultural understanding. This is sadly lacking from the current *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* (unlike the Welsh document) and here's a chance to incorporate this vital aspect. 'Making a positive contribution' (presumably to society) means the need to understand other people from a range of backgrounds and cultures; it is indicated that practitioners themselves should 'promote equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice' so why not include this aspect for children?

1. Will it make life easier for practitioners? (a single document on guidance, a more cohesive inspection system, a single cohesive system for 0 to fives?)

At first glance, it seems like a 'common sense' type of document. However, hidden within its good intentions and up-beat language are a wealth of complex issues. Integrating the Birth to Three Matters, the Curriculum Guidance, the Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters, under 8s daycare and childminding, not to mention the OfSTED criteria will be a major task for someone – and it must be someone who has extensive knowledge of the early years. This cohesion is vitally needed but it **MUST** be done effectively and with children's best interests in mind. With Lesley Staggs now leaving, I wonder who has the knowledge and strength of character to pull this off. It concerns me that we have added yet another 'new initiative' to a chain of ongoing initiatives which is unlikely to make life easier for practitioners in the early years at least in the short term. It represents a mass of vital training which will have to be undertaken by ALL practitioners (irrespective of background and training). The suggestion that the final document itself will be capable of delivering its own level of training seems, at best, a little hopeful!

The on-going initiatives mean that the workforce has been given, as yet, little opportunity to understand itself – by that I mean get to grips with its own parameters and components. The vast differentiation in training and background of early years practitioners means that something as potentially huge as the EYFS (with changes as indicated – and intimated - in the Direction of Travel document) will be yet another dimension which could prove challenging and potentially divisive if someone is in charge who does not understand the current staffing context.

2. Will the Government's continuing lack of commitment/investment to training mean that it will fail?

This will be a significant factor, as I've indicated above. Not only am I concerned about the extent of the training that will be required (usually at minimal cost) but I have significant concerns as to WHO will lead such training. Universities have, on the whole, not necessarily been able to develop large numbers of early years qualified staff and College staff are often very overstretched. LEAs and 'consultants' currently run much of the early years training sessions but, again, they are often overstretched so ... it seems that there will need to be some extension of the numbers of trainers if the early years workforce is, in itself, to be adequately prepared for the challenges of the new EYFS implementation, particularly in relation to the youngest children.

3. The emphasis on play as central to an early years curriculum. Will this be affected or undone by the Rose Review?

As I think you suspect already by the question, there is a real issue here. Whilst the document states clearly that 'assessment will allow practitioners to plan activities and experiences for individual children', the Rose Review (Interim Report) seems to be adopting a 'one size fits all' approach to literacy learning and teaching. A majority of early years experts are literally up-in-arms about the Rose Review (e.g. there's a Press Release coming shortly from the Early Years Curriculum Group), taking as it does a very poorly researched stance on the teaching of (synthetic) phonics. Whilst the DOT document writes of 'freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities' the Rose Interim Review writes of 'phonics work' having to be taught to under-fives in a 'systematic' way. These two documents are clearly at odds in the pedagogy they are advocating. The Rose Review final recommendations (if based on the interim report) will definitely undermine practice based on play, particularly if OfSTED inspectors will also focus on 'phonics work' and phonics teaching, rather than on playing with words and sounds and stimulating excitement in literature and literacy.

4. The EYFS will be statutory yet removed from the National Curriculum? What are the implications of that?

I have some problem with the notion of the FS being removed from the National Curriculum. It seems to me that we should be aiming for a seamless education system from birth through to 18+. I would NOT wish to see the EYFS being influenced in a downwards direction by the NC, but I do want to see it given equal status and rights with the NC, if only for reasons of status for the early years. This is vital if it is to make the kinds of difference that the writers of the DOT document seem to want.

There are also implications for staffing. The EPPE report, widely acknowledged in the DOT document, emphasises that the quality of early education is very dependent upon practitioners with high levels of training. Other research has shown the significant differences that qualified teachers make to educational achievement in young children. I would want to ensure that removal from the National Curriculum would not mean lessening of high level training or, worse still, a reduction in the number of teachers. The promise by the government to ensure one qualified teacher to every 10 settings within the next few years is inadequate enough in itself: if this is reduced by acceptance of lower qualifications, then standards could become a real issue.

5. Any other comments?

I find the title of the document 'Direction of Travel' a very strange way of conceiving of young children's care and educational experiences. Where are we travelling to from? Or are we wandering off somewhere unspecified? At best, we could say that travel usually has a destination – but does this mean that we are only educating and caring for children for a future destination (older children/adulthood) rather than caring for and educating them as current citizens?

It's heartening to know that 'this fundamental restructuring of the existing quality frameworks will be taken forward in partnership with key stakeholders'. I do hope that these views will make an impact on the final document (rather than the practice adopted in the Rose Review which set out to decide that synthetic phonics should be taught, whatever the evidence to the contrary and the opposing views of many early years experts).

It does seem as though it is all going to happen in something of a rush as there is to be a 'formal consultation on the detailed content of the EYFS' in Spring 2006. I do hope that those developing the integrated document will consult widely and accept the views of early years experts across the board.

If you've any thoughts on the paper yourself, whether you agree with the above comments or not, why not share them with other TACTYC members through e-mailing j.moyles@ntlworld.com ?