



Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators

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The Early Years Foundation Stage through the daily experiences of children

In 2002-02, The Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Cambridge collaborated on research to explore children's and teachers' experiences of the then new *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfEE/QCA 2000) in reception classes in England. In 2007, the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) was introduced, with its greater emphasis on children's learning through play and practitioners' roles in enabling and interacting in the playful learning process. In 2009, TACTYC was instrumental in raising the profile of children's learning through play by initiating firstly a colloquium of play scholars and secondly, a meeting at the Houses of Parliament with interested politicians and others. A subsequent research-based book was then published (Broadhead et al. 2010)

TACTYC was interested, on behalf of its members, in linking the reception class research with the current EYFS and began some research in late 2010/early 2011 partially replicating the ATL funded research (to enable comparisons) and also emphasising children's play experiences in reception classes which we had anticipated would have greater focus since the advent of EYFS. The research took place in different local authorities across England and was conducted mainly by TACTYC Exec members. Our intention was to gather data about reception age children's curriculum experiences and the perceptions of teachers about instigating the EYFS. Twenty children and eight teachers were involved in the research. The children were observed over a half- or full-day using a timed, child-focused observation schedule. Each child's experiences were observed and recorded for one minute in every five. Each reception class teacher was then interviewed about their views of EYFS and the impact they perceived it to have had on their pedagogy and practice.

This study, like its ATL-funded predecessor, is unique in looking at the reception class day through the experiences of the child. Whereas other studies, e.g. Brooker et al. (2010) and Garrick et al. (2010) have looked at practitioners' perceptions and children's perceptions (respectively) through interviews, our research has directly observed children's everyday experiences in the reception class. We, like others, have been concerned for some time that reception age children are frequently treated as young KS1 children and not older EYFS children. The ATL study in 2004 showed the National Strategies influenced children's learning experiences, which tended to be dominated by

literacy and maths but the findings of this study show that this has changed, as we shall see.

We believe that the whole point of early education is how the child experiences the curriculum and the meaning these experiences have for them. Young children are powerful, competent learners but frequently not treated as such. We anticipated seeing a widening of the curriculum in the light of EYFS, more opportunities for children to learn through play and a greater range of meaningful activities for children. Since the advent of *Every Child Matters* and the focus on the individual child, it might also have been anticipated that children's individual interests and understandings would prevail in reception classes. This brief paper reports the basis of our research and, in particular, our findings from analysis of our data and a discussion of these findings.

THE RESEARCH AND ITS METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in 8 different local authorities in England varying from multi-cultural city settings through to rural counties. The schools were usually recommended by their local authorities and had been judged at least 'good' or above in their recent OfSTED inspection. Ten reception classes were studied by seven different observers who had academic and advisory backgrounds. Twenty children were the subject of child-focused, timed observations: 11 girls and 9 boys. The average age of the children was 5.06 and 5.05 years respectively.

The non-participant observers spent a total of **4395** minutes in the classrooms, of which **879** minutes were spent in close recorded observation. Although researchers tended to observe continuously, only one minute in every five of the child's experiences was actually recorded. Girls were **directly** observed for **520** minutes and boys for **359** minutes. In addition, eight of the ten teachers agreed to be interviewed about their experiences of implementing the EYFS, their views on children learning through play and their current practices in relation to pedagogy, curriculum and planning. Target child observations of randomly selected children are a recognised way of gaining rich and rewarding data about children's everyday experiences but only represent a snapshot over a whole year.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

Our eight teacher respondents had much to say about play and pedagogy that inevitably reflects the questions they

were asked. They also mentioned significant influences on pedagogy and practice such as Reggio Emilia. The need for the EYFS to be extended to children aged 7 was also mentioned at least twice. Whilst the teachers stated their passion for play or their belief that it is the main and most vital way in which children learn, the evidence in the classrooms shows little correlation between teachers' intentions and children's experiences. For example, individuality was mentioned and recognised but children still spent over a third of their day in being occupied in whole class sessions. Observation of play and learning appears high on teachers' agenda in their interview responses but we saw little evidence of adult involvement in children's play and noted only one specific observation being carried out. Although we did not have a specific category for observation by adults, one observer noted in her comments a teacher who was observing children and interacting effectively in accordance with children's play and learning experiences.

FINDINGS FROM OBSERVATIONS

Both girls and boys spent a significant amount of time on routine matters in the whole class, e.g. registration, administration, assembly and teacher directed tasks – 24.4% and 23.1% respectively. Added to this, whole class literacy sessions take a further 8.0%, and whole class maths 0.6% of children's time. If we also add the amount of time children spend in other whole class sessions, e.g. hall activities/PE (girls 4.0% and boys 2.7%) and music/singing/dance (girls 0.7% and boys 3.0%), this means that girls spend 37.1% of time under adult direction and boys 29.4%.

Children were also involved in small group maths and literacy sessions, girls spending 2.8% of their time and boys 4.1% (maths) and girls 0.5% and boys 4.4% (literacy). When adult-led small groups are added, children therefore spend around two-thirds of their time in the school day in the company of teachers and other adults.

When it came to knowledge and understanding of the world (e.g. cooking, natural world type experiences), the researchers noted boys involved in only five observed minutes and girls in only two minutes.

As play has achieved a high profile in the EYFS (through documents such as DCSF/QCDA 2009), we anticipated observing not only more child-initiated play, but increased adult-interaction in play. Our evidence revealed that whilst boys spent almost 9% of their time in indoor play activities (e.g. role play, water, sand, construction) and girls 11.7%, for boys adults were involved for only 0.8% of the time and for girls 4.4% and then mainly in a monitoring capacity, although in one particular case, a boy in a classroom James Stickley Regional Account Manager 'den' area received sensitive and relevant adult interaction and intervention.

Children have opportunity for periods of outdoor (gross motor) play experiences (girls 11% and boys 14%), adult interaction in that play often related to the provision of

equipment, behaviour management or engagement in, e.g. ball games. In one instance, the teacher was involved with the children in parachute games. Outdoor play in several schools tended to be confined to school break times where adults were mainly involved in monitoring children. The outdoors was also the setting for some small scale activities, e.g. bead threading, sign-making – girls were involved in 4.4% of such activities and boys 5.8%. This indicates that children spent the following percentages of their time outdoors: girls 15.4% and boys 19.8%. Many of these findings are very similar to the ATL Adams *et al.* study (2004).

Creative activities also featured in the children's daily experiences with boys spending 9.2% of their time and girls 15% of their day on activities related to e.g. painting, drawing, playdough, cutting and sticking, making cards, creating with fabrics. However, only two incidents of creativity in such activities were observed, and it is important to emphasise that the use of such materials is no guarantee of creative thinking. Only a very small amount of time (3% girls and 2.7% boys) was spent on activities related to information technology, e.g. computers, cameras. Both boys and girls spent around 3% of their time having snacks and another small percentage of time watching or generally being 'inactive' (girls 5.3% and boys 4.4%).

In the ATL study, Adams *et al.* concluded that children experienced 'impoverished learning' with little cognitive challenge or meaningfulness for children despite, like this study, individual children having widely diverse experiences. TACTYC researchers noted little provision for rich and unpredictable play and learning and the ambiguous position of Year R appears to persist.

Our findings from interviews and observations show some similarities with the Garrick *et al.* study but, whilst children in that study stated a liking for 'real-world' experiences, only one of our observed children had any experiences that could be described in this way. Children in the Garrick study also reported enjoying play and some wanted adult involvement but, again, there is little evidence of this in our study, especially for boys. Teachers in our study, like those in Brooker *et al.*'s study (2010), welcomed the focus on play and child-based learning and the general content of the EYFS.

CRITIQUE

Whilst our analysis of the data is a basic categorisation, the pattern overall is not dissimilar to that achieved in the original ATL research nor through informal observations carried out by Executive Committee members as part of e.g. doctoral study observations (which initially prompted the conduct of the research). It would seem that whilst the rhetoric of the EYFS (as evidenced in the interviews) is strongly in favour of play and meaningful activities for children, few teachers appeared able to sustain this in their pedagogy and practice. We acknowledge this as a small-scale study but, taken with the original ATL study, our data

and the findings extrapolated from those, leave us with many questions about children's reception class experiences. We reiterate that our intention was to look at EYFS practice through the eyes of the child.

DISCUSSION

Teachers' roles in children's learning and play

Whilst children's experiences were the main focus of this study, the data showed that teachers spent considerable time managing and supervising activities: these were largely conducted at tables with outcomes geared towards a product or a tightly prescribed skill. Most art and technology was teacher-directed. There was considerable use of printed templates, colouring, copying and cutting in all teacher-planned activities, providing few opportunities for the children's own ideas. Teachers' time managing resources and the environment limited their involvement in the children's learning: this was particularly noticeable during children's self-initiated play.

Teacher-led literacy and mathematics sessions showed little by way of meaningful contexts for children and appear to have changed little since the 2004 ATL report, (except for greater time spent on synthetic phonics, and reduced time spent on mathematics (4.6% of total minutes). Of the total time children engaged in literacy, 33.6% was spent listening to the teacher read a story, 39.4% on phonics and only 12.6% reading. Time spent on writing was particularly low (14.1 % of the total time spent on literacy). Only 8 of our 20 study children engaged in any form of writing during child observations, spending 10 minutes copying sentences written by a teacher and 30 minutes writing sentences dictated by a teacher. More meaningful examples occurred only twice in play when one boy decided to make 'a special book, a 'Power Ranger' book' on which he wrote letters and other letter-like symbols but was alone in his creative use of graphicacy in play. Another boy chose to communicate through writing within his role-play (see Boy 2, p. 3). These were the only examples of creativity in literacy and there were no instances of creative thinking in mathematics. These findings suggest an underlying cause contributing to recent low scores in writing and calculations in the *Early Years Profile* (EYP), (DfE, 2010).

Noticeable also was an apparent lack of breadth to the curriculum. There also appeared to be little opportunity for collaborative and sustained dialogue with adults and peers, important for children's language and cognitive development. In teacher-led activities, teachers generally gave children very precise (closed) instructions and resources that meant that there were few opportunities for children to use their own ideas and very little adult interaction to support and develop children's ideas in play. The data lacked any passages of intellectual search in either teacher-led activities or children's self-initiated play. In many of the classes several adults sat with the children during whole class sessions such as lengthy 'carpet times' including registration and in some of these there were as many as eight adults present.

Play: the child's experience

Although the time children spent playing had increased since 2004, there appeared to be low levels of engagement in play and it lacked complexity. The potential for rich, complex and challenging play was largely unrealised. The richest example of role-play was 'Boy 2' who took a foot-pump outside, pretending to pump the tyres of wheeled toys and telling his teacher "Your customers look really happy with that!" He asked his teacher if he could turn a truck over 'to repair it' and she helped him think how he might do this. Eventually he did so with the help of two friends, pretending to investigate the problem. Overall only 6/20 children engaged in role-play. One child played alone, preventing the social element and dialogue that can make role-play so rich. Although several joint episodes were observed, only one was sustained. Role-play is also acknowledged as providing meaningful contexts for children to use marks and symbols to communicate their thinking but only one minute of writing was observed: none of children communicating their mathematical ideas through graphics in their play. Two children spent a considerable amount of time in whole class P.E. In contrast one boy spontaneously set up an obstacle course outside using small P.E. apparatus but his play was solitary and was unobserved by his teacher.

HAS ANYTHING CHANGED SINCE 2004?

There is evidence in this study of disjunctions between what teachers 'teach' and the levels at which they operate. In 2004, ATL reported 'Play appears to be something that is very much left to the children, whilst teachers and other educators get on with the important business of getting through the curriculum and onwards and upwards ... towards important targets' (8.8: 81). Time for play provides periods of relative freedom, relaxation and socialising: such interludes may be enjoyable for children but we would argue that it is difficult to justify the time spent that results in often low-level play for reception age children. Our findings largely repeat the 2004 findings, revealing again that: 'Overall we observed few opportunities for:

- sustained, shared and purposeful talk;
- sustained, complex imaginative play;
- authentic, engaging, first-hand experiences'. (ATL, 2004: 22)

THE EYFS: A 'PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM'?

The Foundation Stage curriculum (DfES, 2007: 7) emphasises that play 'underpins all development and learning for young children' reflecting 'their wide ranging and varied interests and preoccupations ... In their play children learn at their highest level'. Moreover 'Play and other imaginative and creative activities help children to make sense of their experience and 'transform' their knowledge, fostering cognitive development' (DfES, 2007 card 1.1). Yet evidence from the data gathered here shows that these expectations are mainly unrealised. We would speculate that a possible reason for this is that, instead of children's observed learning and play preferences being used to plan experiences, it is the **prescribed curriculum** informing planning and practice.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

In one classroom, available time seemed well used, allowing children to fully engage in learning: for example, following self-registration the children were immediately able to engage in play. The teacher of Boy 2 took an interest in his collaborative play and provided sensitive support without dominating the children's intentions. When he asked if his teacher could help repair his 'birthday badge', she suggested he choose materials to help him fix it and reminded him where to find them. Later she noticed he was pretending to be Father Christmas and giving out presents: she quietly offered a roll of sticky labels which encouraged him to write labels and a message - 'It's the way to the North Pole.'

WHY ARE THE AMBITIONS OF THE EYFS LARGELY UNREALISED?

The data showed that, without exception, teachers and other adults working in reception classes respond to the children they teach with kindness. As early years professionals they are committed to fulfilling the curriculum requirements but the perceived and real pressures they experience serve to confuse. Teaching in the early years is highly skilled but the emphasis appears to be on delivering the curriculum rather than on the learning experiences of the children. Whereas in 2004 the legacy of the literacy and numeracy strategies ensured these aspects dominated, there has been a shift towards a greater emphasis for time to play. However, indications are that some teachers' still lack an understanding of play and its educational value. We agree with McInnes *et al.* (2011: 131) that pedagogy needs to be 'founded on a clear understanding of both play and learning, their relationship to one another and the role of the practitioners in facilitating play and learning would appear beneficial'

THE WAY FORWARD FOR TEACHERS AND CHILDREN IN RECEPTION CLASSES

We suggest that greater breadth of the curriculum needs to be achieved and flexible activities planned to allow children to explore their own ideas. In mathematics and literacy teachers should re-consider the merits of low-level skills-based tasks and engage children in genuinely open-ended and relevant experiences that have real meaning to them. Perhaps teachers' expectations of children's capabilities need to be much higher. A new appraisal of 'creativity' in the curriculum is needed, moving beyond completing products prepared by teachers to ensuring that children are deeply engaged, able to explore their *own* ideas and be creative in all aspects of the curriculum and in their play.

We would argue that the findings of this study point to a need for reception teachers to re-appraise the role of play for learning in reception and develop their professional understanding of its value through critical reading, the use of effective observations (including photographs and learning diaries) and through discussion and reflection with colleagues. Effective, collaborative, open-ended dialogue with children will contribute to increased intellectual challenge and higher-level thinking: this is especially

important in the context of children's self-initiated play. Understanding of these aspects may be enhanced by a closer collaboration between effective nursery schools and reception teachers.

We recommend that reception teachers give serious thought to the excessive use of 'carpet' times at the beginning of and during the day and whether it is appropriate for reception children to attend assemblies, to have whole class physical activity or 'playtime' with the whole school. Above all we recommend that teachers and other practitioners view the classroom and the curriculum experiences from the viewpoint of the child.

HOW CAN TEACHERS BE BETTER PREPARED TO TEACH IN RECEPTION?

It seems from this study that narrow assessment emphases and an excess of initiatives and curriculum changes have mainly failed to allow for the development of an open-ended pedagogies responsive to the child, putting undue pressures on teachers and impacting on children's learning.

This study shows how important it is that reception teachers are well trained, not only demonstrating children's 'subject-based' skills and ELGs, but given the freedom to see the day through the child's experiences. Future training should focus on the relationship between effective play and learning and the adult's role in play, and on rich examples of children's writing and of effective mathematical thinking. The importance of collaborative and sustained dialogue and of children's intellectual engagement cannot be over-emphasised. Sustained, complex and challenging play and learning can only come through teachers' higher-level understanding of children's day-to-day curriculum experiences translated into effective pedagogy.

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