

‘Practitioners’ Experiences’ – what difference has the EYFS made?

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This summer’s announcement of the review of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* in England, led by Clare Tickell, has re-launched a flurry of claims and counter-claims about the impact the new framework has had on the wellbeing of young children and their families, *and* on the wellbeing of the practitioners who provide for their welfare, education and care. Everyone will be familiar with the opposing claims – ‘It’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to children!’ – ‘It’s the best thing since sliced bread!’ – so a team at the Institute of Education University of London were delighted to be invited, by the DCSF, to find out what practitioners really think about the impact on their own lives, and on children and families, of the new requirements.

The study

From the start, the team was faced with an almost impossible task: to elicit the views of a representative sample of the ‘childcare workforce’ across a representative sample of settings, regions and local authorities. We did our best. We selected local authorities in six regions of England (North, North-East, South-East, South-West, Midlands, Inner London) which included the range of affluence and poverty, rural and urban, homogeneous and diverse settings, which we were looking for. In each of those authorities we invited seven groups of practitioners to participate: head-teachers and setting managers; teachers and Early Years Professionals; nursery staff; childminders; and children’s centre staff. We quickly learned just how difficult it was for some of our key groups to participate: staff in private day nurseries and preschools, for instance, had very little non-contact time and could only attend at 8 a.m. or in the evening; childminders too were busy from 8.00-6.00 and found it difficult to get away; and in the snow-storms that arrived as field-work commenced in February, we began to feel we were lucky if anyone at all turned up for our focus groups.

But they came; and they talked. Forty-two focus groups in six regions came together over a six-week period, and responded to our ‘big three’ questions:

- How does the EYFS influence your day-to-day practice with children and families?
- How, if at all, has the EYFS supported improvements in the care and education you provide?

- What, if any obstacles and difficulties do you face in using the EYFS?

Supplementary questions dealt more specifically with the welfare arrangements, including nutrition; with planning and record-keeping; with the impact on boys and girls, bilingual learners and those with additional needs; with the practical difficulties associated with outdoor play and with outreach work; and with professional learning, and partnership with parents. We came away with almost 42 hours of recordings to be transcribed, and a wealth of information, opinions and concrete examples.

Our first task was to provide the DCSF with 'headline findings', and to our surprise the 35 headlines which emerged in our early analysis – most of them rather positive – remained the significant findings all the way to the end of the analysis. Despite all the 'ifs' and 'buts' and reservations, the overwhelming view in all the focus groups was: 'This is good for children and we like it – don't go and change it!' (The 'ifs' and 'buts' of course are serious ones, and were highlighted in our conclusions. We hope that the review team, and the new government, will take them very seriously).

The good news...

So what did we find? Generalisations are difficult: not just because childminders have a different daily experience from head-teachers, and play-workers from reception teachers, but because so much was found to depend on the local implementation of the framework, and the training and support that were offered. But some important generalisations which appeared in our 'headlines' were supported by almost 100% of participants. The *Early Years Foundation Stage* was felt to be:

i) Child-centred and holistic:

This view came across very strongly in almost all groups. A children's centre worker claimed,

'it's more about the love and affection and the caring and the holistic approach to them that is important up to the age of 7, I believe;'

a private setting manager explained,

'The main changes in the EYFS have been in the way we plan, before the EYFS it was more or less staff initiated planning, now it's more child inspired, if you like. We observe the children then we plan and we also take ideas from the children and the parents and staff'.

ii) Play-based:

There was a universal understanding that early learning is achieved through play. Most reception teachers agreed that

'It's confirmed a lot of our beliefs, and how we were working before'

'Basically it's saying that's OK for you to be that way, it confirmed that that was the right way of working'

Even after-school play-workers, who were initially worried about their new role, agreed:

'It takes a long time to actually figure out that you've got this document that's telling you what to do, in actual fact, if you take a step back from it, its only telling you to play with the kids!'

In almost all groups, practitioners were eager to offer examples of the ways that they provided 'learning through play', both indoors and outdoors.

iii) Practitioner-friendly:

Some groups, in some authorities, had been overwhelmed with anxiety during the introduction of the EYFS, and some were 'very depressed and confused' by their early training; they viewed the new framework, they said, as 'complex' and 'daunting'. But by the time we met them, they all reported having adapted the framework to their own preferred ways of planning, working and assessing. The majority reported that they now did *less* planning than before, relying more on continuous provision which was adapted to children's changing needs, and less on short-term topics which were entirely adult-led.

Other areas that were strongly supported by practitioners were the requirement for outdoor learning (despite the fact that many PVI settings had to make exceptional efforts to take their children out every day); the emphasis on partnership with parents; and the general increase in the professional status of practitioners who were not qualified teachers: both childminders and after-school staff commented that they were now able to share their views with teachers on a more equal basis.

... and the bad news

Practitioners needed no prompting to tell us what they disliked about the EYFS. Key concerns lay in three main areas: 'the burden of paperwork', 'the development matters' and 'the profile points'.

Paperwork was a big issue for some groups in some local authorities – the amount practitioners felt was required of them depended on what their local trainers had indicated, rather than what the statutory requirements state. Worst-off were the childminders in one region who believed they had to document everything every child did, and write down the ‘next step’; they were not sure who had told them this, and they agreed that it wasn’t in the documents, but this ‘urban myth’ had a powerful hold on them. Another myth that afflicted childminders was the ‘daily risk assessment’ of their playrooms and gardens, required in some regions but treated lightly in others (and in the EYFS documents). In the worst cases, childminders reported that they were experiencing enormous and unnecessary pressures to ‘be like a nursery’ when parents wanted them to ‘be a like a home’.

Development matters: The authors of this part of the EYFS cannot have dreamed how divisive it would be in practice. Most practitioners valued the descriptions of children’s development and found them helpful in identifying aspects of their own children. But few appreciated the accompanying photographs of children or the age-bands ascribed to them, which they frequently described as an affront to the principle of the ‘Unique Child’, and a cause of distress for parents. As a nursery teacher explained:

‘It’s upsetting for parents if you show them what level their child is at and there’s a picture of a lovely chubby baby and it says ‘12 months’ when the child is coming up to three’.

Profile points should only be of concern to reception teachers, but everyone working with children over three years had a view on them, and many felt that certain ‘goals’ for literacy and numeracy in particular were much too ambitious, while those in other areas of learning were ‘too airy-fairy’. This is going to be the most contested area for review, and some participants felt the only solution was to ‘get rid of the goals’, and then the programme of learning and development could adapt to the child and the context.

Finally

The level of knowledge, skills, ingenuity and expertise that practitioners demonstrated to us was astonishing. Whatever their level of qualifications (and these ranged from ‘no qualifications’ to ‘MA in Early Childhood Studies’), everyone who joined our groups showed enormous commitment to their roles as educators and carers, and enormous insights into the kinds of activities and routines which delight young children, and foster their wellbeing in the short and longer term. We hope that the review panel will listen

carefully to their views, which are expressed on behalf of children and families as well as on behalf of the profession.

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Practitioners' Experiences of the EYFS.