**Who owns the ‘rights’ to early development?**

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**Introduction**

The battle for the pedagogical culture of Early Years practice is rooted in who has control of assessment. Two main questions need to be asked:

* As the government’s leadership and credibility collapses with the proposed Baseline that the whole sector united to say wouldn’t work, I am now looking around to see who will fill the vacuum created and what their motives will be?
* Are the leading organisations supporting the early years sector united in promoting child-centred approaches or do their values become compromised by competitive commercial practice?

As practitioners, the ways in which we plan our provision depend greatly on how we see assessment. Where determining opportunities for the child’s future learning and development is the focus, then their current well-being and involvement levels; their characteristics of effective learning (including observable features such as schemas); and those aspects of the curriculum the child is exploring; are the all-important formative assessments. This ensures that we plan a motivational, rich and balanced curriculum for each child. Interim comparisons (summative assessments) with developmental landmarks, such as those within Development Matters age bands, form a useful check for appropriate progress.

The timeframe and emphasis balance between these two types of assessment is a powerful indicator of the appropriateness of the culture that exists within a setting. Where constant reference to, and checking of age expectations or examples of common developmental behaviour predominates (such as the statements in the age bands of Development Matters), then the resulting practice becomes about ‘filling’ perceived gaps in a child’s developmental makeup. This is an adult-led process based on tick lists and practitioner-led activities. Where ‘assessment for learning’ predominates, the practitioner is engaged alongside the child in discovering their learning voyage in a child-centred learning process. Reporting the results of this on an intermittent basis by comparing progress to the overlapping age bands ensures that each child’s journey is balanced and appropriate, without undermining the fact that it is unique.

**Why did Baseline Assessment fail to inspire?**

The main choices offered to schools by the Baseline packages selected by the DfE (which had to incorporate a ‘binary decision’ - “Yes, the child can…” or “No, the child can’t…”) were either the test each child had to take during their first half term or judgements based on the observations of EYFS staff. The inevitable conclusion that the government’s reviewers of the data produced made was that the results were not comparable enough for the purpose of measuring a cohorts’ data to the end of Year 6. However, the Early Years sector was also clear in its appraisal of the difficulties in using the assessments made on each child purposefully in planning for their future learning and development and as a baseline against which purposeful comparisons could be made using existing measures. All the companies involved in producing a baseline were aware of the opportunities to fill that gap with new ways to re-assess throughout the Reception Year and ways of tracking back through the early years to birth, to create a continuum into which other EYFS providers could purchase.

**Commercial reality promotes a race to the lowest common denominator**

There has been a technical revolution within Early Years settings and classrooms. Practitioners now attempt to use tablets to support observations that use digital photography and videos alongside written descriptions that can be accessed by and discussed with parents on the same day. Software packages also produce learning journeys that parents can actively contribute to using smart phones and tablets. Such innovations have the potential to enrich development opportunities for each child. The addition of assessment tools within the packages could enable meaningful reflection, questioning of patterns in learning behaviour and attainment for individuals and groups, and so support planning processes appropriately in the short, medium and long term.

However, if the software and the predominant assessment culture places the long term goal of ‘expected’ (or above) attainment at the end of EYFS, and assessment options for every observation are about that specific aim, using the statements from Development Matters as the definitive ‘road map’ - rather than a mirror of comparison - then it is natural that each practitioner limits their focus to that expectation. The consequent provision for the child is about completing the ‘full set’ of each age band before moving on. I have challenged an online learning journey provider, Tapestry, over their inclusion of a ‘Development Matters statements checklist tool’ that can be used for each and every observation. Such assessments would subsequently be included in a child’s record. Although they recognised how pedagogically inappropriate it was, they explained that the customers wanted it and would go elsewhere were it removed. They argued in email communication with me that:

Despite our views about how assessments should be made, and our strong feeling that best practice should not include using the Development Matters statements as a tick list, we have been under overwhelming pressure to permit the process of assigning statements to observations, when a teacher/practitioner requires it. If we had resolutely refused this, we would be out of business now. All our competitors permit this option. We have taken the view that it is better to voice our opinions and advice as to how to create meaningful observations and assessments and to try to disseminate this amongst our users. (EYFS Forum content manager about Tapestry, 2016)

One way a commercial provider could improve its place in the market is by redefining and taking ownership of what the most appropriate assessment criterial looks like. By offering the Baseline Assessment process open to applications, the Department for Education gave companies the opportunity to start taking possession of the approach. Having won the right to sell their product to schools, the different companies subsequently developed their initial approach/offer by adding on systems for assessing over time and tracking progress, building on the binary assessment process embedded in the Baseline. Knowing that it is important for teachers to believe in the integrity of the process, the marketing for these products needs to be pedagogically plausible. However, it also needs to be perceived as realistic, given the time pressures in a modern educational environment. So simplifying the assessment procedure so that it generates data that can be processed easily, giving clear indications of a child’s attainment at any specific time and their direction of travel is promoted as a selling point to hard-working practitioners. A leading provider publicises it’s product with the following: ‘*Designed to lead good practice, it offers a solution that fits with the busy life of a school’* (Early Excellence’s EExAT promotion, 2016).

Most early years experts would question whether these two are solved with any simple strategy if learning and development is the complex individual journey all the evidence suggests it is. Binary assessments may produce binary data which computers work best from, but surely, real education should not be based on it. As Bertam and Pascal said: ‘We need to ensure that what we are measuring truly matters and that we are not simply focusing on things that are easily measured.’

**How discerning is the market? Is it fair to assume great leadership and well qualified staff?**

Are all teachers, head teachers and PVI leaders responsible for making the decisions over what assessment process they should ‘buy in to’ well placed in their experience or training to do so? Every time the government or technological advancement opens up the sector to the market place (e.g. Phonics resources, Baseline Assessment, Online Learning Journeys) requests are made to local authority advisors and support staff for guidance on ‘what to buy’. Of course, local government officers cannot comment or signpost within such commercial processes, but can empower the decision makers by providing clear guidance on the important considerations when reviewing the options. In reality, as with much ‘shopping’, decisions are based on limited information, gut feeling, and the promises the advertisement makes that connect most with the buyer.

**What is the real impact on practice?**

The experience of a practitioner in a nursery chain highlights just how important the impact of assessment packages can be. A nursery assistant in a small chain explained how the assessment/planning culture required individual statements within each age band to be backed up by three observations before they could move on. She watched in disbelief when a colleague changed a child’s clothes twice to get three different photos of him climbing stairs, observations she would then attribute to different days, just so she could tick it off. The leadership praised colleagues when statements were completed and used the facility offered by the package to demonstrate the negative gap between chronological age and observed attainment (which automatically turns red) to determine targets for each key person for their 10 children aged 0 to 2. Considered arguments by the practitioner for child-led approaches have been repeatedly dismissed by the management of the chain and setting.

**Could local authorities or independent consultants have an impact?**

In the absence of political direction and leadership from central government, it is vital that local authorities who still have constructive working relationships with the majority of primary schools and settings offer clear guidance as to the most appropriate ways to use formative and summative assessment with our youngest and most vulnerable children. Early years advisors/consultants have to consider with some care how to remain an independent and important voice within a sector. In the absence of clear direction from the DfE, Early Years is currently dominated by the fear of ‘getting assessment right’ and the solutions being sold all offer that which seems to make everything easier, whether those responsible for producing it really believe in that or not.

**References**

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