

Early Years Professional Status (EYPS): The joys of assessing!

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Being an EYPS assessor for one of the pilot schemes (Sept 2006-Jan 2007) has been fascinating, fun and hard work. As new provision for all four pathways rolls out across the country, it looks as if EYPS is here to stay and many more people will go forward for assessment, either based on their already considerable knowledge and experience or after further training. I'd like to share a few insights about my own experience of being an EYPS assessor and suggest a few personal 'tips' for candidates approaching EYPS.

I had the pleasure of working in a small team of like-minded, friendly assessors, all committed to playing a part in ensuring continued and improved quality of care and education for young children. The Needs Assessment days (now called 'Gateway'), in which candidates went through a series of exercises, such as role-playing a staff interview, to receive feedback on preparation for final assessment, were rather like running a marathon at a sprint. Assessors and candidates raced from one exercise to the next to meet the pre-determined timetable, shifting gear for the different demands of each activity, with barely time to catch a breath between them. As assessors are required to record 'verbatim' all that was said, pens were used up by the dozen and arms and hands (and heads!) ached by the end of each day. Candidates brought with them such a fascinating range of experiences that it took strength-of-will to stay within the remit in the personal interviews and not to deviate too far from the pre-set questions.

Assessment visits were preceded by candidates submitting a series of tasks in which they aimed to demonstrate their competence in meeting the EYP Standards. Preparation for visits by assessors using these tasks took between four and five hours for each candidate. As most assessors seemed to be doing it in addition to the usual 'day job', this was quite a tall order if candidates were a little late in submitting their tasks. Midnight oil was frequently burning! The visits themselves were again very interesting – it was a privilege to have the opportunity to visit so many different settings with their unique approaches to the care and education of young children. Some outstanding practice was

seen by each of us (and some not so hot!) There were a few 'disasters' along the way between the group of assessors – late cancellations of visits or witnesses because of ill health, a candidate being sent off to hospital in the middle of a visit, an assessor nearly being washed away to sea in a storm during a ferry crossing to a visit – but on the whole they were brilliant experiences.

Assessing during visits involved a round of (again, pre-determined) activities including a guided tour of the setting, interviewing the candidate and witnesses, and scrutinising documentary evidence against the Standards. Again, all needed recording verbatim. It was a very tight timetable with decisions to be made against a plethora of data sources at rapid speed, all requiring justification. For that, an assessor needs a bit of space in which to work, preferably a bit of quiet, and several cups of tea or coffee. Now, these things are not always easy to provide in a busy early years setting, perhaps running on few resources. Being squashed into the narrowest galley kitchen between the washing machine and tumble drier, next to the toilet, with knees pressed against those of interviewees was not the most conducive of environments for rapid, accurate scrutiny and calm, thoughtful assessment. We all worked with Christmas music and the usual noise and excitement of pre-Christmas early years settings. However, we all made the best of the circumstances.

The file of documentary evidence provided by candidates during visits was crucial to the assessment. Those that were clearly signposted in order of each Standard and with detailed evidence of actual, personal and recent practice were the easiest to negotiate and to assess. There was no time available to search for evidence through unmarked files or piles of papers (indeed, it is not allowed), so the most efficiently organised files resulted in the best evidence on the whole. Similarly, evidence from witnesses was also crucial. Witnesses seemed to find the process rather stressful, even though we tried hard to keep it friendly and non-threatening. Being questioned about someone else's practice when they know that a colleague's new EYPS might depend upon the answers (witnesses gain nothing from the process themselves) is a little daunting, but assessors are not trying to catch witnesses out.

It might help witnesses and candidates to know that specific, detailed examples of practice rather than assertions about types of practice are what seem to be needed for

EYPS assessment. It's not enough for a witness to tell us that 'S/he is very good with children and forms good relationships with them'. Instead, give us examples: 'Each morning s/he makes a point of greeting each child individually and spends a bit of time chatting to them about something particular to them. For example, this morning s/he asked Child A how her new pet rabbit was settling in and what she needed to feed it'.

Given the challenges involved in assessing and in being a candidate for EYPS, maybe a few tips to future candidates might help to ease the process for all concerned. Good luck!

Tips for candidates:

- Take time over the preparation so that you can convey your verbal messages succinctly and in direct relation to the Standards and instructions given. Verbatim recording is tricky! Make sure your clear messages can be recorded.
- Be sure that all written submissions reach your assessor in plenty of time for preparation.
- Organise your documentary file as logically and with as clear signposting as possible, preferably in numeric order of Standards.
- All evidence in the file should be either self-explanatory or be carefully explained and related to the Standards. A photograph without annotation or reference to its significance is of little use.
- Try to provide your assessor with table space and somewhere suitable for private interviewing. Oh, and those cups of coffee are so welcome!
- Choose witnesses carefully and help them to understand that the assessor needs specific examples of your personal practice to illustrate the areas s/he is asking about.
- Don't forget: EYPS is about you personally. It is not an assessment of the setting.

Do Jane's experiences parallel your own in relation to assessment?

Are these tips helpful to you in thinking about assessment?

What is your experience as an assessor?

Any ideas/thoughts/comments gratefully received by Janet Moyles (j.moyles@ntlworld.com)