

The first year of implementation of the early years foundation stage

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Background to the report

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) has a statutory remit to keep the curriculum under review, including the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which became statutory in September 2008 for all children, aged Birth to 5. In order to speak with national authority and to provide the Department for Children, Schools and Families with advice on the curriculum and assessment, QCDA needs to build a robust evidence base from across the full range of EYFS provision. As part of this ongoing monitoring process, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) has been contracted to undertake a range of research activities.

To date, three forms of evidence collection have been completed:

- Practitioner focus groups (13 groups, 135 practitioners)
- Practitioner questionnaire survey (1,211 practitioners)
- Literature review (24 research reviews, four Ofsted reviews of inspections, five research reports)

Key findings

General

Across the range of practitioner groups and settings, key aspects of the EYFS are in place, and most practitioners are using guidance and resources such as the EYFS framework, Practice guidance and Profile to support their provision and Development matters and the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) to support their assessment. Key aspects of the EYFS have been embraced and embedded, which indicates strong support for the EYFS among practitioners.

Among all groups of practitioners, and particularly among childminders, there is an emphasis on using children's interests and ideas as the basis for planning. This aspect of the EYFS appears to be securely embedded, with practitioners using a variety of approaches to ensure their planning is informed by, and responsive to, children's needs and preferences.

Practitioners were committed to using a variety of child-initiated and adult-led activities, with the former being especially prominent. There was some variation in the balance of these types of activities between settings, with reception staff reporting that they used child-initiated tasks less frequently than staff in other settings.

Practitioners state that they plan for, deliver and assess a balance of provision across the six areas of learning and development and see this as important in supporting children's development. In practice, however, there is a tendency for some areas of learning and development to be given greater prominence, sometimes in response to children's needs (for example, children needing additional support in personal, social and emotional development (PSED)). At other times, as a result of what was considered to be external pressures, reception teachers tended to allocate greater time to communication, language and literacy (CLL) and problem solving, reasoning and numeracy (PSRN) as a result of what they perceived to be school-directed policies. However, this needs to be considered within the context of the findings that the EYFS is securely embedded across all types of provision.

Overall, practitioners express confidence in their own knowledge of the EYFS, but stated that they are less confident about knowledge and understanding of the EYFS among colleagues in key stages 1 and 2, and among headteachers, inspectors and other professionals. Some practitioners claim that this perceived lack of awareness has an impact on their provision, for example, through some reception practitioners believing that they are being asked to adopt approaches that appear not to be in line with EYFS guidance and advice.

Some practitioners state that they feel the pressure of conflicting demands as they try to implement the EYFS, and believe that there is an excess of paperwork that hinders their

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practice. Comments in both the focus groups and the free text elements of the questionnaire indicated that reception staff reported experiencing more difficulties in delivering the areas of learning and development than those in day nurseries and preschools. Comments made in the survey show that reception staff perceive some additional pressures from the demands of literacy and mathematics in key stage 1 and key stage 2. This is despite the wide range of national and local guidance to the contrary. The requirements of Ofsted inspection, in particular, are seen as sometimes being detrimental to provision, with a belief that this necessitates an inappropriate focus on documentation rather than children's experiences.

During the focus group discussions a number of practitioners across all types of settings stated they are confused and uneasy about what is required of them and a desire for clarity above all. Around half of respondents to the questionnaire requested when prompted clarification or additional guidance on a range of EYFS issues. Staff in reception settings were more likely than staff in other settings to request additional guidance on issues such as using outdoor provision and supporting child-initiated activity. While practitioners retain interest and motivation in improving their provision for children, and support the EYFS in enabling them to do this, uncertainty about complying with the interpretation of particular requirements can sometimes stifle enthusiasm and confidence.

Local authority training has been well received by many practitioners but some, particularly childminders, were more likely to express a degree of dissatisfaction in focus groups with its quality and usefulness. Training sessions sometimes appeared to deliver inconsistent messages and have contributed to a sense of confusion about the requirements of the EYFS among some practitioners.

A key issue for reception staff was ensuring the effective transition from EYFS year 1. There was widespread agreement that the pedagogical approaches engendered by the EYFS should continue into year 1 and beyond, while at the same time increasing the expectations of curriculum content and challenge. There was concern that for some children, transition between the stages was not effective because of abrupt changes in pedagogic practice. Respondents identified this disruption as having a potentially detrimental effect on pupils' achievement.

Research evidence indicates the clear benefits of developing parental involvement in early years education, with effective settings sharing educational aims with parents/carers and ensuring regular communication (weekly or monthly). In such settings, parents/carers are seen as active partners, having an input in planning and assessment.

The importance of early learning that takes place within the home is underlined by research evidence, with parents/carers appearing to need additional support to develop children's

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learning in early numeracy activities, alongside the more usual focus on literacy activities. More generally, parents/carers and non teacher-trained staff need support to increase their responsiveness to the cues that children provide during paired and group activities.

The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project identified five aspects of pedagogy that are particularly important in influencing good outcomes for children; these are

- quality of the adult-child verbal interaction
- practitioners' knowledge and understanding of the curriculum
- practitioners' knowledge of how young children learn
- adults' skill in supporting children in resolving conflicts
- helping parents to support children's learning at home.

The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/09 reported that 'Most childcare provision (95 per cent) is at least satisfactory in its overall effectiveness, and nearly two thirds (65 per cent) is good or outstanding. Of the providers inspected in 2008/09, nine per cent are outstanding, a considerably higher proportion than in 2007/08 when the figure was four per cent. Levels are also higher in the provision of good and outstanding support for children to stay safe, be healthy and make a positive contribution.

Planning

EYFS documents are widely used to support planning, with the practice guidance and statutory framework being important reference points, along with *Development matters*. Practitioners state that they use these documents as the basis for planning, and utilise a range of other resources, including commercially produced materials, to provide activity ideas. Some groups (childminders and before/after school clubs) were less likely to use non-statutory EYFS resources to support planning.

The content and level of demand of the early learning goals and *Development matters* statements are strongly supported by practitioners overall. Between 72 per cent for CLL and 89 per cent for physical development (PD) agreed that the statements and goals were appropriately pitched. However, a significant minority of practitioners expressed a number of concerns relating to particular areas of learning, with PSED, CLL, PSRN, and knowledge and understanding of the world (KUW) drawing the most comment. Practitioners who did express concern about the level of demand of these areas of learning were more likely to work in provision for children in the later stages of the EYFS. A significant minority of practitioners

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were concerned that some of the early learning goals were being misinterpreted by practitioners and provision was too stretching for some children. Staff working in reception settings were more likely to express these concerns than staff in other forms of provision. Aspects of calculation also drew comment for what was believed to be their overly demanding nature. This aspect in particular, needs to be considered within the context of the findings related to practitioners' understanding and confidence in PSRN.

Practitioners requested greater simplicity and brevity in the *Development matters* statements, and ELGs to help in communications with parents/carers. Although there was widespread support among practitioners for the ELGs and *Development matters* statements, there were some specific requests for revisions in order to clarify the content. This reflects the necessity to establish the appropriate pitch of language to encompass the range and diversity of qualifications and experience held by EYFS practitioners.

In settings where practitioners were confident with their approach, and were supported by the management of the setting, the requirements of the EYFS were fully understood and implemented appropriately. There was a degree of confidence in how to support and extend individual children's learning and development on a practical basis, and in the way that the EYFS supports and enables this. However, there was a concern based on a belief that it had to be documented a certain way to be accessed by external agencies. In some cases this appeared to lead to duplicating planning documents or creating them in order to meet external demands. There was also widespread practitioner concern regarding outward compliance when planning across all areas of the curriculum and assessing outcomes. The question of 'Am I complying with what it should look like?' was prevalent among all types of providers.

Delivery

Across the areas of learning, practitioners felt that they maintained a balance between adult-led and child-initiated activities, although there was some variation. PD, PSED and creative development (CD) were viewed by practitioners as being more readily suitable for child-initiated activity, while practitioners stated that PSRN featured more adult-led activities than other areas. Again, this needs to be considered within the context of the findings related to practitioners' understanding and confidence in PSRN.

Research evidence indicates the effectiveness of provision that maintains an appropriate balance between child-led and adult-led activities. Child-initiated activities help to develop children's interpersonal skills and their sense of social responsibility. Adult-led activities, on the other hand, support the development of skills and memorisation.

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In general, across all areas of learning, effective settings enable children to plan and initiate their own activities, when appropriate. Practitioners are able to observe the development of play and to interact selectively, to encourage or extend learning.

In terms of any difficulties practitioners experienced in delivering the areas of learning, PSRN was most frequently mentioned as a source of concern. Practitioners stated that they found it difficult to deliver aspects of PSRN through child-initiated activities, and to integrate PSRN with work in other areas of learning. Some requested additional training and cited a personal lack of confidence with mathematics more generally – an issue also identified in the recent Williams review of mathematics education.

There was strong evidence from the literature review that in relation to PSRN, practitioners need to take consistent account of children's existing knowledge and skills, with prior numerical knowledge and cognitive abilities tending to be underestimated. Rather than characterising children's responses as correct or incorrect, practitioners need to encourage discussion of children's approaches and hypotheses in order to address misconceptions.

Research evidence highlights the role of language and social interaction in early numeracy development, for example, through adult and child collaborating to 'co-construct' the curriculum by taking turns to verbalise thinking and extend understanding. Children tended to do better in settings in which pair and group activities stimulate social interaction and discussion, particularly in problem solving.

The literature review identified four factors that are important to PSED:

- child-initiated activities that build independence and self-esteem
- feedback from adults to children to mark progress and developments such as learning new skills or solving problems
- friendships, with children being encouraged to play and make rules together, and to develop social groups through, for example, discussion activities
- clear discipline and behaviour policies, with support for children to be assertive and to talk through their conflicts.

Many practitioners feel strongly about what is expected of young children and whether these goals are implemented in a way that is developmentally appropriate. For CLL, developing reading and writing skills was a focus, with some practitioners reiterating their concern about whether it was beneficial to focus on these skills with young children. The particular issues arising from boys' developmental patterns, and the tendency for them to develop an interest in and capacity for reading and writing at a later stage than many girls, were raised along with the difficulties of supporting children for whom English is an additional language.

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Evidence from the literature review clearly indicates that having adults read to children on a continuing basis plays the most important role in developing the knowledge and skills children need for reading.

Opportunities for adult-child and child-child interactions to support inquiry and shared thinking are important to reading development, according to the research. The collaborative development of play, for example symbolic play, also contributes directly to communication, language and literacy skills.

In relation to KUW, research evidence highlights the need to build on children's prior knowledge through questioning, and to provide a range of stimulating opportunities for exploration and investigation.

The EYFS, as stated above, has been embraced by all practitioners and the principles are embedded in practice across all provider groups. However from all the practitioner responses reception practitioners were more likely to state that they experienced greater difficulties in delivering an appropriate balance of the areas of learning than other practitioner groups. This may point toward perceived tensions between the principles of the EYFS and the practices EYFS practitioners associate with key stage 1. This group also appeared to provide fewer opportunities for outdoor learning in comparison with other practitioners. These findings give a clear sense of what practitioners stated what they believed to be the potentially inappropriate tendencies for reception provision to adopt practices that conflict with the principles of the EYFS.

Outdoor provision across different settings was well established, with all areas of learning being provided for in the outdoor environment. PD, PSED and KUW included outdoor provision, most often while PSRN, CD and CLL were believed to be slightly less conducive to outdoor learning. For some practitioners, there were no barriers to using the outdoor environment and they expressed confidence about addressing all areas of learning equally effectively indoors or out.

Assessment

Research evidence makes clear the importance of assessment in early years education, including initial, diagnostic assessments of children's prior knowledge and conceptual understanding. Effective provision relies on practitioners' ability to assess prior knowledge and to plan appropriate activities and challenges, using their understanding of child development. Evidence strongly suggests that some practitioners need additional support in this area.

Practitioners demonstrated a strong awareness of the key EYFS documents designed to give guidance and support for assessment, using the practice guidance, EYFS Profile and

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framework widely. They used profile online exemplification materials and profile scales reference sheet for occasional support.

Reception staff made more use of the three documents than most other groups, reflecting the statutory requirements for EYFS Profile assessment. Childminders, on the other hand, used EYFS documents to a lesser extent than most other groups, which reflects the finding in relation to planning – it appears that childminders are more likely to be using a range of other resources, rather than working from the main EYFS non-statutory guidance.

Practitioners did not tend to use a proliferation of assessment aids, but among other resources mentioned were learning stories, local authority-produced assessment materials, schemas and commercial products.

Information to support assessment is sought from parents/carers in a number of ways, and the overall picture is of successful consultation with initial meetings, ongoing informal conversations and approaches such as fact sheets and questionnaires being used.

Gathering information about children from their previous settings is now widespread, although some difficulties remain as settings of all kinds sometimes fail to respond to requests for information.

In gathering evidence for their assessments, there tends to be a focus on quick, easy-to-use methods, in line with the aim of making assessments practical and manageable. Practitioners use photographs and make notes of observations on post-its/stickers. Record sheets and profiles are also used as a means of logging observations and evidence, along with a range of 'learning journey' formats.

While practitioners reported their intentions to give equal time to assessing the different areas of learning, they highlighted CLL, PSED and PSRN as a particular focus, echoing the tendencies reported for planning and delivery. For some groups, such as childminders, there was a tendency to challenge the notion of what was perceived to be an expectation of strict accounting for time in this way, as children's learning, and hence practitioners' observations, frequently covered more than one area of learning at the same time.

Practitioners were clear that assessment evidence was sought and collected from both child-initiated and adult-led activities. Some felt that this tended to be accomplished through an even balance, while others undertook more assessment through predominantly child-initiated activities. Some practitioners noted that these proportions would differ based on the availability of staff and the ages of the children concerned.

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Recommendations and next steps

In the light of the findings in this report, the following actions are recommended:

QCDA work in 2009/10

In the light of the findings in this report, the following actions are proposed for QCDA to undertake this year:

- QCDA is working with a number of settings and local authorities to explore the issues raised in the report in more detail. Practitioners in these settings should focus on their everyday experience of implementing the framework and how it supports their practice, as well as identifying issues for development. These settings could also consider effective forms of professional development.
- The issues raised by practitioners will be explored with setting owners, setting managers, head teachers, SIPs, local authority officers and advisors, and Ofsted inspectors. The implementation of new primary curriculum provides a context for these issues to be taken forward.

Supporting the implementation of EYFS

Future monitoring of the EYFS will need to be developed and build on the findings of this year's work. The following issues and activities could be considered as part of QCDA's monitoring programme in 2010/11 and in the department's wider work to support the implementation of EYFS:

- The extent to which practitioners are aware of the flexibility available to them to plan for additional input in particular areas of learning (such as PSED), where this is important to meeting the needs of the children.
- The drivers of effective practice in relation to:
 - developing children's knowledge and awareness of different cultures, religions and communities (within PSED and KUW)
 - supporting early literacy skills for boys, and children learning English as an additional language

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- delivery of PSRN, especially using child-initiated activities, identifying and building on children's existing knowledge, skills and strategies and integrating PSRN with other areas of learning.
- Practitioner knowledge and application of child development principles and how this can best be supported.

Preparation for the 2010 review of the EYFS

The planned review of the EYFS in 2010 provides an opportunity to explore some of the issues raised by practitioners in this report including:

- clarification of the status of the different forms and levels of guidance about accountability and statutory requirements to ensure practitioners are able to maintain a focus on effective provision while also providing evidence for accountability
- ensuring the right balance is struck between consistent national standards and flexibility to meet children's needs
- in any review of the early learning goals and *Development matters* statements consideration of:
 - the extent to which scales representing children's development draw on recent research into children's developmental pathways
 - the scope for further focusing the goals and statements on the key aspects of learning
 - the extent to which goals and statements use language which is as clear and accessible as possible bearing in mind the range of EYFS audiences.

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