

could do better

Grethe Hooper Hansen and Richard House of Early Childhood Action offer another perspective on the revised EYFS...

The Open Eye campaign which, since 2007, has challenged key aspects of England's statutory Early Years Foundation Stage was greatly disappointed by the newly revised EYFS framework published by the DfE in March. We see our role as acting on behalf of practitioners who, if they wish to survive, are forced into compliance by pressure from Ofsted to fall in with mandatory, centrally imposed policy prescriptions, and cannot step out of line or express what they really feel about early years policy; this is clearly evident from letters received since 2007.

To begin by giving credit where it is due, the new EYFS framework does, as was promised, reduce the number (but not the severity) of the early learning goals, which does ease some of the bureaucratic burden on practitioners; it continues to sustain the universally welcomed four themes and principles; and it also explicitly acknowledges the importance of personal, social, emotional, physical and language development in small children.

However, the revised EYFS falls far short of what we had hoped for from pre- and post-election government rhetoric. It not only continues to preserve the 'schoolification' that should never have been imposed on the sector, but it intensifies it into what threatens to be a wholly data-driven 'audit culture' agenda, which has more to do with adult anxieties and political public relations than it does with young children's wellbeing. Through its frequent use of the word "must", we might justifiably rename it "the mustification of early childhood".

Own goals

A major bone of contention is the numeracy and literacy goals, made more demanding than before, given a 'Progress Check' for two-year-olds (risking the pathologising of children at age two) and an 'expected' developmental level for children to have reached at the end of the Reception year, when some children are almost a year younger than the oldest in the group. In reality, the massive diversity of young children's development makes nonsense of any attempt at normalisation.

The prospect of practitioners spending time with clipboard lists and watching children through profile-driven eyes horrifies our wise early years colleagues overseas. In leading countries such as Germany and Finland, the sector is actively protected from cognitive work, which does not begin until age 6-7. Outside the UK, providers defer to Jean Piaget, whose research (in common with Rudolf Steiner's pedagogy) showed that cognitive functions, if not artificially awakened, do not become significantly available to children before the age of 6-7. Prior to that, nature has other plans: ensuring physiological development and building the subcortex of the brain (through self-directed play, feeling, fantasy, imagination and exploration), from which the neocortex grows. The 20th century's greatest scientist, Albert Einstein, could not read before the age of eight (and some sources say 11 or 12) – but in this country he would have been left feeling a failure and fearing school.

Playing with fire

There exists little corroborative research because, prior to 2007, no government ever thought of forcing pre-school children into statutory quasi-formal learning. Before introducing the EYFS, the then DCSF commissioned research from the Institute of Education, London, but suppressed it because it failed to support the initiative and showed that early teaching has no effect on improving later literacy skills (revealed by the *Guardian* in July 2008, only after an MP's Freedom of Information Act inquiry). However, empirical research has now emerged from a surprising source: The Longevity Project conducted by Dr Howard Friedman, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California in Riverside, with an eight-decade study of healthy ageing – revealing that "starting formal schooling too early often led to

problems throughout life, and shockingly was a predictor of dying at a younger age. This was true even though the children in The Longevity Project were intelligent and good learners." He comments that "An over-emphasis on formal classroom instruction – studies instead of buddies, or 'staying in' instead of 'playing out' – can have serious effects that might not be apparent until years later". In imposing quasi-formal learning at ever-earlier ages, England's politicians and policy-makers are playing with fire.



about the author

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about the author

Grethe Hooper Hansen was formerly head of SEAL (the Society for Effective Affective Learning), an international organisation founded to explore the pedagogy of Dr Georgi Lozanov and other innovative approaches to learning. She is currently writing a book on a new concept of education based on Lozanov's approach.