



National Education Trust

The UK's Leading Education 'Do-Tank'

The National Education Trust is an independent charitable foundation dedicated to the promotion and sharing of excellent practice and innovation in education

Response to the EYFS Consultation

September 2011

The National Education Trust is committed to tackling inequalities so every child, regardless of social background, has the opportunity to thrive. The National Education Trust are working in partnership with the Department for Education to deliver the Early Years Matter programme.

Five regional networks have been set up to promote the importance of high quality, innovative and creative practice in children's centres and early years settings. We recognise the importance of the Government Programme to extend free early education to all disadvantaged two-year-olds and the key role that childminders, early years settings and children's centres will have in ensuring those children get the best possible start.

The establishment of strong networks, committed to high quality early childhood education and care will produce results. The National Education Trust believes that it is possible to raise standards and improve quality through the sharing of 'What works well' whilst demonstrating how new and innovative ideas can challenge and inspire others to become 'even better'. Quality and standards across the centre, the network and region will improve. A cycle of continuous improvement across the sector will be supported, established and embedded.

Summary of Response to the EYFS Consultation Documents

A single statutory framework for all those working with children under five is necessary to ensure the safety and well being of young children and to provide a wide variety of opportunities for learning and development. In view of the wide diversity of early years provision and practice it is essential for children, their parents and for the community that minimum standards are set down, monitored regularly and inspected.

Greater emphasis is needed in the statutory framework about how children learn (the pedagogy) rather than what they learn (curriculum) and there are missed opportunities to extend the framework and continue the process of active learning, play and exploration for five and six year olds (children in year 1) as in neighbouring countries.

The focus on three prime areas of learning and development – Communication, physical development and social and emotional development will be of benefit to children and families and will help to ensure that children are happy, healthy and sociable when they start in primary school. Formative observational assessments across these three prime areas will help to build a picture of the unique child but also of how that child relates and responds within a community from an early age.

The references to 'what' children should learn across these three areas of learning and development demonstrate a lack of understanding of early child development and should be revised to include the early stages of communication, reading, writing and physical movement.

The introduction of four further areas of learning and development – Literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts and design will build on the three prime areas and provide children with broad and balanced foundation for lifelong learning. Again the references to 'what' children should learn demonstrate a lack of understanding and should be written by early educators who have knowledge and experience of child development.

The new framework recognises and values the expertise within the sector in observational assessment for learning. Whilst it is entirely appropriate to reduce the burden of paperwork, it is important that clear guidance is given about both formative and summative assessment. A summative assessment somewhere between 24 and 36 months serves no purpose. It will only be of value if a universal assessment tool is used at a specific stage of development, and only if there is a moderation process and a way of collating and comparing the data regionally and/or nationally. The costs of implementing such a system will need to be considered carefully.

An early language assessment could be introduced at relatively low cost which would provide a way of identifying children at risk of delay, and a way of tracking the progress of children involved in early intervention programmes and showing impact.

The National Education Trust is concerned that if the EYFS profile is based on the 17 Early Learning Goals, it is no longer valuable for schools. The Early Learning Goals are too broad and too vague to identify next steps in learning. Children at risk of delay or with SEN will not be identified and the aims of the Government in terms of early identification and early intervention will not be met. The cost of collecting this profile data from maintained schools, free schools and academies will be significant – new systems for submission to the DFE will need to be set up in each free school and academy, whilst arrangements for moderation by an independent body will be needed across all types of school to ensure accuracy. Further clarification is needed on the content and use of summative assessments, the moderation process and the systems for submission to DFE. We would recommend further consideration of assessment and reporting across the Foundation Years.

Use of the term 'School readiness' demonstrates and perpetuates the idea that the sole purpose of early education is to become 'ready' for school. As schools diversify and leadership models change, there is a risk that school readiness will be interpreted in many different ways which will be damaging to both children and families. The dispositions and attitudes needed for lifelong learning should receive greater emphasis in the document. The framework and any publicity should clearly state that children will become 'healthy, happy, communicative, sociable, curious, active and ready for lifelong learning'.

Additional supporting comments

The National Education Trust is committed to improving quality and raising standards across the Foundation Years. The new statutory framework must be introduced alongside a new funding system if it is to ensure the safety of the most vulnerable children and improve opportunities for learning and development.

Despite significant investment in early childhood education and care in recent years there is frustration that there continues to be a lack of understanding about the reasons for investing. There is a lack of urgency in spite of the the growing bank of research which supports early as opposed to late intervention. When 71% of children's services are facing significant cuts in budget it is vital that high quality early education is given high priority. The reality in many regions is that early years budgets have been cut, children's centres and nursery schools are closing and the most vulnerable families are unable to access good quality early education.

In the past, grant funding was not necessarily directed where it was needed most, the reputation of early childhood educators was tarnished following reports about funding wasted on large projects which had little or no measureable impact. Grants had to be spent within strict time limits and this prevented long term planning and strategic direction. It is now time for specialists in the field of early education to demonstrate the importance of early childhood education as an investment for the future.

The First Five Years Fund www.ffyf.org provides a good model of how this might be achieved, but it will only be effective if it is led by an independent body, which is able to influence both the public and private sectors. This is, in effect, the Early Intervention Foundation described by

Graham Allen in his report 'Early Intervention : Smart Investment, Massive Savings.
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/earlyintervention-smartinvestment.

A framework for the Foundation Years must be introduced alongside investment in early as opposed to late intervention to ensure quality and standards across the sector. The Early Intervention Grant allocated to Local Authorities to address the underlying problems which can have such a negative impact on children's future happiness, attainment and success is not ring fenced and as such can and will be used to cover anything from potholes in roads to public sector redundancies. Greater clarity is needed about how the early intervention grant is being spent and how it's impact will be monitored.

The National Education Trust is committed to the 'Early Years Matter' programme as a way of encouraging further debate and discussion about the value of early childhood education and early intervention. All Government ministers are invited to visit the early years settings and centres involved in the programme, to participate in NET seminars and debates or to join us in sharing excellent and innovative practice.

The National Education Trust would welcome further opportunities to contribute to parliamentary discussions and reviews on early childhood. We are able to draw on the views of leading thinkers, researchers and educators who are all committed to promoting excellent practice and innovation in education.

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