

# Learning for life

Critical of the new Early Years Foundation Stage, Dr Richard House puts forward his idea of an appropriate early learning environment



In 2000 I wrote a detailed textual critique of the Government's *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS), soon to be replaced by the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) this September. The CGFS, I argued, embodied an ideology of early learning which is mechanistic, over intrusive, control and assessment obsessed, hot-housing driven, 'adult centric' and unnecessarily over stimulative of young children's experience. I suggested that such an early years regime may be doing untold damage to a generation of young children – the effects of which may well be lifelong, and research into which is an urgent necessity.

All that has happened since has, sadly, merely confirmed the concerns I expressed then. In this article I will focus on just one aspect of the childhood debate – children's early learning environment – and just why it is so important for young children to have an informal early experience free of 'adult-centric' anxieties and practices, and with the unhurried time and space just 'to be' in relation with themselves and with their world.

The notion of 'developmental appropriateness' is one that lies at the heart of early years practice – but it can

be one of those fuzzy terms which begins to lose its special meaning through (political) over use. For me, 'developmental appropriateness' is a notion firmly rooted in a principled and defensible view about what kinds of learning experiences are enabling, and which are harmful, for young children.

## The 'Open EYE' campaign and the EYFS

I have been directly involved in the Open EYE campaign since its launch last November. Open EYE ([www.savechildhood.org](http://www.savechildhood.org)) strongly challenges the Government's new EYFS legislation in terms of its compulsorily imposed early learning goals, which will apply to children across all settings. The campaign has gone from strength to strength, with a 'top 20' Downing Street petition which already has nearly 7,000 signatories, a great deal of media coverage, a major international conference in February attended by 200 delegates, and ongoing contact with shadow ministers and the parliamentary process at a high level. Our campaign is also coinciding with a rush of media and research reports about the harm that the testing and 'audit culture' is doing to our children.

Open EYE is non-party political, and

does not represent any particular educational philosophy. Members and supporters come from a range of opinion across the political and educational spectrum. Our challenge to the EYFS has come rather late in the day, and there are a number of reasons for this: a degree of complacency, perhaps, and kind of 'sleepiness' – many early years workers/practitioners aren't naturally political animals. We also know of many mainstream practitioners who had no idea that the EYFS was a compulsory framework until they heard from, or about, Open EYE! Also, only at a late stage was the possibility of exemption for settings based on pedagogical philosophy withdrawn by the Government.

## 'Developmentally appropriate' experience

'Open Eye' has set out a detailed document outlining its points of concern about EYFS – and below are excerpts from that document relating directly to the question of over-formal early learning:

*'...We are very concerned that the literacy goals are both compulsory and, we believe, developmentally*



inappropriate, including the compulsion to use a particular reading and writing scheme. It seems inevitable that these goals and practices will “filter down” to the under 5s – indeed, this is already happening in many settings. There are major concerns as to whether this kind of cognitive learning is developmentally appropriate for young children; and there exists convincing research which strongly suggests that it isn't.

‘...the literacy goals represent an acceleration of reading and writing skills before a suitable foundation for these skills has been established. Most importantly, disadvantaged children [including children with special needs] are the most likely to benefit from an unhurried preparatory experience as a foundation for formal literacy learning... [It is disadvantaged children] who [most] need a solid foundation in socialisation, listening and speaking skills, and fine motor skills, before proceeding to the demands of reading and writing....’

‘...Much has been made of the “play-based” nature of the EYFS framework. We believe that the notion of play used in EYFS is one that has lost its true meaning, being narrowly “adult centric”, and seriously neglecting the subtleties of truly authentic imaginative play with its attendant rewards. For many holistic educators, to speak of “directed” or “structured and purposeful” play is not to speak of play at all...’

‘...We... believe that the early years constitute a very delicate and sensitive period in which the values of simple care, quality attachment and non-possessive

love should be paramount...It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to retain the simple ‘relational’ values of care, attachment, attentiveness and love as core underpinnings to early years practice if the overweening bureaucratic demands of the new EYFS are not, at the very least, significantly trimmed back. We believe that early childhood experience is the very last place where “audit culture” values and practices should hold sway.

‘...A mindset of observation and assessment saturates the new framework. It is claimed that it is only 5 year olds who will be subject to the assessment process; yet we all know from experience elsewhere in the schooling system that the very existence of an assessment or testing apparatus at a given age has direct consequences for children significantly below that age, as settings “drill” or prepare their children for the assessment procedure. This “filtering down” of assessment pressures always occurs, and there is no reason to believe that it will not happen with the EYFS profiling process.

‘...One consequence of this is the premature “waking-up” of children into adult-like consciousness well before it is appropriate; and this acceleration into needless awareness of adult expectation further generates anxiety. This will be particularly so in environments when imaginative, child-initiated play has been curtailed, with its constant opportunities for self-determined learning and the self-esteem which arises from discovering that “I can do it” rather than “I might fail”.

‘...A utilitarian approach dominates the EYFS guidance throughout, which

verges on a kind of “developmental obsessiveness”, and which is anti-time, and quite contrary to any reverential or spiritual dimension to early childhood experience. The open, flexible attentiveness of the early years practitioner is paramount, but there is a real danger that an awareness of the profile assessment and LEA targets will come to dominate and influence practice and the mood of practitioners...’

### The problem with over-formal learning

What we believe to be ‘over-formal’ learning can take a number of forms, including an adult-imposed concern with deliberately introducing children to literacy and numeracy at pre-school ages (as opposed to it happening in a seamless, *unselfconscious* way); an adult-driven guiding of children’s (so-called) play to produce ‘outcomes’ that adults are requiring; and an assessment- and planning-obsessed attitude, encapsulated by the term ‘audit culture’, that interferes with practitioners’ capacity just to be in healthy, unmediated and undistorted relationship with their children. There is also a kind of ‘developmental obsessiveness’, in which practitioners are forced to think about children in an anxiety-fuelled, relentlessly ‘developmental’ way, which constricts the space for children just to be (from psychoanalysis, we know that children – especially young children – are deeply affected and impinged upon by the ways in which we adults actually think about them).

Holistic educators, on the other hand, believe that young children learn best through a combination of physical movement and activity and *unintruded-upon* free play and imitation. The ideal environment is an *unhurried* and family-like one of care and warmth where there is a predictable rhythm gently but consistently ‘framing’ their overall experience, and where children learn about living an ordered domestic life by fully participating (according to their capabilities) with cooking, cleaning, gardening, making beautiful and useful craft products, and in celebrating the festivals and rhythms of the seasons. Singing, song and story are also seen as central to such experiences – and we believe that it is these kinds of experience that give the appropriate

foundation for more formal learning when children are gradually introduced to it at a later age. Not only is there no need to rush or guide children into quasi-formal learning at these tender ages – no matter how well camouflaged – but in the longer run, all the evidence shows it to be harmful and counterproductive.

Holistic educators are also centrally concerned with what can be termed 'pedagogical subtlety', and the care of the young child's developing and still-vulnerable senses. Far ahead of his time, Rudolf Steiner argued that it is commonly subtle experiences, and what he called 'the imponderables', which are most important in these tender early years. This view is entirely consistent with the psychoanalytic idea that young children's early learning needs to occur *unselfconsciously*, rather than in a conscious, overly adult, cognitive way. This is a central reason why holistic educators deliberately refrain from bombarding children with questions about what they are doing, why they're doing what they're doing, and from giving them the responsibility of making endless choices between what, to them, is a bewilderingly complicated range of options. Making conscious, discerning choices is a highly complex process that requires an *adult-like ego consciousness* which young children simply do not yet possess – and it is positively cruel, verging on the abusive, to treat children like 'mini-adults' in this way, as if they did possess these capabilities. Recent neuroscientific research is also confirming that young children's senses develop in a holistic way, so systematically to skew learning towards the cognitive in an unbalanced manner is to risk distorting the healthy development of the child's senses.

There is indeed a wider and toxically pervasive tendency in modern technological society to treat children as 'mini-adults', rather than deeply understanding children's intrinsic nature and the quality of their consciousness, and then only from such an understanding, making informed and discerning decisions about how to relate with them. As we all know, some adults thankfully have this capacity quite naturally – and we also know that children have an amazing 'nous' for perceiving such adults and making a beeline for them! But sadly, many more adults don't naturally possess these child-attuned qualities, and worse, they don't know that they don't, so they

proceed to treat children as mini-adults without realising that that's what they are doing. And worse still, the kind of effects that the new EYFS will have on practitioners' attitudes and practices cannot fail to make this even worse – because a substantial part of the compulsory guidance actually makes it impossible for practitioners not to do this if they are going to 'roll out' and 'deliver' the EYFS in the way that the Government is insisting.

### And finally

Young children, then, need time and space just to *be* – they need the kind of experiences which are now under systematic threat from the hyperactively busy audit culture which now threatens to engulf early childhood experience, with its almost manic 'development obsessiveness'. As the authority on children's well-being Steve Biddulph said in a special address to our recent Open EYE conference, 'Any attempt to force or structure learning in the under-fives actually backfires. It's like ripping open a rose bud to get it to bloom.'

The central problem with quasi-formal learning is that it is developmentally inappropriate – not least because it is harmfully skewed towards the cognitive and away from the kind of learning where the young child's body and developing *will* can and should be taking the lead. Physical development is the foundation during the first seven years of a child's life, and to divert the child's growing energies into overly cognitive, quasi-formal learning at this stage is to put at risk the child's healthy physical development.

Under 'quasi-formal cognitive learning' I also include information and communications technology (ICT). As I write, psychologist Dr Aric Sigman is strongly challenging the way in which the new EYFS imposes engagement with televisual technology on toddlers at what are absurdly young ages (mini-adulthood raising its ugly head again) (see 'Technology for toddlers' scheme risks creating a screen-addict generation', *The Times*, 3 May). We entirely support Sigman's call for an early years 'buffer zone' that would ban all electronic media in order to protect young children's developing brains.

We need a far deeper awareness about the ways we treat our children, and the often unconscious and unaware assumptions we make about them. If, for example, we 'structure' their play, or



we deliberately introduce notions of literacy and numeracy into young children's minds and worlds, we are making them self-aware of their learning long before this is necessary or appropriate. We are treating them as 'mini-adults' by projecting our own world on to them, and dragging them into adult consciousness, rather than leaving them in their dream-like, unselfconscious way of being, trusting that they will quite naturally emerge into progressively more adult consciousness as a natural developmental process when they are ready.

Perhaps one of our greatest challenges raising and working with children is to be aware of and contain our own anxiety, so that we don't unwittingly project it on to our children and then leave them to sort out the toxic consequences. And perhaps those who need to do this most of all are politicians and policy-makers, who at one malign legislative stroke have the power to affect a whole generation of children. **S**

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