

# **SUBMISSION OF EVIDENCE**

## **The Open EYE Campaign responds to the Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum by Sir Jim Rose.**

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### **SUMMARY**

In this submission, we argue that the Rose Report on primary education impacts the pre-school early childhood realm with wrong-headed and politically expedient recommendations that have no evidence base, and which should be challenged and resisted. As well as being critical, however, Open EYE wishes to propose constructive alternatives that take account of leading-edge early-years thinking – proposals which are in young children's best developmental interests, and which are eminently achievable and practicable, given the political will to embrace such proposals.

### **WHAT JIM ROSE SAYS ABOUT THE EARLY YEARS**

Professor Jim Rose's report proposes a new curriculum based on six areas of learning to tie in with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and which, it argues, will enable a smoother transition between early years and primary school. The report also proposes to abolish staggered entry into primary schools, arguing that summer-born children should start reception class in the September after they turn four years of age (though it does also say that some children should attend part-time). The report draws upon research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies which concluded that there was an education penalty for children with birthdays in August who start school in the September after they turn five, because they do less well at school, and are also slightly less likely to go to university.

### **BACKGROUND**

The remit of the original interim report for the Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum was centrally about the primary sector; however, the final report does contain some direct ventures into the early-years sector that deserve critical examination. It is crucial, first, to disentangle the kind of informed critical analysis offered in this submission from the ill-disguised, politicised propaganda contained in what a *Times Educational Supplement* leader rightly referred to as 'hysterical press reporting' by congenitally anti-government newspapers and commentators,<sup>1</sup> who would have found a way of rubbishing whatever Sir Jim had proposed in his report.

There are certainly some aspects to the final report that are encouraging from Open EYE's standpoint – for example: giving attention to the 'bloated' primary curriculum and to the importance of oracy; Rose's noble concern to free up the primary-school system from prescriptive control; the welcome emphasis (taken at face value) on play in the primary sector; and the explicit attention given to the question of children's social and emotional well-being. However, there are three key aspects of the final report that deeply concern Open EYE, which we discuss below under the headings of: The Indefensibly In-tact EYFS Literacy Requirements; The Question of School Starting Age; and The Place of Information Technology in the Curriculum.

### **1. Indefensibly Left In-tact: The EYFS Literacy Requirements**

In a Press Notice dated 30 June 2008 and titled 'SIR JIM ROSE TO REVIEW GOALS ON EARLY LITERACY'<sup>2</sup> it stated that Children's Minister Beverley Hughes today announced that Sir Jim Rose has been asked to review two of the milestones set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage as part of his review of the primary curriculum. The review will now consider whether two statements on developing literacy strike the right balance between giving children a good start in literacy skills and supporting a smooth transition from the early years into Key Stage 1 of primary school.' Although we should emphasise that Open EYE maintains there to be other, similarly questionable learning goals in the EYFS framework, the two specific goals under question here are:

- Use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words;
- Write their own names and other things such as labels and captions, and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation.

We were told that The Primary Review will look at how appropriate these aims are for children around age five, *when evidence shows it is realistic for children to achieve them*, and how we make sure that children progress well, and smoothly, between the EYFS and Key Stage 1 in primary school.’ (our italics) In a footnote, we are further told that ‘These statements are already contained in the existing Foundation Stage, and evidence from Foundation Stage Profile data shows that 46% of children already achieve the first of these, and 30% achieve the second, even before the EYFS comes into effect. Sir Jim’s review of the primary curriculum is due to report by the end of March 2009.’ Minister Beverley Hughes is also quoted thus: ‘We have always said that we will keep the EYFS under review, which is why I have asked Sir Jim Rose to look at two of the early learning goals on children’s literacy at around the age of five, <sup>3</sup> and report on how well they support a smooth transition into Key Stage 1 of primary school.’ (our italics) The media fanfare about a so-called government ‘climb-down’, with which much of the media did indeed greet Minister Hughes’ announcement, only served to camouflage and obscure the degree of grudging equivocation contained in the announcement. In the above italicised text, we can see the DCSF’s misleading biasing already in evidence – with their telling us, reassuringly, that ‘...evidence shows it is realistic for children to achieve [the goals]’. To the contrary, any dispassionate analysis of the available research evidence would view this as a statement verging on the disingenuous, and this bland assertion is offered without any substantiation.

Our own review of the research evidence shows quite clearly that current evidence does not *begin* to support the casual assertion made by the minister here.<sup>4</sup> Note also that Sir Jim was not asked by the minister to review *the developmental appropriateness of the goals in the context of children’s development* (which Minister Beverley Hughes could easily have requested), but merely to ‘report on how well they support a smooth transition into Key Stage 1 of primary school’. In this single statement, the ‘schoolifying’ agenda cascading into the early years is exposed for all to see – with all that seems to matter to the minister being ‘a smooth transition to schooling’ for young children, and not the developmental appropriateness *per se* of the EYFS learning goals.

In the light of this ministerial ambivalence, equivocation and subterfuge with the facts, perhaps it should come as no surprise that there was no mention in Jim Rose’s interim report of the two writing goals that Minister Hughes (reluctantly) agreed should be reviewed by Sir Jim. At the time of publication of the interim report in December 2008, over five calendar months had elapsed since the government’s announcement of a review of the controversial EYFS learning goals. One can only question why an issue felt to be so urgent by the many thousands who signed our Downing Street petition has been treated with such a lack of urgency – not to mention the similar concerns raised by the government’s own early-years Advisory Group, one of whom was quoted in The Times on 20.7.09 as saying. “*I think it was probably aspirational ... I don’t think it came from actual solid evidence that the majority of children could achieve that. The evidence has shown that most children can’t.*” The cacophony of voices across the sector, both in the press and across the wider media, together with the Downing Street petition calling for the Learning and Development Requirements of the EYFS Statutory Framework to be relaxed to ‘guidance’ only, would seem to have warranted such urgency. Such a change would also ensure that any potential harm rendered by other developmentally inappropriate goals would be avoided.

We support and share the recommendations of the DCSF Select Committee, which met on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2009 (and to which discussion Open EYE contributed with its own evidence) to consider the National Curriculum, with their conclusions and recommendations being as follows:-

### **The Early Years—getting the entitlement right**

7. We welcome the Department’s decision to review two of the communication, language and literacy Early Learning Goals within the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Nevertheless, we draw the Department’s attention to the near universal support for the reconsideration of the Early Learning Goals directly concerned with reading, writing and punctuation. (Paragraph 65)

8. We recommend that the Early Learning Goals directly concerned with reading, writing and punctuation be removed from the Early Years Foundation Stage pending

the review of the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2010. (Paragraph 66)

9. We recommend that, through its review of the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2010, the Department takes the opportunity to evaluate whether the statutory framework as set out in *Setting the Standards for Learning and Development and Care for Children from Birth to Five* is too prescriptive and too detailed. (Paragraph 67)

10. We recommend that the Rose Review does not pursue its recommendation that entry into reception class in the September immediately following a child's fourth birthday should become the norm. (Paragraph 69)

If these widely shared concerns are indeed valid, then many thousands of young children across England are at risk and are quite possibly being damaged by legally enforced and developmentally inappropriate early literacy learning. When this is added to the highly equivocal attitude to the review of the goals, as described above, this marked lack of priority that Jim Rose and the government have given to this grave issue surely speaks volumes about their degree of openness to amending the statutory framework.

## 2 The Question of School Starting Age

From the report's accurate observation that summer-born children entering reception are commonly treated as immature in comparison with their older classmates, giving rise to lack of confidence and self-regard with consequential limits on others' expectations and their own, it is a quite incomprehensible non-sequitur for Sir Jim then to recommend entry into reception class for four-year-olds in the September following their fourth birthday; and this extraordinary recommendation has probably received by far the most critical coverage in the media and the professional journals – and, in our view, appropriately so; not just recently but over at least a decade. As many authorities have pointed out in commentaries on the final report, why has Sir Jim not recommended that summer-born four year-olds should start school in the September following their *fifth* birthday, thus avoiding such potential negative effects? The 1870 Act of Parliament made this clear, with its compulsory school-starting age set at 5, not 4. Moreover and most tellingly, the Government's own Early Education Advisory Group also recommended a later start to primary school in its recent report.<sup>5</sup>

The actual rationale given in Sir Jim's report for summer-born children starting school in the September after their fourth birthday is that, based on sound research, such as the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE), and plans to provide earlier access to nursery provision, he proposes a single point of entry to reception class in the September immediately following a child's fourth birthday. Yet the EPP(S)E research, whatever else it might prove, does not provide any evidential rationale whatsoever for this specific policy proposal. On the contrary, its conclusion that 'high quality nursery experience' has proven benefits well into the primary years, should make the case for extending the time children stay in nursery, rather than cutting it short through questionable proposed government policies. The only other rationale given – that of 'plans to provide earlier access to nursery provision' – is entirely to do with political expediency. It's no coincidence that within days of the Rose interim report coming out back in December 2008, the government's welfare reforms followed, with the extraordinary proposal for 'preparing' single mothers of one-year old children for going back to work<sup>6</sup> – and with this, in turn, coinciding with a new Unicef study showing that full-time childcare for very young children is unquestionably harmful.<sup>7</sup>

It is quite clear, then, that **there exists no reliable evidence base underpinning this far-reaching recommendation about school starting age**, and it is difficult not to conclude that it is driven by factors other than the age-appropriate needs of young children. There does exist, however, considerable research evidence that points towards a very different recommendation for school starting.<sup>8</sup> With practitioners routinely arguing that it could have a substantially negative impact on children whose development makes them unsuited to the more formal world of learning that characterises many reception classes, we must foreground the fact that the development of children within the EYFS framework will vary hugely from child to child. Any assessment of summer-born children's learning will inevitably show them to be significantly 'behind' some of their peers; yet this will in no way be an indicator of poor teaching: rather, it will simply be the result of developmental variability and varying biological growth. As one early-years commentator has written, 'The planned single point of entry to reception classes will only be in children's interests if we stop expecting all children to achieve arbitrary learning goals like writing a full sentence by the end of the summer term.'<sup>9</sup>

Various mainstream early years' experts have also raised concerns that big classrooms and an academic environment would be 'too much too soon', especially for summer-born children. There are, and always have been, a large number of very concerned parents who fear the harm an early start to school will have on their children; but parents' views seldom if ever seem to be factored into policy decisions. There are also widespread concerns that Rose's school-starting recommendation could have major repercussions for private, voluntary and independent (PVI) and maintained nursery providers. If all children in England were to begin school in the September after they turned four, it seems certain that many nurseries, in those Local Authorities that have retained several points of admission to reception class, would be forced to close – thus leading to a major diminution of the diversity of provision that has historically characterised and been such a strength of the sector. Moreover, a mix of three and four year olds is arguably integral to a setting's quality.

Children need extended time in a setting with as few transitions as possible. Forcing children to transfer into a large reception class, when they may not yet feel fully confident in the more intimate nursery environment, is likely to result in anxiety and damage to self esteem, especially when a true developmental foundation is being formed. Open EYE believes that in such a process, young children will in effect be 'uprooted', and then – worse still – re-planted in inappropriate learning soil. All in all, then, there are both developmental-pedagogical *and* diversity/viability arguments which overwhelmingly suggest that the unintended consequences of Sir Jim's school-starting proposal would be potentially catastrophic for the sector and, therefore, a grossly irresponsible policy change.

### **3 The Place of Information Technology (ICT) in the Curriculum**

There must also be major concerns about computer and ICT skills becoming 'central pillars' of primary education – just at a time when the speed at which children are growing up is being widely recognised as a major cultural concern. It is also likely that too much screen-based technology at an early age can interfere with some children's attentional skills and their ability to acquire literacy skills, and indeed with *all* children's capacity to read for pleasure (which ensures the practice necessary for true literacy). The rationale that the Rose final report gives for this extension of ICT – that children of this age are already computer literate, so why not simply acknowledge, work with and reinforce this trend? – is expediency of the worst kind.<sup>10</sup> To the contrary, the fact that young children are so immersed in a technology that a great deal of research is now showing is harmful in all manner of ways to their development should be an argument for radically *reducing* it in the schooling system, and for giving children positive empowering experiences of the world that are real and relational, rather than 'virtual' and technological. Given what, to many, is the outrageous, legally enshrined presence of ICT in the EYFS framework,<sup>11</sup> this latest embracing of ICT for young children again suggests that cultural expediency is the driver for school policy making, and not the developmentally appropriate well-being of young children. Finally, we can also be certain that the extension of ICT in the primary schooling sector will, before long, cascade down to the pre-school sector, as routinely happens with such 'innovations'.

#### **THE RELEVANCE OF THE ALEXANDER PRIMARY REVIEW - FEBRUARY 2009**

One strong conclusion of Professor Robin Alexander's Primary Review curriculum report is that the primary curriculum should build on the Early Years Foundation Stage, rather than be impinged upon by downward pressure from secondary-school level. Some commentators argue that this could have positive effects at reception-class level, where the dissonance between EYFS and Key Stage 1 makes life exceedingly difficult for teachers; and, further, that 'It would make such sense to build from the earliest years upwards, enabling the EYFS to be fully implemented to the end of the stage and enriching the education of all primary school children with a seamless move into Key Stage'.<sup>12</sup> This latest report was compiled from hundreds of written submissions, meetings and surveys of published research, and it found that many teachers were indeed concerned about a 'collision' between the EYFS and the primary curriculum, particularly during reception year. While Open EYE broadly and warmly welcomes Robin Alexander's latest curriculum report for its clear-headed discussion of ethics in education and the formation of critical thinking, the report might not emphasise as strongly as Open EYE would like the view that thinking and the cognitive function are indissolubly interrelated with, and are founded upon, the senses and emotions – or, expressed neurologically, cortical on sub-cortical. This foundation for cognition and intellectual activity is activated and then gradually established during the primary school years, and is an experiential learning process that needs to be carefully nurtured through artistic activity, handwork, physical activity, the establishment of community, and very sensitive interaction with children. The latest report does certainly go some way towards recognising this, and hopefully the final report, to be published later in 2009, will give this issue the prominence we

strongly believe it warrants. Certainly, *the argument for such learning activities predominating is even stronger in the case of pre-formal learning environments.*

While this latest report has little to say about the early-years sector, we understand that the final report is likely to give major attention to the early-years sphere, as the foundation for subsequent learning. It will be interesting to see the extent to which Robin Alexander's final report identifies the problems with EYFS that Open EYE and an increasing number of early-years authorities have identified. Certainly, any argument that primary education should build upon the mandatory requirements of the EYFS entails very real dangers – and not least, of effectively sanctioning the target-driven mechanistic thinking that informs at least some of the framework.

## **COMMENTARY and CONCLUSIONS**

Open EYE believes that young children's great gift is *wonder* – a delight in, reverence for, and desire to know about the pleasurable things they experience and which give satisfaction. The recently published Children's Society report on Good Childhood<sup>13</sup> is quite explicit in recognising the crucial spiritual foundation of children's experience (where 'spiritual' has a very open, 'post-denominational' definition). Early childhood is centrally concerned with learning from experience, with harmonising emotional experience in a living social context, and establishing a life-affirming set of values and basic stance in relation to the world – which foundation then forms the essential basis for the child's healthy development of thinking and intellectual activity. Children's unselfconscious moral development is also centrally based on their experience and appreciation of beauty, and their capacity to empathise with the feelings of others. In the early years, the carer's and the practitioner's/teacher's task is to help children build, or rebuild, their worlds of feeling and values, within an intimate social context in which they learn to care for each other and can feel, and empathise with, the pain and hardship of others. Finally, we believe that nature is the best place for early learning – which is why early-years care in Finland takes place largely outdoors.

Referring back to the Rose report, whilst Open EYE warmly welcomes Jim Rose's increased emphasis on play in the early primary years, and his expressed concerns about the testing regime (in which he tellingly goes beyond the strict remit given to him by Minister Ed Balls), there are major concerns about his view that progress is goal related, and the goals of learning must be explicit in order to guide planning and teaching. These are indeed the values and assumptions of the 'New, Audit-Driven Utilitarianism' in education so rightly criticised by Robin Alexander – but these 'audit-culture' values are not only fundamentally incompatible with many of the more laudable aspirations in Jim Rose's report, but their cascading down into the early years is a catastrophe-in-the-making for young children, and threatens to render their early experience deeply age-inappropriate.

It can be argued, moreover, that *any* 'primary review' might well end up missing some crucial points unless it explicitly includes the early years. Pretty much everything that happens in primary education depends on what has occurred in the first five years of a child's life, and so it is a major omission to review primary schooling without including significant consideration of what comes before it – viz. early childhood experiential learning. By leaving the early years to others, Professors Alexander and Rose are both, arguably, failing to realise that primary-schooling experience should be building on *developmentally appropriate beginnings*, and should not be treated in a relatively self-contained way, as if it were not intimately connected with pre-school experience.

In short, Open EYE maintains that any 'primary review' needs to pay close attention to those roots of learning and development which are the bread and butter of children's early years experience. This is just one reason why we passionately believe that the EYFS should be extended to the end of year 1, and become, as far as possible, a seamless continuum, so that children have sufficient unhurried time for establishing a more effective foundation for *subsequent* learning. This, along with our recommendations about the inappropriate literacy-learning goals, the later school starting-age, and the deletion of legally enshrined ICT from the EYFS guidance, is our strongest recommendation to Professor Rose. It is most noteworthy that one of the most senior ex-civil servants in the early years' sector, Lesley Staggs, who had so much influence in the introduction of the original Foundation Stage in 2000, recently wrote a letter to the press that strongly supports much if not all of the points we have made in this submission.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, we might well ask, when are we going to have a policymaking process that puts the developmentally appropriate needs of young children before the needs of the economy, political

expediency and the like? Open EYE believes that the case for a cabinet place for a minister whose exclusive charge is the well-being of young children is getting ever stronger.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. 'Don't take fright at Sir Jim's terms', *TES* editorial, 12 December 2008.
2. 'Sir Jim Rose to Review Goals on Early Literacy', Department for Children, Schools and Families, 30 June 2008, retrievable at: [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2008\\_0133](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0133) (retrieved 13/12/08)
3. A new phrase has crept into statements coming from the DCSF which, in view of the vital importance of avoiding a 'too much, too soon' approach, is deeply worrying: this is the phrase '...children around age five'. When children are being targeted with specific learning goals, this cannot responsibly be defined using terms that are so imprecise as to be essentially meaningless. In practice, the term 'around the age of five' encompasses children as young as four (if summer-born 4 year olds) and others who are nearly six – with such age disparate data then being used to inform the Early Years Profile assessment on which future policy is based. This approach fundamentally misunderstands the huge difference that just a few months can make at this age, let alone well over a year; and it cannot possibly therefore give rise to clarity of judgement in policy-making. (Some children are assessed against the Early Years' Profile whilst still in nursery school, if they turn five years of age before the 30<sup>th</sup> June in their final nursery year.)
4. See Richard House, 'Research – You Can Prove Anything', *Early Years Educator*, 10 (6) (October), 2008, pp. 17–21.
5. See Kim Morrison, Letter to the Editor, 'Rose curriculum report raises many questions', *The Times*, 11 December 2008.
6. 'New benefit rules "too soft on jobless"', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 2008.
7. See 'All-day nurseries can lead to behavioural problems, says Unicef', *Evening Standard*, 11 December. See also Steve Biddulph, *Raising Babies: Why Your Love is Best*, Thorsons, 2006.
8. See E. Sykes, J. Bell and C. Rodiero, *Season of Birth Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990*, University of Cambridge/Cambridge Assessment, 2009.
9. Julian Grenier, 'To the point: Rushed into reception', *Nursery World*, 15 January 2009.
10. It has also not gone unnoticed the extent to which ICT commercial interests are profiting massively from the wholesale penetration of our schools with all the paraphernalia of ICT.
11. See Aric Sigman, 'Does Not Compute: Screen Technology in Early Years Education', Open EYE Special Report, 2008 downloadable at: <http://openeyecampaign.files.wordpress.com/2008/02/doesnotcompute.pdf>
12. 'Editor's view: This review is speaking sense ...', *Nursery World*, 26 February 2009.
13. Richard Layard and Judy Dunn, *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*, Penguin, London, 2009.
14. *Nursery World*, 18 June 2009 .....

### Letter of the week

#### ROSE IS NOT A ROSE

I am writing in response to Beverley Hughes' article in defence of the recommendations of the Rose Review (4 June), intended to reassure the early years sector. It did nothing to reassure me. While there may be much that is to be welcomed by those working in Key Stages 1 and 2, I believe that loud alarm bells ought to be ringing for those who work in the early years.

The recommendations that Ms Hughes was defending fly in the face of the evidence. Goals achieved by 28.3 per cent and 48.2 per cent of children are said to be 'within the grasp of a majority of children', in an attempt to justify retaining them - with the promise of yet more guidance. Given the overwhelming focus on Communication, Language and Literacy Development during the last four years, it is beyond belief that anyone can think the problem is that there is insufficient guidance in this area.

The basis for making a once-a-year intake into school national policy to address what the report describes as the 'penalty which many summer-born children experience' is equally spurious and not borne out by the evidence quoted in the research. The real issue that penalises these children is an assessment system that wants all children to be in the same place at the same time, despite the fact that some are up to a year younger than others.

The review acknowledges the real benefits of high quality pre-school education for children - and then proposes a policy that will deprive summer-born children of up to two terms of what will most benefit them.

Progress made in early years since 1997 is being systematically eroded. It's ironic, really, given that early years was not even part of the remit of the Rose Review. Even more worrying with the review of the Early Years Foundation Stage on the horizon - now I wonder who will be asked to lead that?!

**Lesley Staggs, early childhood consultant**

**\*\*\*End of Evidence\*\*\***