

**UKLA Response to Draft Early Years Foundation Stage
July 2006
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Introduction

Dr. Rosie Flewitt and Dr. Julia Gillen were invited in an individual capacity, as members of the United Kingdom Literacy Association's (UKLA) Early Years Special Interest Group, to represent UKLA during the consultation period for the 2006 draft Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)¹. This report is based on information gathered by Gillen and Flewitt at consultation events hosted by the DfES Primary National Strategy team² and on their reading of the draft EYFS. In this report we comment specifically on the Section entitled 'Communication, Language and Literacy' in the draft EYFS 'Areas of Learning and Development'. We also take into account aspects of EYFS Sections 1 - 5 which inform and support the proposed curriculum for communication, language and literacy.

Draft EYFS Consultation Period

At the consultation events, the overall aim of the draft EYFS was presented as being to create a 'single quality framework' that embraces *Birth to Three Matters*, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* and *National Standards*. The intention of the EYFS is to make existing guidance more accessible to practitioners and to create a firm basis for integrating care and education in a play-based approach.

Practitioners, heads, managers, FE/HE, parents and national organisations have strongly recommended retaining all that is good in the existing documentation, with a re-enforcement of a 'bottom-up' approach, using the holistic approach to child development characteristic of *Birth to Three Matters*. In addition, focussed consultation conducted in a wide range of settings in diverse socio-economic and ethnic communities in four local authorities has revealed that:

- Reception teachers feel that inclusion and diversity should be integral to any new documentation, rather than 'bolt-on', and that links should be made with KS1 literacy and maths frameworks. They were pleased that no changes were being proposed to the Foundation Stage Profile.
- Parents say that children value outdoor play in all forms, a wide range of indoor activities and they place particular emphasis on their friends and 'special' adults in early years settings.
- Parents place particular value on their children's happiness and confidence, the quality of their learning experiences, including outdoor activities and how well staff know their child. Parents feel that activities should be planned and

¹ Details of EYFS consultation documentation and on-line contributions can be found at <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/features/frameworks/consultation/>.

² Early Years Foundation Stage Seminar, London, March 2006, Lead Further and Higher Education Foundation Stage Seminar, East Grinstead, May 2006 and Lead Local Authority Early Years Foundation Stage Seminar, Manchester, June 2006

tailored to individual needs and interests and children should not be 'pressured'. Parents appreciate structure alongside play, good staff/parent relations, professional staff, favourable staff/child ratios, care taken over transitions and the chance to meet other parents.

Draft EYFS Section 3: Areas of Learning and Development³

Section 3.1: This includes a brief statement regarding the role of the practitioner in supporting children's communication, language and literacy (top p14). We strongly recommend extending this statement to include the role of non-verbal communication. Speech or verbal communication is not the only means that children use to communicate and express themselves. They express themselves in many ways, including movement, visual representation and song. Moreover, speech itself is always accompanied by an intricate set of non-verbal signals. Learning how to express one's self appropriately using non-verbal communication is essential to the development of social competence as is the ability to interpret the non-verbal signals of others. We recommend, for example, an extension such as:

A major task for children in the early years is developing their understanding and competence in communication, language and literacy. Children learn to communicate in many ways, not just through words, but also through the many languages of drawing, dancing, rhythm, drama, images, body movement, facial expression and gaze direction. Practitioners must support children's learning and competence in non-verbal and verbal communication in contexts that are meaningful to children, and where there is a genuine reason to communicate. For example, by encouraging children to develop their symbolic representation and creative thinking, their speaking and listening skills, sharing stories, songs and rhymes, all of which help to lay the foundations for beginning to read and write. Practitioners must give children the confidence, opportunity, encouragement, support and disposition to use and express their developing skills in a range of verbal and non-verbal 'languages', in a range of situations and for a range of purposes.

Section 3.2: At the consultation events attended, there was strong opposition to the inclusion of age-related developmental stages as presented in Section 3.2. Although these are described as 'broad and overlapping stages of development', they are premised upon a 'typically' developing child, and take account neither of children with special educational needs nor of social and cultural diversity.

This approach appears to disregard practitioners' clearly stated need for inclusion and diversity to be integral to the document. Whilst it is appropriate for some degree of developmental progression to be indicated, the draft grid format does not appear to respond to practitioners' recommendations, and we strongly recommend that alternative formats should be found.

We suggest that three broad stages of 'Infants', 'Toddlers' and 'Young children' (rather than the current six stages) would be sufficient to highlight key aspects of developmental progression, whilst allowing more scope for respecting children's individual needs, diverse backgrounds and special educational needs. This would also avoid the potential confusion of the terms 'young children', 'very young children' and

³ We have only commented on those aspects of this section that are most relevant to 'Communication, Language and Literacy'

'youngest children' that are currently used, sometimes inconsistently and/or misleadingly, throughout the draft EYFS, and that do not clearly correspond to the current six developmental stages. Detailed recommendations for revising the grids are made later in this report.

We suggest adding 'reflection' to 'planning and resourcing' in the **final paragraph and diagram** on p15, that is:

The on-going cycle of thinking about development and assessing children's progress (development matters), observation and assessment (Look, listen and note), reflecting on practice, planning and resourcing (Reflect, plan and resource) and learning and teaching (Effective practice) ... etc

Section 3.9 Sub-section 'Communication, Language and Literacy' (pp42-58):

The current, draft section on communication, language and literacy consists of 1 ¼ page overview, including statutory 'Requirements', 'What communication, language and literacy means for children' and 'How settings can effectively implement this Area of Development', followed by 15 pages of age-related performance specification grids⁴. Below, we comment on each of these sections in detail.

Requirements: We note that the statutory requirements offer a robust, broad framework for communication, language and literacy.

What communication, language and literacy means for children: This section outlines some key principles underlying the teaching and learning of this area of development. However, it seems to skip backwards and forwards between processes of language development, the importance of becoming a skilful communicator and the role of the practitioner.

We feel that for clarity, to emphasise a 'bottom-up' approach and to link the EYFS with existing documentation, the description of each Area of Learning and Development would be strengthened if direct links were made to the four aspects of Birth to Three Matters which have been placed at the hub of the 'wheel' on p26. This would enable practitioners and trainers to identify clear relationships between each area of learning and development and the principles underpinning the curriculum.

We also strongly recommend more integrated, overt references to:

- the holistic nature of learning
- how children communicate in many different ways, verbally and non-verbally
- the importance of children's and carers' body language and non-verbal responses in the development of children's understanding and vocabulary
- the multi-sensory nature of learning
- the need to build on children's own knowledge and to integrate children's own experiences
- planning for diversity to include learning styles and patterns of learning

⁴ Although as a result of early consultation, the age ranges have been removed from the grids, distinct ages are clearly inferred by the child icons, which are stated as age-related in draft EYFS Section 3.2, p14.

We note that in the current draft document, the terms 'communication', 'language' and 'literacy' are used variously, and that this could lead to confusion. We strongly recommend including clear definitions of these terms to encourage their more consistent use in EYFS. For example, definitions could be presented in a highlighted textbox:

Communication: the joint making of meaning between people through a variety of different verbal and non-verbal modes, such as speech, body movement, gesture, gaze, images, using different media, such as face-to-face interaction, telephones, computers. The ways that these different modes and media are used vary from setting to setting and have cultural values attached. Communication can be one-to-one, as in face to face interaction, or asymmetric, as in TV programmes.

Language: the primary meaning is communication through the exchange of verbalisations. In the early years, the term 'language' is used metaphorically to describe the many different ways that young children communicate, such as through movement, facial expression and gaze, drawing, drama and music.

The term **Literacy** in the early years encompasses all the knowledge, skills and dispositions that children acquire towards spoken, printed, visual and technological 'literacies'. These include, for example, enjoying the excitement, interest and delight of stories and rhymes, becoming familiar with literacies that are valued by their own communities, learning about symbols, numbers and sign systems, becoming familiar with print and developing their skills in new technologies.

Alternative wording for this section is proposed in Appendix A, which makes more explicit some of the ideas expressed in Sections 3.1 – 3.7.

Please also note:

- 'Taking turns' carries different, more general meaning from 'turn-taking', which refers specifically to taking turns during interaction.
- Language development starts as "conversations" between a child and a child's carers and family, with the carers/family interpreting the baby's sounds and responses, and the baby gradually assuming a fuller part in the dialogue. These "conversations" are **central** to young children's language development, not just an "ideal opportunity" as stated in the guidance.

How settings can effectively implement this Area of Development: This section clarifies the role of the practitioner, but we recommend re-ordering some of the items for a more logical flow of aspects that practitioners should bear in mind. There are also some very important omissions, which we strongly recommend should be included:

- games and creative activities to promote children's development in communication, language and literacy, including new technologies

- non-verbal communication and the many different ways that children express themselves
- helping children to strengthen their command of skills that are valued in their home culture

Careful thought has been given to the extended and re-arranged wording for this section proposed in Appendix A.

The Developmental Grids/ Performance Specifications

Overall, and in agreement with the strong opposition to the developmental grids expressed by education practitioners, practitioner trainers and academics working in the early years at the three consultation events that we attended, we feel that the grids in their current format diminish rather than build on the strengths of the existing documentation and Sections 1 – 3.8 of the EYFS. The following points summarise some of our main concerns:

General comments

- The grids are clearly age-related, and we have already heard them termed 'assessment checklists' and even 'performance specifications'! Developmental grids have been shown to encourage a deficit view of learning, therefore if the grids remain as they are, it must be recognised that they will in some instances lead to questionable practice. Extra training will be needed for ALL early years practitioners for the duration of this document to minimise these effects.
- The grids are two-dimensional, following a time-related line of development. As such, they fail to reflect or give guidance on diversity of social and ethnic backgrounds, and of educational needs. The grids do not provide any guidance on supporting the development of an atypically developing child (something which practitioners have specifically requested, as mentioned earlier).
- The grids run counter to the strong principles and the need for reflectivity voiced in current training materials, for example, the DfES-funded, high quality and recently published 'Communicating Matters'. We suggest a more equal balance between 'Notes for Reflection' which encourage practitioners to reflect on their current practice and grids/examples of possible practice.
- The linear nature of the grids implies that some activities enjoyed by the youngest children are not suitable for older children. Although this may sometimes be the case, there is no way in the current format (other than tiresome repetition) to indicate which activities cover all ages, and which are age-specific. (A specific example is the way that in the current draft enjoyment of rhythms and rhymes has 'disappeared' from 'linking sounds and letters' by 40 months contrary to the recommendations of the Rose Report.) This could be overcome by:
 - Sub-dividing the activity columns, one column with purple horizontal divides if they are age-stage specific, and a second column running the whole length of the ages with no horizontal divides if the activities are suitable for the whole range of ages-stages.
 - Reduce the number of 'stages' to three, as suggested above, and for each sub-section, present the information in overlapping circles or rectangles (see Appendix B for possible alternative layouts)

Comments on the Communication, Language and Literacy grids

The grids for *Communication, Language and Literacy* are sub-divided into: Language for Communication; Language for Thinking; Linking Sounds and Letters; Reading; Writing and Hand-writing.

We propose that making a distinction between using language for thinking and language for communicating masks the fact that the action of communicating is transformative, and simultaneously changes thinking. We are also concerned by the distinction between 'writing' and 'hand-writing'. We propose that:

- 'Language for Communication' should be re-named 'Interacting with others'
- 'Language for Writing' should be re-named 'Emergent Writing'
- 'Language for hand-writing' should be re-named 'Preparation for hand writing'

For each sub-section, we suggest that serious thought be given to reducing the number of examples given in the grids, reducing the number of 'stages' (as detailed in Appendix B), and including 'Notes for Reflection' for each sub-section, possibly following the style set by the recently published 'Communicating Matters' training materials. The inclusion of Notes for Reflection would clarify and encourage practitioners to reflect on the principles underpinning each grid sub-section. In addition, such notes could be used by settings as the basis for group reflection on their past and current provision, with a view to improving future provision. We suggest that this could help to avoid the risk of practitioners using the grids as checklists/ tick boxes. We also draw your attention to the following shortcomings/oversights in the grids:

- There is an emphasis on printed forms of literacy, and no attention is paid to the diverse literacies (eg visual and technological) that children of the 21st century are developing and need help to develop for purposes relating to learning.
- There is an emphasis on moving from non-verbal to verbal, whereas it is known that non-verbal communication remains a fundamental part of interaction. Non-verbal communication should be mentioned throughout all the stages.
- Some aspects of communication included in the early stages need to be clearly presented as applicable throughout all stages, eg the use of rhyme and songs.
- There is an imbalance between the substantial attention paid in the later stages of development to learning the formal code for reading and writing and the development of rich language experience recommended by Rose.
- In the later 'stages' there is an absence of the multi-sensory nature of communication and a swift move towards a top-down focus on a more formal teaching of phonics, letter formation etc. Again, those aspects of multi-sensory learning should be present throughout all ages covered by EYFS.
- Direct instruction linking letters to sounds should not be undertaken until professionals are sure that the children involved have acquired, and continue to acquire, rich experiences of language and literacy, including opportunities for them to discover some correspondences for themselves.
- Mark-making, and particularly drawing, as meaning making in its own right and as a precursor to writing appears undervalued, given that drawing is an excellent means of communication and for developing good manual skills for later handwriting. Resources for drawing should be plentiful, should include a variety of writing implements and suitable resources should be available from an earlier age than indicated in current grids.

- Please see Appendix B for an alternative layout to replace the current rigidity of the draft grids.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Dorothy Faulkner (Educational Dialogue Research Unit, The Open University Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology) for her thoughtful contributions to our discussion of the draft documents.

Appendix A: Alternative Wording for Communication, Language and Literacy (pp42-43)

What communication, language and literacy means for children

This area of learning stems from the *Birth to Three Matters* aspect of the child as 'a skilful communicator'. It is through communication that children express their strengths and interests, and experiment with different ways of representing their understandings. Babies respond differently to some sounds and from an early age are able to distinguish sound patterns. They use their voices to make contact and to let people know what they need and how they feel, establishing their own identities and personalities through a range of sounds and non-verbal communication, such as body movements, facial expression, eye contact and hand gesture. When interacting with others, infants practise turn-taking through play and imitation and as language develops, young children learn about conversation, although non-verbal messages remain an important form of communication throughout life.

Communication is a key area of children's holistic development, helping children to gain a sense of self by making sense of and participating in the different social and cultural worlds that they encounter in their lives. To become skilful communicators, infants, toddlers and young children need to be with people who have meaning for them and with whom they have warm and loving relationships, such as their family or carers and, in a group situation, a key person who they know and trust. Parents and immediate family members most easily understand their young children's communications and can often interpret for others. Communicating and being with others helps children to build social relationships, including friendship, empathy and sharing emotions. The ability to communicate helps children to participate more fully in society.

The development and use of communication, language and literacy are at the heart of young children's learning. All children learn best through activities and experiences that engage all the senses. For example, music, dance, rhymes and songs play a key role in language development and are important and enjoyable throughout the early years. Becoming a skilful communicator helps children to become 'competent learners', to grow in confidence, to exchange ideas with others and to begin to take responsibility for their own learning. As children develop speaking and listening skills, they build the foundations for literacy, for making sense of visual and verbal signs and ultimately for reading and writing. Children need lots of opportunities to interact with others as they develop these skills, and to use a wide variety of resources for expressing their understandings, including mark making, drawing, modelling, writing and reading. Learning to communicate is not just about learning language – it is about interacting effectively in the different social and cultural worlds children find themselves in. Mastering this art and becoming a skilful communicator develops both social and intellectual competence, helps children in all aspects of learning and helps them to become strong, happy and healthy.

What communication, language and literacy means for practitioners/ How settings can effectively implement this Area of Learning and Development

To give all children the best opportunities for effective development and learning in communication, language and literacy, practitioners should give particular attention to:

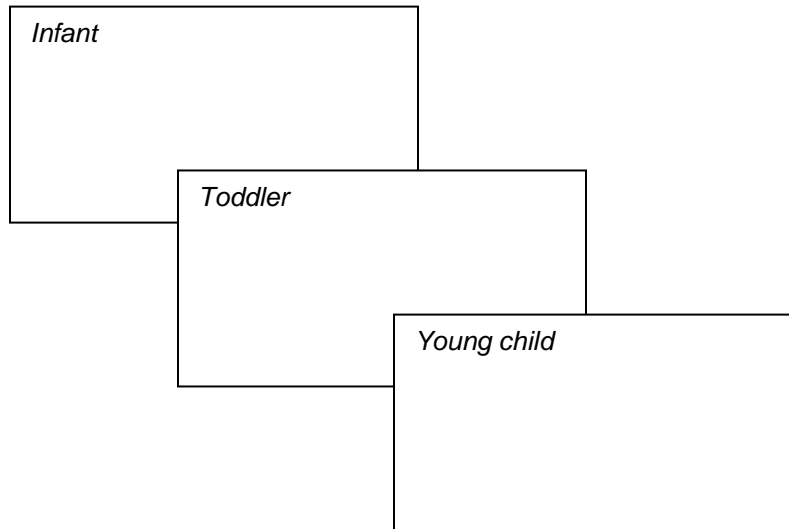
- planning an environment that is rich in signs, symbols, notices, numbers, words, rhymes, pictures, music and songs that take into account children's different interests, understandings and cultures;
- providing opportunities for children to have easy access to resources and to initiate activities that enable them to develop their understandings of numeracy, literacy and creative thinking. These resources include games that use numbers, counting, sounds and letters, poetry, fiction and non-fiction books, art materials and musical instruments, digital equipment, appropriate computer games, resources to stimulate imaginative play, equipment that enables children to express themselves creatively and to explore shape, colour, smells, patterns and quantities such as measuring weights and lengths.
- giving opportunities for linking language with physical movement in action songs and rhymes, role play and practical experiences such as cookery and gardening;
- showing sensitivity to the many different ways that children express themselves non-verbally, and monitoring their own non-verbal behaviour to encourage children to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings through a range of expressive forms, such as body movement, art, dance and songs.
- providing time and relaxed opportunities for children to develop spoken language through sustained conversations between children and adults, both one-to-one and in small groups. Adults should allow children time to initiate conversations, should respect their thinking time and silences and should help them develop the interaction. They should show particular awareness of, and sensitivity to, the needs of children learning English as an additional language, using their home language when appropriate and ensuring close teamwork between bilingual workers so that the children's developing use of English and other languages support each another.
- having realistic expectations of children's developing uses of language and respond to children sensitively, using rich language to help children develop vocabulary and linguistic structures whilst respecting that children learn in different ways and at different rates and that they may use their home languages, local dialects and other forms of communication
- providing opportunities for children to see adults writing and for children to experiment with writing for themselves through making marks, personal writing symbols and conventional scripts from the children's home languages;
- providing opportunities for children to build up relationships with a range of different adults and with children their own age, younger and older, particularly children with special educational needs;
- identifying as early as possible and responding to any signs of language delay or apparent communication difficulty, including seeking parental and professional support, ensuring children's hearing is monitored regularly, and providing information and support for parents; ensuring close teamwork with speech therapists and practitioners, where appropriate;
- planning opportunities for all children to become aware of languages and writing systems other than English, and communication systems such as signing and Braille and for children who use alternative communication systems to develop ways of recording and accessing texts to develop their skills in these methods.
- providing time and opportunities for children to develop their phonological awareness through games, rhymes and language play in small group and individual teaching, when appropriate.

Appendix B: Possible replacement for linear grids

If age-related grids are felt to be needed to avoid inappropriate practice, then use broader frameworks, which would suffice for this purpose eg reduce from 6 stages to 3 stages:

- infant (birth to 18 months)
- toddler (1 to 3 years)
- young child (2 ½ to 6 or entry to Year 1)

This format could then be supplemented by clear examples of different kinds of activities within each age range (of the type given in the grids). To emphasise overlap, the examples could be physically overlapped at the edges⁵ eg:



Or, alternatively, overlapping circles could be used, with activities that span across the ages place in the central, overlapping sections, as below:

⁵ NB This style of presentation is used in Te Whariki (1996), Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand

