

The need for a Transformative and Contextual Early Years Curriculum

Georgina Trevor and Amanda Ince

Early childhood education and care became a policy priority in England in 1997. Spending went up considerably, private providers were encouraged to provide childcare and multi-agency Sure Start centres came into being. The aim was to reduce the attainment gap for children with limited resources, help parents to return to work and prepare children for formal schooling at age 5. The Childcare Act in 2006 and implementation of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) curriculum in 2008 heralded a shift in educational thinking and was praised early on as a holistic and child-centred approach. Despite moves towards comprehensive and integrated early childhood services, a divide formed between education and childcare, which has not been resolved in the intervening twenty years.

The EYFS, within the context of wider early years policy, had the potential to close this gap, but it has increasingly, through several revisions, become more focused on school readiness, whilst the view of the sector remained rooted in “childcare” – with the Government’s “15 or 30 hours free childcare”, “Tax free childcare” and frequent references to the sector as “childcare providers”. Educational economists report that the private childcare market in the UK was, in 2013-2015, worth an estimated £4.9 billion (Lewis and West, 2015). PVI settings often have a competitive pedagogical culture of targets and measurements of school readiness. Within an increasingly narrow system, the desired outcomes can become the focus, meaning “school readiness” leads the learning.

The coronavirus pandemic across the UK in 2020 resulted in early years settings closing in late March for all pupils except children of key workers and those classified as vulnerable, and the subsequent “childcare” arrangements made by parents struggling at home to both work and look after young children. In January 2021, primary schools were instructed that reception provision upwards should remain open only to critical workers and vulnerable children, while all pre-reception early years provision, whether in the maintained sector or PVIs/childminders should remain open to all children. This decision was fuelled by the government view that that “Caring for the youngest age group is not something that can be done remotely” (DfE, 2021: 4).

Whilst many early years settings spent much of 2020 navigating how best to support children’s learning and deliver the curriculum in the face of utter uncertainty, the split between childcare and education came sharply into focus. The curriculum, premised on overarching principles of resilient, capable, confident, self-assured, unique children effectively ceased to be a priority during the pandemic, illustrating just how much the curriculum has become one of utility. The need for “childcare” came to the fore with the EYFS, viewed as vehicle for “school readiness” delivering the “knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life” (DfE. 2020: 5) being effectively been put on hold.

Conversely, international approaches, such as that of New Zealand, saw staff encouraged by their Ministry of Education to continue developing tailored learning programmes based on the existing goals in each child's individual education plan. The New Zealand curriculum Te Whāriki, refers to their children as "global citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world. Children need to be adaptive, creative and resilient, to 'learn how to learn' so that they can engage with new contexts, opportunities and challenges with optimism and resourcefulness" (Ministry of Education, 2017:7).

New Zealand government departments responsible for early education during the pandemic based their approach, in part, on their priorities and beliefs surrounding the purpose of early years education. This contrasted starkly with the purpose of early education as seen by the English government, as a national results-driven approach to early years education, aiming to achieve numerous and often conflicting outcomes as a means of measuring success. The result is the development of the curriculum as technical practice, with goals and outcomes increasingly tightly defined. Seen in this way, education becomes a transfer of knowledge relating to specific measurable competencies, the acquisition of which are observed, assessed and tested at predetermined key stages in a child's life.

This top-down approach illustrated by the chronology of changes to statutory early years frameworks. The EYFS's most recent update in 2020 followed changes in Ofsted's Early Years inspection Handbook in 2019, proposed changes to the Early Learning Goals in June 2018, and the government's consultation on primary school assessment in 2017. All point to an outcome-oriented agenda with the EYFS end goals and inspection framework revised before the curriculum itself was revisited.

When learning is mapped backwards from intended outcomes, it becomes independent from any meaningful context, with a child's skills or knowledge merely summed up using predetermined checklists as part of convergent assessment. This approach relies on assumptions regarding competence, deficit and the achievement of a hierarchy of skills, and objective observation for the purposes of obtaining approval of external agencies. Rigid frameworks born of the notion that a single construction and measure of learning exists, result in teaching to tests and will not suffice in an increasingly unpredictable and changeable present and future. The use of fixed measurements to calculate progress seems to have led to recent suggestions that young children are "falling behind" their expected stage of development and attainment.

In a busy setting, within a measurement culture, the focus is on what can be measured, making what is the measurable most important while that which cannot be measured or does not align neatly with tick-boxes or baselines is disregarded and overlooked. 'There is no room for the unexpected because it does not fit the predefined script. But engaging with young children is "full of the unexpected" (Clark, 2020: 137). The McNamara fallacy (coined by the sociologist Daniel Yankelovich) describes this in four stages: measure whatever can be easily measured; disregard that which cannot be measured easily; presume that which

cannot be measured easily is not important; presume that which cannot be measured easily does not exist.

In order to navigate the coronavirus pandemic, and its effect on young children, the desire to revert to measurable outcomes to fill so called gaps in children's knowledge must be avoided. Instead, time should be spent in partnership with parents and children to develop skillsets and approaches that help them find a way through this new landscape. It has been widely reported in the media and on social media discussion fora that some practitioners and teachers have noticed changes in children's behaviour over the past year. Terms like "falling behind" and "catching up" are used by politicians to indicate a level of concern around children's development. Children's charities have also highlighted concerns; for example, in November 2020 Home-Start drew attention to increased numbers of young children's mental health and development. Whilst not the case for all children, it is an acknowledged phenomenon that some children are not thriving in the context of their own progress, and instead are returning to behaviours they displayed at a former stage of their development.

The uncertainty that came with the first lockdown in England in March 2020 was difficult to navigate; many parents shielded young children from the realities of the pandemic, leading to often fragmented understandings. Everything children knew changed overnight. Children were collected from nursery or school one day and told they were not going back, and no-one was sure for how long. The difficulties this gave rise to became apparent for some children on their return to their setting, with providers reporting "some children's behaviour had deteriorated", whilst others suggested experiences during lockdown may have led to some children now "struggling to engage in play and activities" (Ofsted, 2020:2).

Whilst regressions are not unusual in the course of early childhood development (development is, of course, not linear), the frequency with which regression has occurred post lockdown has been reported to have increased sharply with worries over sleep (children finding it harder to settle or frequently waking), eating (children becoming fussier with food), toileting (children having accidents or wanting to wear nappies) and speaking (children using "baby" noises, becoming quieter or in some cases, selectively mute). Separation anxiety has increased, and transitions are harder; even simple transitions have triggered strong emotional responses in children or changes in their behaviour. Less time spent outside during lockdowns has led to fewer opportunities for open-ended outdoor play and much needed physical development, meaning that many children found it harder to cope and make sense of how they felt physically.

In this context, a creative curriculum with freedom and support to play without limitations of imposed curriculum is essential. How the content of the curriculum is unpacked by the practitioner and co-constructed with children is influenced by the children's diversities and interests, practitioner training, academic and pedagogical knowledge, practical experience and "funds of knowledge": a knowledge base of experience, social practices and social and

emotional experiences of all parties (Wood, 2013). The importance of context, and in particular children's lived experiences, transforms the interpretation of an immovable curriculum as "universal truth" into adaptable and reflexive approaches. We unpack this idea in a recent chapter (Trevor, Ince and Ang, 2020).

All early years practitioners and children must be afforded considerable pedagogical space to allow for complex interpretations to unfold and refold, establishing an interwoven web of relations that form the "fabric of meaning" (Carr, 2001: 82). When integrating/re-integrating a curriculum such as the EYFS into early years settings, pedagogical approaches must constantly adjust themselves, through a culture of listening to the perspectives of the children, to create relevant and meaningful understandings of children's learning experiences.

The EYFS, used in conjunction with guidance documents such as *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012), and the much anticipated *Birth to Five Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2020) relies on observation and interpretation embedded in participatory practice to deliver meaningful learning experiences, with practitioners continuously reviewing and evaluating the impact of the curriculum.

Action research offers a process of democratic "meaning making" as a way to instigate positive and lasting change, and address issues faced by practitioners in a variety of early childhood settings. Ince and Kitto (2020) offer a practical guide to practitioner enquiry and action research as a way to instigate positive and lasting change and bridges the theory/practice divide. It can support "a collaborative, positive learning culture – providing time and space for sharing knowledge and support for continuous professional development for all practitioners" (Early Years Coalition, 2020: 7).

We know that one single curriculum does not exist; in the United Kingdom alone the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) each have their own distinctive early years policies and curricula. Curricula frameworks thus reflect areas of knowledge deemed of value in the context of the wider society within which they operate and should be approached as a tool to be used in conjunction with skilled practitioners and their judgements.

The EYFS does not contain all the "skills, knowledge and attitudes children need as foundations for good future progress" (DfE, 2020: 7). Instead, with alternative approaches, the EYFS has the potential starting points upon which a complex and diverse curriculum may be built. One which recognises children's capacity to actively participate in the construction of a rich curriculum and re-imagine the skills and knowledge that such a curriculum has the potential to develop.

"There is a constant relational reciprocity between those who educate and those who are educated" (Rinaldi, 2006: 141) and the process of learning is not neutral. Everyday practice

needs to recognise that curriculum should be experiential and practitioners must actively listen to better understand the perspectives of children. An innovative and adaptable curriculum that recognises the rights of all children, and that permits skilled, well-paid and trusted practitioners to engage in local democratic experimentations, should be a high priority. Now, more than ever, children must lead their learning, and their learning must lead our practice.

Georgina Trevor is a member of the leadership and management team across a group of two family run North London nurseries. Amanda Ince is a Principle Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education.

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