



## Reshaping the future

### Realigning, re-energising and reframing priorities for ECE practice and provision

#### **1 Introduction.**

The arena of Early Childhood Education (ECE) has always been, and continues to be, an intense area of discussion and debate. While there is an acceptance birth to seven years is a uniquely significant and dramatically formative period of children's development and growth, there remains an untapped opportunity to reach consensus in defining its explicit nature and content. There is a general agreement all children benefit from a high quality ECE experience, although when this is the focus of debate, there is often lack of clarity, agreement, or acknowledgement of what this means in practice. Although a steady flow of Government sponsored and other evidence appears to indicate the emergence of agreed precepts of quality, there exists a need to untangle narratives in both what this is and how they are most effectively achieved. The dialogue between politically and nationally derived ECE Policy and day-to-day practice can unnecessarily compete and we think new and positive opportunities for recognition and understanding of how ECE needs to 'work' are there for the taking.

#### **2 Purpose.**

The purpose of this document is provoke, stimulate and initiate a debate and discussion on how the understanding and representation of ECE practice and provision can be fully understood and reshaped. Its aim is to explicitly identify current key priorities that appear to be determining the current challenges and issues and attempt to realign this with a view of responsible and impactful practice, drawing from what we know and how this is specifically defined by the current environment. By invoking this debate and addressing the issues it raises, its aspiration is to inspire educators across the sector to develop a confident and professional approach, and an enhanced ability to articulate the nature, uniqueness and critical location of ECE in the wider educational continuum in ways that connect with all current and potential stakeholders across the political, policy and practice space.

### **3 Focus on practice and provision.**

While the current questions around the delivery of ECE are acute and varied; (such as funding, sustainability, and staff recruitment, retention, remuneration and ratios) this document will focus exclusively on the element of practice and provision and how this can be most effectively understood, delivered and articulated. The quality of teaching and learning, the provision of an appropriate curriculum, the experiences children are provided with and the means by which they are supported and optimised necessitate a dedicated focus. The outcomes that this enables for children and the cognitive, social, physical and intellectual foundations that this creates remain at the central core of the purpose of ECE. Therefore, this requires a specific focus to ensure that all elements of a successful sector are built around this as its primary purpose.

### **4 Current Context.**

Although generic issues and challenges remain pertinent to the debate that defines the concept of quality in ECE, recent events and national initiatives have added contemporary dimensions that both highlight long-running tensions and also reveal additional dimensions. These are identified as follows:

#### **Evidence.**

4.1 While there exists a steady stream of evidence for effective ECE practice, outcomes and quality, there have been a number of recent additions which have added to the debate around the understanding of ECE and the evidence that drives it. In particular, research digests published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) have had a significant impact on framing elements of practice and its impact. In particular this has provided evidence-based information and support for the importance and implementation of strategies for high quality interactions, effective CPD, Supporting Literacy development, Mathematics and supporting metacognition. Equally, information disseminated by the East London Research School and the research based Early Childhood Hub, (a subsidiary of the Chartered College of Teaching) have added significant dimensions to the debate, particularly in the arena of supporting effective learning behaviours. The DfE 'Stronger Practice Hubs', which will be active from November 2022, also promise to provide significant case studies of research driven practice.

#### **Pandemic.**

4.2 The current long tail of Covid-19 recovery looks set to continue and the impact of both the pandemic itself and the associated measures designed to prevent the spread of the virus remain sources of concern and challenge. While this is a clearly a universal phenomenon it could be reasonably argued this has been particularly impactful upon young children, who have experienced their vital formative years in an environment of lockdowns, social distancing, face masks and intense hygiene procedures. Additionally,

the national narrative of the need for an educational strategy for 'catch-up' further complicates the situation as it appears incongruent with wider objectives.

### **Early Years Foundation Stage.**

- 4.3 The revised statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which, after much debate within the sector, was introduced in September 2021 to enhance and define the nature of expectations for children in this age phase. While it reasserted much of previous iterations and amendments, it established a significant shift in the importance of the role of curriculum and the importance of core knowledge within it. Additionally, it advocated and enabled greater professional autonomy in terms of the processes and approaches used by educators and placed a greater emphasis on professional judgment rather than generating written evidence and creating unnecessary paperwork.

### **Ofsted.**

- 4.4 While tensions regarding Ofsted's approach, and perceptions of it, to inspecting the EYFS have incited a continual debate in the ECE community, recent events have further intensified this dialogue. A greater emphasis on the understanding of curriculum progression and sequence, on the role of recall and memory and the primacy of early literacy has caused (sometimes heated) discussion within the sector. Additionally, the recently published Ofsted five-year strategic plan identifies ECE as a key element of focus for the first time. Again, while the principle of focussing on ECE provision has been broadly welcomed, there are some concerns regarding how this will be focussed in practice. There is a perception amongst the sector that Ofsted's view of effective practice does not always align with a grassroots experience. Although there is a consistent strategic view of ECE quality, there is sometimes a discrepancy when this is interpreted in individual Inspections, especially when Inspectors are not ECE specialists.

### **A sector of many essential parts.**

- 4.5 While the sector has always been a diverse one, with different traditions, contexts and origins, it has always been the aspiration (and policy starting with the creation of the 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage in 1999) that it is unified and consistent in order to secure a quality education for all children in the EYFS. However, there appears to be an increasingly pronounced divide between school based and private/voluntary/independent (PVI) provision in terms of practice, pedagogy and approaches to provision. While by no means a universal picture there is a belief that school-based provision for nursery and reception (in in some cases funded two-year-olds) is disproportionately over formalised and narrowly focussed on specific 'academic' elements of the curriculum. Equally there is an ill-informed and unfair perception that PVI provision is less robust and professional and has a limited impact on the children that attend. This mutual (mis)perception within the sector only heightens the inconsistency of practice and weakens the possibility of a strong, unified group of voices.

## Voices from the sector

4.6 Recent lobbying-based campaigns (NDNA, EYA ) and reports (Family, Tapestry) have highlighted polarised views and the perception of the sector in both the educational community beyond ECE and how this is viewed by society as a whole. Wide dissatisfaction amongst ECE educators with its perceived profile and lack of acknowledgement with policy-makers and wider society was reported and the need to address issues around reputation, and challenge prevalent mythologies was strongly identified. Equally significant were the findings from the Royal Foundation Report which also identified strong public support for the early years sector but a pronounced lack of awareness regarding its specific impact.

## 5 Priorities for Development.

At this juncture, it is important we identify priorities when considering the issues it reveals? Some are long-standing, others are contemporary. Many are circumstantial. We wish to realign the understanding of ECE practice, ensuring that it is as effective and impactful as it can and should be. We want it to be better described and advocated for, and for it to be fully valued, acknowledged and respected. To achieve this, the key elements could be those we have set out below.

**Priority 1: The Evidence Base.** If we consider ECE practice to be the process described in fig. 1 below, then we need to ensure every aspect of this derives from a secure and robust evidence base that is clearly aligned to research. All aspects of practice; the how, the what and the intended outcomes or aspirations; (what Ofsted describes as 'intent, implementation and impact') need to be fully understood within the context of evidence, and each of these elements should be secure in an understanding of how and why they are significant, relevant, impactful and appropriate. We need to be prepared to address the questions of:

what an effective and responsible curriculum in ECE should contain

how this is most effectively delivered, (creating the contexts for teaching and learning)

and how this relates to and supports the outcomes for children that we aspire to deliver.

Too often, processes and approaches in ECE can be unintentionally based more on a 'folklore' assumption, or the continuation of a tradition rather than an assertion that it is justified and applicable in its own right. A tendency towards 'quick fixes', the gravitation towards apparently simplistic panaceas and sometimes attractively promoted gimmicky approaches that have no real evidence base are commonly visible in ECE provision. Such a phenomena not only provides a potential damage to the outcomes, and therefore the achievement trajectories and life chances for children but also serve to undermine the wider profile and reputation of ECE

professionals and the likely impact of their provision. As a profession we need to fully embrace and engage with evidence – even when this challenges deeply held beliefs or apparently sacrosanct long-standing practices. When research identifies attributes of practice associated with different phases of educational development there needs to be a willingness to refine this, where possible, to an ECE context, rather than dismissing it out of hand as not sufficiently early years specific. We also need to be confident enough to re-evaluate orthodoxies and traditions that can sometimes define practice and engage in a professional discussion regarding their validity. The pandemic has given us cause to do this in many aspects of practice, and we should grasp hold of this opportunity to change. Equally, in this vein, there is a need to continue creating a strong, authentic quantifiable evidence base for ECE outcomes, strategies and processes that reshapes our practice and gives us the language to describe it in a more robust, accessible and professional way.

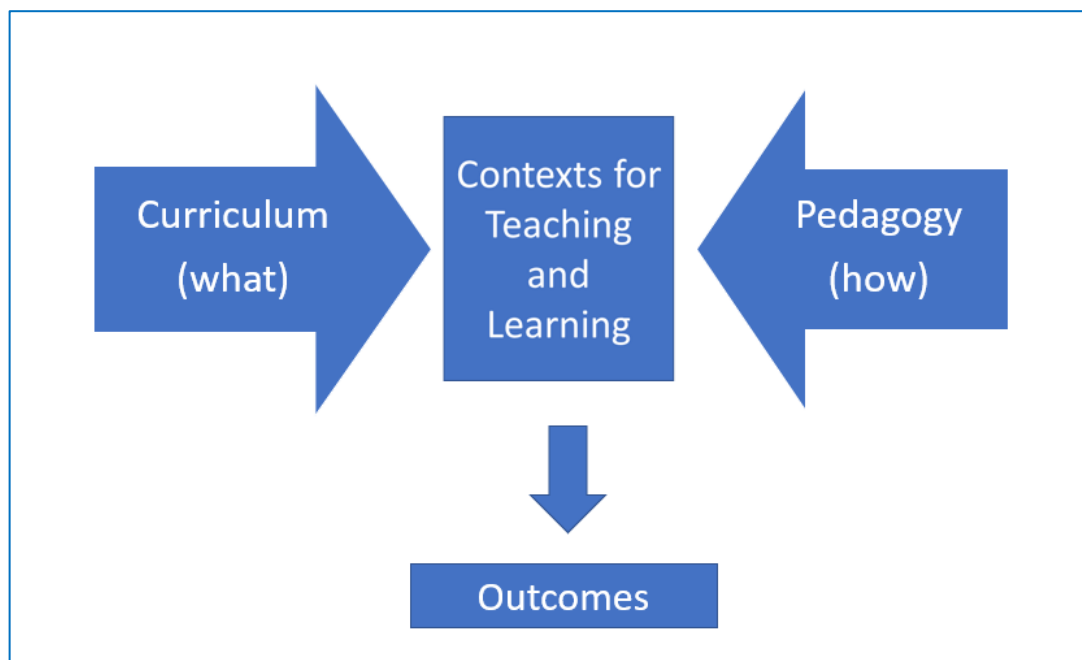


Figure 1: Teaching and Learning Model

**Priority 2: The role of Learning Behaviours.** Derived from the need for a research context for practice, is the significant evidence that strongly suggests the role of ‘Learning Behaviours’ are critical components of ensuring successful achievement and attainment. While they retain a role throughout all phases of children’s educational experience, it is crucial that these are fully embedded within ECE to ensure they can be built upon as the child learns and develops afterwards. While it is sometimes argued these are biologically primed, they are recognised as learnable, and therefore teachable aspects and their identification within the everyday practice of EYFS educators, both as contexts for teaching and motivations for assessment need to be made explicit. The vital roles of Executive Functioning, Self-Regulation, Metacognition, Cognitive Flexibility, Working Memory and Inhibitory Control form a strong, evidence driven set of

competencies that should underpin educators' understanding of practice and work in conjunction with the more recognisably cognitive, or more traditionally academic elements of the curriculum. These 'engines' of learning and development exist in a complex symbiosis alongside and intertwined with the acquisition, refinement and internalisation of knowledge and skills, and they need to be recognised as an integral part of the curriculum experience and a core element of delivery. While these can currently be located within the 'Characteristics of Effective Learning and Teaching' as part of the statutory EYFS, the full understanding of how these operate and how they are provided for and supported in ECE Provision is a variable. The knowledge and awareness that they have an equal statutory status in the requirements for EYFS educators as the seven Areas of Learning and Development is not always clear and it is sometimes the case that the latter aspects retain prominence. However, this is not the situation of either/or but an imperative that it is both; and/as well as.

**Priority 3: Responsible Curriculum Content.** In considering the importance of the curriculum and the content that defines it, we need to be aware that this is "a top-level plan of everything the early years setting wants the children to learn" (Grenier 2020). Within that definition, we inevitably take decisions about the nature of that content, how it will enable and empower children, and how it will establish bodies of knowledge and skills, alongside, and in conjunction, with the 'engines' of Learning Behaviours. To that end, there should be an aspiration of responsibility that children, as far as possible within the unpredictable world we live, are prepared and informed to engage and influence it. Therefore, although the statutory EYFS provides an authoritative framework of outcomes from which the curriculum is derived, there are additional elements which, it could be argued, are also necessary for responsible practice.

- In an increasingly technologically developing age, a basic skill for understanding and engaging with the world, and indeed surviving within it, will necessitate a secure and confident knowledge base and skillset within the area of Digital Knowledge and Awareness. Incorporating this sensitively and appropriately into everyday practice for children in this age phase could be a vitally responsible action. This will have an important role, especially as means to supporting, optimising and extending all other elements of learning and development in both cognitive and non-cognitive domains.
- Additionally, there is a growing recognition of the importance of environmental awareness and issues related to the challenge of sustainability and resilience. Future generations will be more acutely aware of the impact of human activity on the environment and climate and be strongly cognisant of how to manage challenges and discover creative solutions. Again, a responsible approach to ECE practice will need to ensure that this has a significant and prominent role in the domains of the curriculum
- Recent global and local socio-political events have thrown a bright spotlight on issues related to cultural identity and diversity and the ongoing narrative regarding the exploration of British Values. As children need to be aware and confident with

their own identity and heritage, in an ever-diversifying world, they also need to have a sound awareness and understanding of different culture, beliefs, traditions and customs that may exist within their own community or outside of it. A responsible curriculum will also need to incorporate this.

**Priority 4: Supporting Wellbeing.** The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated measures have, as already stated, undoubtedly left a deep imprint on the psychology and psychopathy of young children. Their experiences will have defined their view of reality and they will have inevitably assimilated some of the anxieties and uncertainties of a different world as it emerges. What this highlights is not new; it potentially consolidates the existing challenge with a greater sense of urgency and immediacy. The importance of a child's emotional and psychological health has always been identified as both critical in its own right and an essential prerequisite for effective and successful learning, development and success (Laevers 2012). Therefore, if we are to ensure a curriculum is successful and children attain the aspirational outcomes as a result, this needs to be built on a secure emotional foundation that has been drastically challenged over the recent period of time. We need to foreground the importance of Emotional and Psychological Wellbeing and resilience as a priority for all children in ECE provision and ensure that through ongoing support guidance and appropriate CPD that a nurturing environment, attachment and an awareness of trauma informed practice are fully visible in ECE practice. While the narrative of 'catch up' sometimes refers to 'lost' development or delayed teaching schedules in academic areas of the curriculum we need to be aware that references to this must primarily refer to the importance of supporting emotional development and providing opportunities for children to articulate, process and understand both traumatic events and anxieties and fears about the world around them. Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies these elements as building on the basic needs for food and shelter. But critically he proceeds to identify the pinnacle of this pyramid as 'self-actualisation' which is the true realisation of a person's potential. While foregrounding the need for emotional security and support is essential and non-negotiable, it is also necessary to assert that, although this is an important end in itself, its role is to provide a psychological foundation for learning and development which ECE Provision delivers.

**Priority 5: The Professional Profile of ECE Educators.** In order to increase wider understanding of the impact and nature of ECE Provision, it will also be essential to further raise the profile and parity of the profession and ensure that its status is acknowledged. Although there is more of a consensus on the importance of ECE in the wider context of educational attainment, there is still an often confused or dismissive perception to understanding what this means in practice. There needs to be a significant reappraisal of how ECE is viewed and perceived but also how the sector represents itself. We need to embed an awareness of the reality that ECE is a serious and not a trivial or less important matter and it is vital that this is understood beyond the confines of the ECE community alone. Part of this requires us to ensure that we have a specialist



ECE presence in all elements of educational debate and are steadfast and unwavering in ensuring that our perspective and the reality of ECE as a crucial element of the educational continuum is represented. The most significant event in a child's life is their birth, not their first day at school. All aspects of educational discourse have their origins in a child's earliest experiences, yet this is often overlooked and as a result the understanding of ECE practice remains adrift of mainstream narratives. As a sector we also need to ensure that how we represent children's learning, and how this represents the origins on the continuum is couched in the appropriate relevant and accessible terminology that aligns it fully with the broader picture. There is an urgent necessity to reflect on how we are regarded and how willingly and professionally we engage in the debate; too often, particularly on social media, dialogue between ECE specialists and non-specialists becomes immediately polarised and dismissed. There needs to be a more open, professional and adaptive approach to this debate that acknowledges and supports misunderstanding and misconceptions. A common language or connecting language should be used. This will enable some of the unnecessary and unhelpful 'mystique' and subsequent mythologies to be challenged and rectified at source and in turn this will ease some of the tensions regarding misaligned and inappropriate policies that can impact on ECE. Additionally, the need for more cross-sector collaboration and understanding, and the move towards a more unified approach to ECE (such as the 'Shared Foundation' initiative pioneered by the City Of York LA) will strengthen all voices in the sector and consolidate effective and impactful practice and provision.



## 6 Conclusions.

Having described the context to ECE and identifying our current priorities what are the key conclusions that can be drawn?

- 6.1 The ECE sector faces ongoing challenges in defining the characteristics of quality provision within the statutory EYFS framework. The role of learning behaviours and additional elements of curriculum content are not fully realised.
- 6.2 A variable evidence-base on identifying the characteristics of quality; in terms of content, process and outcomes, undermines a consensus of definitions of quality and the sometimes ambivalent relationship between the sector and the content of research and evidence further exacerbates this issue.
- 6.3 The current context has intensified and additionally illuminated specific concerns. The importance of children's emotional and psychological health in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic needs urgent and long-term recognition and support.
- 6.4 Recently introduced national initiatives continue to impact upon the sector and paradoxically challenge, confuse, and consolidate the understanding and definitions of quality ECE provision.
- 6.5 The outward facing image, and reputation of the ECE community is adversely affected by how it chooses to present itself within a lobbying context, and an external lack of understanding, and a need for significant professional engagement between the ECE sector and the wider educational community.
- 6.6 The current context and challenges, alongside the recently introduced initiatives have provided a fertile ground for reflection, debate and innovation; in this it has provided an apposite opportunity to reframe and reenergise the impact, understanding and professional profile of the sector.

## **7 Recommendations.**

Hey! recommends five key actions:

### **Explore and define.**

7.1 Further exploration takes place to define how quality provision is driven by the evidence in terms of the curriculum (content), pedagogy (process) and assessment (outcomes) and that an ongoing professional debate continues to refine the approach to this. A secure and robust evidence and research base needs to both drive practice and also provide an effective context for articulating ECE practice.

### **Continuous Professional Development.**

7.2 Raising the status of supporting children's wellbeing and emotional health, and the critical role of Learning Behaviours needs to be prioritised through accessible CPD and generating a professional confidence in practice.

### **Ambitious curricula.**

7.3 The sector needs to be ambitious in using EYFS as a springboard to develop innovative and rich curricula that responds to the needs for children to build citizenship, social responsibility, ITC skills, resilience and enthusiasm for learning and educational achievement.

### **Positive pro-action.**

7.4 The sector needs to develop a greater sense of self-awareness to enable it to move from a position of defence to one of positive proactivity that connects with education in all its other forms and elevates the status of ECE as a movement to achieve outcomes and positions ECE as an essential component in children's learning. This will also entail developing a new narrative that creates new conversations in new spaces, communicating in commonly understood terms and avoiding polarised behaviours.

### **Connecting to other educators.**

7.5 A wider engagement needs to pursue a policy of increased understanding amongst the educational (and wider) community and for policy makers to connect ECE to all its multiple outcomes, and to resist the temptation to link initiatives to mono-policy and inadvertently disregarding the specific nature and requirements of ECE.

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## About hey!

We're here to provide a modern, informed and positive approach to early years learning, that continually evolves and draws upon its rich history and traditions. Work with us to raise quality and achieve better outcomes through a deep understanding and knowledge of curriculum progression. We want to inspire early educators through a pedagogical repertoire to optimise children's early years learning.

Our training, consultancy and policy development support:

- Create conditions for learning, with effective observation and assessment, professional interventions, and enabling environments.
- Use evidence-based, research-driven approaches to supporting the most effective and impactful practice.
- Make best use of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), enhancing the statutory framework through exploring the influence of international models, pedagogy, and curricula, recognising the importance of cultural identity and diversity.
- Enable and inspire early years practitioners' confidence to develop and sustain a responsive, reflective and informed approach to the best possible practice.

## Our offer for you:

- Information briefings, training, onsite support, and consultancy.
- Online and on-site services and programmes for parents, schools, academies, all types of early years setting, organisations, local authorities, and national government departments.
- Briefings and informed explorations of the national and international picture, the identifiable contemporary ideas and beliefs, and the known and potential policy direction of travel. With guidance on how this may affect everyday practice and provision, the implications for early educators, and how this can be interpreted and used for maximum benefits.
- Evidence-based training, research and consultancy to achieve the best in early years practice. With packages of CPD support that entail linked sessions with opportunities for reflection, application and dissemination in settings.
- Advice with practice reviews, support for developing quality provision, supporting effective assessment and the EYFS profile. Auditing provision for quality and identifying/targeting CPD needs.

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