

Does birth to three matter? by Diane Rich

At a recent international conference, I met with educators from as far apart as Iceland and New Zealand. Many were intrigued and alarmed to hear that in England the early years curriculum is going to include children from birth to the end of the first year in school.

Not only were they interested to hear about the wide age range, but they were shocked to learn about the curriculum divisions set out for children from birth, namely the six areas of learning in the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance- personal, social and emotional development, communication, language and literacy, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development and creative development. One remarked, 'How can this be? For babies? We used to take our lead from England, but we won't follow this approach.'

Perhaps a single coherent quality framework is necessary for this stage, but if we are to have such a framework, educators deserve one that they can be proud of world-wide, and children deserve one that concentrates on the principles underpinning early childhood pedagogy and not what can be interpreted as a subject based approach to development and learning.

They deserve a framework which promotes what matters to them and not what matters to curriculum planners. What is needed is a framework with a 'bottom up', rather than a 'top down' emphasis.

Advocating a bottom up approach

Recent attempts to ensure effective transition from the Foundation Stage into Key Stage 1 resulted in training materials '*Continuing the Learning Journey*' being distributed to all infant and primary schools. As co-author of this, I was keen to ensure that a key message was prominent: teachers and classrooms need to be ready for children, and children should not be groomed to get ready for Key Stage 1. This message has been well received by those using the materials and many schools now adopt a bottom up approach to learning, with Foundation Stage principles and approaches influencing Key Stage 1 and beyond.

When I learned that the Birth to Three Matters was to merge with the Foundation Stage I welcomed a chance to fully adopt a bottom up approach and make sure that all those working with babies and young children, including those in schools, had a good understanding of child development and early childhood pedagogy.

I anticipated the new document would be dominated by the *Birth to Three Matters* principles and the four key aspects: A strong child, A healthy child, A skillful communicator and A competent learner. I was hopeful that educators currently new into the profession, or for some reason unfamiliar with the birth to three aspects would base their practice on these, along with the principles which underpin them.

Top down dangers

To my disappointment we have a top down document dominated by the six areas of learning from the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*, which in turn has been heavily dominated by the subjects of the National Curriculum. This means that all hope of the *Birth to Three Matters* framework having an impact on the Foundation Stage and beyond into school years will be lost. This is not good enough.

It is completely inappropriate for babies and toddlers to be associated with the six areas of learning. These are far more appropriate for children at the end of the primary school phase as they are directly related to the national curriculum subjects. They certainly have no at all place with babies and toddlers.

The current proposals will result in pushing children further and earlier into, for example, inappropriate communication, language and literacy activities which will do little to foster children's understanding of the purpose of communication, language and literacy, or their love of literacy and lifelong commitment to it. The damage this will do, through the implicit and explicit messages about learning, for all those professionally involved with children of this age and with parents and carers too, is unthinkable.

It is completely inappropriate for parents to be given the message that the six areas of learning are what matters most to children, especially children in the Early Years Foundation Stage age group. This will have a negative impact on the values in our society and how we define children; on toys and resources produced for children; on parenting; on pressures for educators, parents and families to ensure that to achieve in the six areas of learning is more valuable than experiencing a rich, quality childhood.

Ways forward

A stronger emphasis on the principles underpinning early childhood pedagogy, on child development and the rights of children to: be listened to; to play, indoors and out; to be responded to as individuals regardless of their age, but according to their own development and interests is necessary. This will be better achieved through higher prominence of *Birth to Three Matters* and integrating the terms strong child, healthy child, skillful communicator and competent learner much more into the revised document. Finally two principles should be added. These are taken from the principles which underpin the work of the *What Matters to Children* team:

- First hand experience as a necessary and significant element in learning;
- children as powerful learners: people who think for themselves and who use their hands, eyes, ears, and their whole bodies to explore the world and everything and everyone in it.

These principles must underpin the work of all educators and all those who engage with children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and beyond.

Debate

'They deserve a framework which promotes what matters to them and not what matters to curriculum planners. What is needed is a framework with a bottom up, rather than a top down emphasis.'

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