

Professionals take on politicians

In a direct challenge to the revised EYFS, Early Childhood Action, is drafting an early years framework, that will be based on best practice and sector expertise that meets the development needs of children.

WHEN THE government published its response to the EYFS consultation, predictably, just before Christmas, hearts sank across the sector. Anorak that I am, I spent much of my Christmas holiday writing a 10,000-word critique of the government's *Reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage: Government Response to Consultation*, taking it apart brick by brick.

In its proposals, the Department for Education (DfE) has alienated all sides – with, on the one hand, play seemingly being downgraded and a 'schoolifying' agenda increasingly dominating the policy-making discourse (alienating those supporting the original EYFS); and on the other, with the concerns of EYFS critics being significantly reinforced, an 'earlier is better' ideology continuing to dominate – with the small print showing that the literacy and numeracy learning goals are not being relaxed, despite claims to the contrary.

So-called 'evidence-based practice' is very much the fashionable new 'kid' on the policy 'block' – as if just repeating the phrase, mantra-like, will somehow magically produce sensible policy-making based on 'the facts'. However, those who engage closely with government early years policy-making have the repeated experience of the DfE being quite impervious to rational argument, determined as they are to drive through their own ideological agenda. So much for the totem of 'evidence-based practice'. This total failure of both rational argument and practice-based evidence to influence government thinking has left early childhood campaigners with little choice but to play 'the ideological game' themselves – but to play it even better than the government.

And so, I recently hatched the idea of a new movement, Early Childhood Action, or ECA. ECA is an unprecedented grass roots initiative that will draw up, and formally publish (through Hawthorn Press), its own early childhood development and learning framework – one that will be genuinely rooted in the most progressive, leading-edge thinking in the field.

Some 21 months ago, 14 university Professors of Education wrote an open letter to the *Times Educational Supplement*, stating that our education system urgently needs to be 'depoliticised', before politicians do any more damage (www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6040351). In this spirit, ECA is a new cultural initiative that is fundamentally challenging the right of governments to impose statutory practices on to professionals, when those same professionals know those compulsory practices to be harmful to their clientele – in this case, to very young children.

The recent National Audit Office finding of the relative ineffectiveness of early years expenditure comes as no surprise to those who have always had grave concerns about aspects of the EYFS, and the way in which its misguided 'earlier is best' approach is deeply embedded throughout the curriculum. One eminent early years colleague recently told me that the NAO report 'is, of course, ammunition which we should use to lambast the arrogant politicians who don't listen to the professionals, and think they know best'.

Signed by such luminaries as Baroness Susan Greenfield, Philip Pullman, Penelope Leach and Sue Palmer, the *Daily Telegraph* open letter, which launched Early Childhood Action in early February, spoke of the 'need to consider the central place of imaginative, spontaneous play, and of young children's physical development in the curriculum'. It also referred to 'the "schoolification" of early childhood, with its over-assessment and excessive monitoring, [with] controversial "early learning goals"... putting premature emphasis on cognitive learning.'

ECA's learning and development framework will draw upon the expertise and experience of a group of leading academics and practitioners from across the early years field (our drafting committee), and will be informed by a long list of specialist experts (national and international) who have agreed to act as consultants to the drafting process. In this way, the process will be open, democratic, and reflexive, in that all ECA supporters will be given the opportunity to feed back on the first draft of the framework, before the final published version is released in spring 2012.

One might justifiably see ECA as the early years equivalent of Robin Alexander's primary review – a genuinely profession-driven initiative that dares to speak professional truth to political power.

The support pouring in to ECA strongly suggests that when practitioners set our new framework alongside the government's revised curriculum, there will be little argument as to which they will prefer, and which is more likely to be in the best interests of young children's wellbeing and healthy development. Come the spring, then, let the ideological battle for the wellbeing of our youngest children begin!

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Useful resources

- A copy of my critique is available on request
- See www.earlychildhood.com, or email info@earlychildhoodaction.com