

## **EARLY YEARS Educator article, July 2018**

### **Making controversy work**

**By Deborah Lawson, General Secretary, Voice: the union for education professionals**

The review of the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) proved controversial before the announcement in June that they were to be piloted in a small number of schools from September. The announcement did nothing to quell that controversy and may have fuelled it further.

The fears of the sector – publicised widely and which generated an online petition to stop the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) review until sector specialists could be involved – originated from the primary assessment consultation and were no doubt influenced by the report from Ofsted at the end of 2017, *Bold Beginnings*. While aspects of that report and recommendations had merit, and were welcomed by some, the media interpretation of them led to widespread concern about the reduction of play-based learning and over-emphasis on formal teaching and ‘schoolification’ of the early years.

The announcement about reception baseline assessment (RBA), which is a school accountability measure, increased concerns further.

During the review period, Voice expressed some of those same concerns and was reassured to find that sector specialists are part of the review panel and that Department for Education (DfE) officials were listening keenly to the concerns of the sector. While it is recognised that good communication aids engagement and acceptance during a period of change, the lack of clear information and communication played a part in and stimulated the rumour and speculation that surrounded the review.

Since the announcement and publication of the 2018 EYFS Profile handbook for the pilot schools, the experts, those involved in the review, and those not, appear to have a difference of opinion.

Experts involved in the review are positive and herald the changes as positive steps toward improving children’s outcomes and life chances. While there is widespread agreement that focus on language, which underpins all areas of learning, is good, there are some others who disagree, arguing that the proposed changes could prove detrimental to children. Interestingly, some the differences of opinion appear to depend on whether comments are focused on specific ELG changes or the EYFSP in its entirety.

While the review panel, working to a specific remit, may have produced the best fit to the criteria it was handed, perhaps the fault lies not with them and the product of their deliberations, but with the process employed. If the review remit was unduly influenced by the findings of the small scale and limited

evidence on which *Bold Beginnings* is based, the sector's reservations about the review are valid.

As early years professionals, we know that nothing stands still. Change is a fact of life, and as good as the ELGs are, as new research evidence is published, it is inevitable that it will recommend or indicate the need for change in pursuit of progress. Whether we believe the process used or the revised ELGs to be correct, change would happen eventually.

What I believe is at the root of the outcry about the changes is that those who work with young children, and know what works and what does not, feel that, yet again, they have been 'done to' and so have their pupils. The sector's concerns are, rightly, for their pupils, whose education and learning are of paramount importance. The reaction of the sector should not have been unexpected.

Had, however, there been better engagement with the sector, and perhaps a longer period of engagement, to enable specialists and early years professionals to contribute to and inform the remit of the review, perhaps the disagreements would be less and the sector's acceptance and involvement greater.

Change is always disruptive, especially when we're not given the opportunity to participate in the process. But differences of opinion, supported with legitimate evidence, can be positive and productive. Controversy stimulates discussion. My advice to officials at the Department for Education is to use that controversy, and the debate generated, positively and to engage positively with the sector.

At the time of the announcement, officials were keen to emphasise that the pilot was the start of a full consultation process and that they are committed to a meaningful consultation with early years experts, practitioners and teachers.

The aim of the review appears to seek to harmonise, for children and early years teachers and practitioners, the transition between EYFS and Key Stage 1. To achieve this goal without building barriers, I urge the DfE to also seek harmony with professionals, using the controversy the review and pilot have generated to enable the sector to work together to make the ELG and EYFS the best it can be, for all the right reasons.

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