**The continuing quest for balance: the position of the Key person in managing the duality of assessment purpose in the Early Years Foundation Stage in England.**

**Introduction**

The authors of this paper are concerned that good assessment practice involving close observations of children and strong links between parents and practitioners, as outlined in the themes and principles of the EYFS, may be overlooked or even disregarded in the current climate of uncertainty in relation to the nature and purpose of assessment, vis-à-vis the recognition of an individual child’s learning and the school accountability agenda of the neo-liberal era.

**Theoretical Framework**

**The Global scene**

In the 21st century, ideas surrounding the care and education of young children are constantly reviewed and reconsidered in the context of cultural, economic, political and sociological change. Towards the end of the 20th century, a consensus was reached between the 21 countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with agreement to prioritise “the goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care” (OECD, 1998). In 2004, *Starting Strong: Curricula and Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, March 2004), presented an overview of five curricula outlines that encouraged and enabled international debate about quality provision for very young children, providing a lens through which to view and reflect upon practice.

Firstly, the research of Laevers, (2003) in Belgium, contributed the Leuven Scales of well-being and involvement as a tool that became widely used as a means of assessing the mental health and happiness of young children engaged in learning. Secondly, the *High Scope* curriculum in America, based on active learning and designed specifically for helping disadvantaged children showed (through a supporting longitudinal study) that children on the programme were better able to adapt to societal demands than non-participants. Next, in northern Italy, the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood was highlighted as exemplary in the practice of listening to young children in order to understand their learning and development. Meanwhile, in New Zealand, a bicultural approach to the curriculum was evolving in the form of *Te Whariki*, meaning “a woven mat for all to stand on”. One aspect of this was the formation of development, cultural and learning goals to chart the achievement of children. Finally, the Swedish system specified learning goals, although the way in which these were to be achieved was decided at a local level rather than a national one.

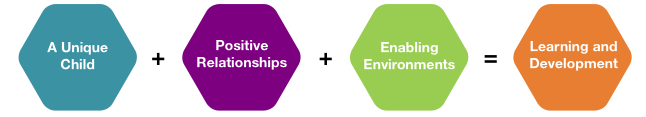
**The United Kingdom**

It is in the context of this OECD climate that the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England came into being in 2007, becoming statutory from 2008. A number of key documents merged to form the framework: the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS), which was first published in 2000, the National Daycare Standards (2001) and the Birth to Three Matters (Surestart) materials. A separate framework for Wales, entitled *The Foundation Phase in Wales*, was piloted in a number of settings in 2004 and extended in 2006, becoming statutory in all settings from 2009 (Wales.gov.uk) and a further curriculum, *Early Years Framework,* (Scottish Government) was introduced for early years in Scotland in 2009. Thus differences in expectations for the education and care of young children in the countries of the United Kingdom could be observed and evaluated with the potential for impacting practice.

**The introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) in England 2007.**

The notion of an early years curriculum framework in England did not go unchallenged. Whilst not all politicians, for example Nick Gibb, the Shadow Minister for Schools at the time, were convinced of the need for a curriculum, some were responsive to calls from the early years workforce concerning the structure of the 1988 National Curriculum (NC), which was deemed inappropriate for the development and learning needs of younger children. Rather than working towards NC levels, Desirable Learning Outcomes (DLOs) were initially introduced within a system that took development into account (DfEE/SCAA, 1996). Before long, and partially in response to curricula frameworks in other countries, the terminology changed and learning goals formed part of the focus in England, although they differed from the New Zealand goals due to a greater focus on skills and abilities and to the Swedish ones because the way in which they were to be achieved was nationally rather than locally agreed. The achievement of these outcomes, called the Early Learning Goals (ELGs), culminated in a summative document of progress based upon a checklist of skills known as the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). Detailed observations made by practitioners responsible for the education and care of children provided evidence of attainment throughout the EYFS to feed into this summation and also recorded the children’s dispositions and attitudes towards learning. At the end of the reception year in school (at age 5) these observations informed the completion of this checklist.

Whilst learning and development formed one part of the EYFS, the conceptual basis of the framework was concerned with the holistic development of the unique child and the importance of forming positive relationships within enabling environments, with the idea that these three elements together provided the context for learning. Therefore the framework was encapsulated by the equation:



The theoretical basis for this drew upon Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (1979) which emphasised the importance of the many and varied interactions in the immediate world of the young child. From the outset, a review of the EYFS was planned once the framework was firmly embedded, and this took place in 2011. As other countries, such as Australia, were continuing to develop curricula frameworks, the global perspective continued to provide the momentum for change.

**The Tickell review of EYFS 2011**

The EYFS was reviewed by Dame Clare Tickell in 2011 and a revised version was issued in 2012, to replace the earlier framework. This is still the basis of the version that is currently statutory; only minor amendments and clarifications were made for the 2014 document. The Early Learning Goals, designed to measure progress at the end of the Foundation Stage, were reduced from 69 to 17 and a two-year old developmental check was introduced. Tickell stated that the EYFS framework should be ‘strengthened and simplified’ (Tickell, 2011:3) and in doing so her views on assessment were clarified:

I strongly support the involvement of parents and carers in ongoing, formative assessment and recommend no changes to the EYFS requirements on formative assessment. To be clear, however, I

recommend that the EYFS explicitly states that paperwork should be kept to the absolute minimum required to promote children’s successful learning and development. (Tickell, 2011:31 section 3.40).

The themes and overarching principles of the EYFS remain unchanged, but the areas of learning and development have been adjusted to encompass prime areas, comprising physical development, communication and language and personal, social and emotional development, and specific areas: literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts and design. Whilst all areas are interconnected, the specific areas are the means through which the prime areas are strengthened and applied (DfE 2102). In foregrounding personal, social and emotional development as a prime area, it is clear that this must be established prior to the commencement of a more formal approach to learning. A child needs to be secure and happy in an appropriate learning environment and enjoy positive relationships with supporting adults.

Dubiel (2014:125) provides a more full account of the changes to the EYFS, alongside a discussion of the principles of effective assessment of young children and their learning. In this he highlights the central role of observational assessment and the importance of contributions from parents and others who know the child well. The key person, identified and named as the practitioner who supports the child in the setting, holds an important role in this respect and should be a major contributor to the assessment process.

**The key person approach in the Early Years Foundation Stage**

In both the Learning and Development requirements (EYFS, 2014 Section 1.10) and the Safeguarding and Welfare requirements (EYFS, 2014 Section 3.27), the importance of a key person is emphasised, based on attachment theory. This is unique to the EYFS, but has the potential to be misunderstood. In the literature underpinning the Tickell review, Evangelou et al (2009) consider the impact of attachment on development and cite the considerable research that supports it. The work of Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck (2005) has been influential in establishing the role of the key person working with very young children in nurseries and has been revised (2012) to encompass the EYFS and then the transition to primary school. Nurturing relationships are without doubt important in the social and emotional development of children and in the context of multiple caregivers in settings, where a practitioner can be consistently present in a regular way over time, there are seen to be benefits. Paragraph 3.27 of the EYFS states:

Each child must be assigned a key person. Their role is to help ensure that every child’s care is tailored to meet their individual needs (in accordance with paragraph 1.10), to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents.

Dowling (2014:97) discusses this statutory requirement and the difference in terminology that can be encountered; sometimes ‘key worker’ is used instead of ‘key person’. It is apparent that the terms can be used interchangeably. Whichever term is used, the role is based on the significance of the relationship between adult and child. The key person is not a replacement for a primary attachment figure, but a child who has been able to enjoy a secure attachment at home should be able to make another, secondary attachment, to a practitioner. In a nursery setting with high ratios of adults to children, the development of relationships is monitored and a child can often be matched to a practitioner for whom she shows affection. That person becomes someone who offers safety and security to the child within the setting, and who also acts as a point of contact with the parents or main caregivers at home. Trusting relationships should be formed not only between the adult and the child, but also between the adults. This enables a child to talk openly about her carers at home and in the setting, developing mutual understanding through continuity of care.

Brooker (2008:152) considers difficulties imposed by practitioners working shifts where care cannot be continuous for a child, and where the key person role has to be split. Whilst many children are able to make numerous attachments, this may not be possible for all children. Dowling (2014:98) considers the role in a reception class where ratios are different from other settings and where there is often only a teacher and a teaching assistant to take on the role for a large number of children. Brooker (2008) suggests that the role can be shared, emphasising that for children who are new to school there should be a key person available for them. The statutory requirement is for the key person to be named and for his or her role to be explained. Whether the role is shared or not is not always clear, and some children might not know who their key person is. Dowling (2014:98) explains that the organisation of playtimes and lunchtimes, when children can encounter other adults, is a particularly vulnerable time and this is when the key person can be most supportive. Brooker et al (2010) found when researching practitioners’ experiences of the EYFS that where the key person system was securely in place valuable support was provided for children’s well being, but in some reception classes some teachers felt that taking on the role of key person was an unrealistic expectation due to the nature and extent of their other responsibilities.

The role of the key person extends into the field of assessment through the requirement for parents, the child and the key person and other professionals to create records of development and progress (DfES 2007 Principles into Practice card). Brooker et al (2010) present a mixed picture here, with practice in this respect varying considerably. If there is a lack of clarity about the role of the key person at present, then any changes to the assessment process, such as the introduction of a baseline assessment, may well result in even more confusion. The notion that practitioners would be accountable for the learning of the young children in their care against government expectations or outcomes, we will argue, has resulted in changes to the assessment process and brought into question the nature of the role of the key person.

**The accountability agenda**

Basford and Bath (2014) provide a reminder that the requirement for educators of young children to monitor and assess their learning progress became enshrined in government policy through the introduction of Desirable Learning Outcomes for entry to compulsory schooling, in 1996 (DfEE/SCAA). Here, funding for an early years setting delivering education to children followed on from compliance with these requirements and so an ‘accountability agenda’ was created. The Nursery Vouchers Scheme (1996) introduced in the final year of the then Conservative government but withdrawn in the following year by the newly formed Labour government, allowed parents with four year old children access to £1000 each for use across a range of provision. Correspondingly, private, voluntary and independent nurseries that met a government imposed set of national requirements were able to drawn down funding to provide free part-time places for these young children. Reflecting on this, in 2014, Dubiel considered that the Nursery Vouchers Scheme presented *“… a plethora of measurements, expectations, targets and duties …”* (2014:45). Prior to this, practitioners in early years settings were able to develop their own approach to assessment based on the principles and values they collectively upheld, untroubled by any wider expectations (Dubiel, 2014).

In other words, from 1996, “… *assessment expectations in ECE* [Early Childhood Education] *have been a key policy lever for successive UK governments to bring people, organisations and objectives into alignment. “* (Basford and Bath, 2014:121). This remains the case, at present, with an EYFSP (STA, 2015) that outlines the assessment and recording requirements for each child’s progress in terms of a set of Early Learning Goals and three Characteristics of Effective Learning. However, it could be argued that the process of completing the EYFSP, in being carried out by that practitioner who is engaged in teaching and learning alongside the children over time, allows the early years setting to take ownership of this accountability and maintain its real purpose, which is to support the individual child in a climate that fosters his well being and overall happiness. This practitioner has come to know and understand the child well and can therefore provide accurate and authentic judgements. Therefore, in England we have an assessment process that arguably satisfies this accountability agenda whilst maintaining a child-focused position. In 2014, however, the coalition government proposed a sea change in introducing a new tool, in the form of a reception baseline assessment.

**Proposed changes to the assessment of children in the final year of the EYFS**

A reception baseline assessment, to be carried out within a child’s first few weeks in school, has been proposed as a tool for external measurement of pupil progress in England. The idea is not a new one, having been trialled and rejected during the 1980’s. In describing the proposed changes, the Schools’ Minister, David Laws, in a written statement on reforms to primary (5-11) and 16 to 19 accountability, reduced the EYFSP to a non-statutory position from 2016.

To judge schools’ progress more fairly … introduce a new assessment taken during reception as the baseline. This will sit within teachers’ broader ongoing assessments of children’s development and progress throughout reception. The reception baseline will be used to assess schools’ progress for children who start reception in September 2016 and beyond. (Department for Education and the Rt Hon David Laws, 2014)

This new policy, piloted in September 2015 for introduction from September 2016, had as its purpose, the evaluation of a *school’s* performance, rather than the performance of an individual child. The attainment of each cohort of children on entry to school would be identified and comparisons enabled with external attainment data gained on exit, at the point of transition to secondary schools. In other words, the accountability measure for for each school would be the difference between the results of the reception baseline and the external testing at the end of primary school. Here the accountability agenda shifts its focus away from one that is supportive of the individual child towards a position neatly summed up in the introduction to the reporting of the professional associations’ (National Union of Teachers/ Association of Teachers and Lecturers) research critiquing the introduction of baseline as, “the weight of school accountability has been laid on the shoulders of our children.” (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2016:3).It is worth reminding ourselves here that these children at the time of such assessment will be four years old; an examination of the nature and purpose of assessment, with reference to such young children, would appear to be pertinent here.

**The nature and purpose of assessment**

At a broader level, the introduction of the reception baseline assessment, alongside the now established two-year-old progress check, to the EYFS, may be considered as offering a lens to the ongoing and international debate in early childhood as to the nature and purpose of assessment for our youngest children. This debate has two loci: Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL), broadly demarcated as “child-led” in relation to AfL and “curriculum-led” for AoL (Basford and Bath, 2014). Figure 1 illustrates the nature and purpose of AfL and AoL as considered by this paper and the authors’ corresponding position that the previously held balance between these two purposes could now, as a result of the reception baseline assessment, be shifting in favour of AoL. This is worthy of our attention since AfL, we argue, supports the happiness and well-being of the child, whereas AoL offers a response to the accountability agenda previously described. Furthermore it is contested here that it is in the gift of the key person to hold this balance between these often competing purposes of assessment, since it is he who advocates for the child and her family through the joint enterprise of pedagogical documentation and discourse and in the context of positive relationships, gained in relation to the child, through secure attachment. In other words, the professional identity of the key person is considered to be at stake as a result of this potential shift in assessment policy.

**Figure 1**

The impact of this proposed government policy, which would replace the individual child’s EYFSP with a reception baseline accountability measure is far-reaching: teacher confidence and judgement, some of the very requirements for pedagogical effectiveness, may be eroded, not least by the lack of trust implied in the notion of accountability, resulting in a move closer to the position already identified by Carr as far back as 2001:47 :*“… as demands for external accountability press more insistently on the profession, surveillance begins to encroach on intuitive and responsive teaching.”* As we have claimed, at a broader level, the introduction of the reception baseline prompts discourse on the very nature and purpose of assessment. Swaffield (2009) in her discussion of Assessment for Learning (AfL) reminds us that the word ‘assessment’ is derived from the Latin for ‘sitting beside’, one implication being that this is very much part of the teacher’s role and the other is that assessment should mirror the very process of learning itself. Ofsted would seem to concur with this link between assessment and learning, citing one of the recommendations of the Assessing Pupils’ Progress initiative (2009), *“… be clear that the purpose of assessment is to improve achievement not just measure attainment.”* (2011: 6).

Carr (2001) goes even further in identifying that the method of assessing learning can actually sustain learning: if the learning is documented in a narrative format that can be re-presented to the child then her views and reflections on that learning may, indeed offer opportunity for new learning. If this learning story is, furthermore, able to be shared with parents and carers then reciprocity with what is encountered in the home environment, by way of learning, may occur and, finally, when the story is considered by the wider team of the setting, the addition of other resources to build, even more, on this learning can be planned. This is a far cry from the purpose and nature of assessment implied in the reception baseline: a summative judgement against a set of curricula objectives used to evaluate a school’s progress, carried out in the first term of the reception year. Here the purpose of assessment as evaluation supports the scientific discourse of empiricism (Basford and Bath, 2014) and in doing so militates against the “unique child”, now something of an English tradition since its inclusion as a principal theme underpinning the EYFS framework, and which implies individuality in learning, understanding of which may demand consideration of the views of all the different stakeholders in that child, not least himself.

The use of assessment to establish a general baseline of attainment for a school cohort or class reveals policy makers’ views on the purposes of education. Alasuutari et al (2014: 47) describe education as a composite concept and, in doing so, refer to the work of Biesta (2009, 2011) who suggests that this concept has three different components: qualification, socialization and subjectification. Qualification refers to the attainment of knowledge, skills and dispositions by the child, whereas socialization and subjectification are both concerned with the broader aims of education: socialization being about how the child is brought into the group, with subjectification focusing on the unique nature of the individual child. It is clear that the reception baseline will evidence this qualification component of education, however, assessment in early childhood, it is argued, will need to continue to reflect the extent of socialization with others as well as the uniqueness of the child.

**The timing of the proposed reception baseline assessment**

This system of baseline assessment was due to be conducted during the first few weeks of a child’s first term in a reception class in school. It should be noted here that the end of the reception year in school currently marks the end of the Foundation Stage and the current assessment tool, the EYFSP, is finalised towards the end of the summer term. The consequences of this proposed change in practice are twofold; firstly, the assessment would be two terms earlier, thus allowing less time for the child to acquire the skills and abilities set out in the early Learning Goals and secondly, the child would not be well known by the adult (s) monitoring and assessing her in the new setting. Secondly, the term ‘baseline assessment’ refers to a test of knowledge, with the data for each child reflecting what the child cannot do just as much as his level of attainment. This provides a deficit image of the child that suggests need rather than ability and that is at odds with the child “who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured” envisaged in the Unique Child principle (EYFS, 2014:6).

Currently, much assessment takes place informally through the process of observation, focusing on the child rather than the outcome. A practitioner who knows and understands her children well carries it out, as the named ‘key person’ for a child or a number of children. If the baseline assessment takes place in the autumn term, teachers and teaching assistants will not have had chance to get to know their children because of the process of transition, or have the same level of awareness of their ability. The key person system will not be securely in place, not least because of the different adult-child ratios within the school system. There is thus a conflict here between the view of the competent, able child who learns in a warm and supportive environment, and the accountability agenda, where the assessment process is of greater importance than the relationship between the child and the practitioner.

**The professional identity of the practitioner**

The introduction of this new assessment tool has implications for teachers’ capacity to see the holistic nature of the child and, perhaps, even childhood, since different assessment tools may offer a different version of the child. It is now argued there is also direct resonance with the professional identity of the adults involved. In adopting this “test” the professional lives of teachers may be impoverished, since this assessment tool casts teachers and learners in very traditional roles, in which there is a clear distinction between the one who teaches and the other who learns. The tools of formative assessment, on the other hand, enhance the pedagogical skills of teachers through practical engagement with others as well as reflection and critical thinking prompted by documentation of children’s learning.

The first few weeks in a reception class can either be used to get to know the children and their families well and encourage them to feel welcomed into a new environment, or they can be a time when assessment is prioritised over the development of attachment relationships, which leads to children feeling insecure following their transition and possibly unable to respond appropriately. If a child is assessed at the point of entry to school and the person assessing him is his new teacher, the child may well feel under pressure. The teacher does not know the child well at this point and needs to form a relationship. Consequently, the entire premise of the key person role is compromised, with a shift in balance from nurture to assessment. If teachers are to*“… be clear that the purpose of assessment is to improve achievement not just measure attainment.”* (Ofsted 2011: 6) then teachers must prioritise the learning needs of children rather than the evaluation of the school’s progress.

Education is a composite concept Alasuutari et al (2014: 47) and Biesta’s (2009, 2011) three components must be valued in the assessment process if this is to remain authentic to the nature of both children and their co-learners, that is, their teachers. Teachers need to understand their role in formative assessment and to engage in critical reflection with a range of others, including parents and carers and the child herself, in making assessments of learning. It is imperative that we continue to see children as unique individuals and to view their progress in the widest sense possible, attending to happiness and well being as part of the process of assessing for learning.

**Conclusion**

Government proposals in 2014 presented a particular direction for the nature and purpose of assessment in the final year of the EYFS: measuring the abilities of four and five year olds within days of them starting primary school in order to be able to chart their progress over time and hence judge the effectiveness of their schooling. At the time of writing, there has been a U-turn by the Department for Education (DfE) in relation to this policy, following the piloting of the three different available baseline assessments available to schools between 2015-2016 and a compatability study by the DfE, which concluded that comparisons between the three assessments could not be made and so a baseline for the measurement of pupil progress wasnot possible. The authors of tis paper welcome this development, since it has opened up a space for further consideration of what constitutes the nature and purpose of assessment in the early years. We hereby argue that it is now incumbent upon those in the profession to define good assessment practice through the role of the key person in children’s learning and, indeed, implore wider discourse that includes cognisance of the identities of both this adult and the child. Ultimately, policy in relation to assessment will then be located, once more, in the themes and principles of the EYFS.

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