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Ms Beatrice Merrick
Chief Executive
Early Education

Lee Owston HMI
Acting National Director, Education

Sent by email to: Beatrice@Early-Education.org.uk

Our ref: 478107

Dear Ms Merrick

Early Years Curriculum Review

Thank you for your letter of 18 November 2022 to His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman. I have been asked to respond in my capacity as Acting National Director, Education.

In your letter, you and other signatories raise a number of concerns about our recent publication 'Best start in Life'. This is the first in a series of research reviews focusing on the factors that contribute to a high-quality education for children from birth to four. It explores literature relating to early years education, drawing on a range of sources, including academic and policy literature.

I am sorry that you found elements of the report concerning. However, a number of the concerns you raise relate to content that we have not included in this first publication. Subsequent publications will provide opportunities to further explore these aspects and so I have not directly responded to these specific issues within this letter. I will address each of the remaining concerns below.

First, you are concerned that this first part of the research series seems to rely on a small and incomplete review of the literature. You state that it does not reflect the wealth of excellent practice in the sector. The purpose of this first report was to consider what research can tell us about some of the key factors that contribute to a high-quality early education. It was not intended to report on the wealth of good practice that exists. We intend to publish further reports in due course that are based on inspection findings, after the research review series has been published. In these later reports, we will want to reflect the depth and breadth of excellent practice that exists within the sector.

You also raise concerns that the report is an implicit threat to providers being downgraded for not complying with what is set out in its content. I can reassure you that this report does not constitute a new or updated inspection framework. We continue to inspect in line with the principles and requirements of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) and as outlined in our current inspection handbooks.¹

Coverage of all EYFS provision

You are concerned that the research review focuses on the 0-4 age range and does not include the reception year. You suggest that this reflects the split between Ofsted's schools and early years inspection frameworks.

We always aim to make our publications relevant and useful to users. Many recent reports have covered children's learning in the reception year. For example, 'Bold Beginnings' in 2017 and the more recent schools research reviews. Most nurseries and childminders work with the 0-4 age group and not with older children. In this series of reviews, we therefore decided to focus on what is relevant to them rather than the whole EYFS. This new research review complements previous publications and shines a spotlight on the importance of the 0-4 age-range, whatever type of setting a child may attend.

Both early years-registered provision and early years in schools are inspected under the same overarching framework – the education inspection framework.² This framework is a unifying approach for all education inspection remits. The separate inspection handbooks for early years inspections and school inspections share many of the same criteria in terms of the quality of education judgement. The separate handbooks are then tailored to match the differing structures and approaches taken in private, voluntary and independent settings compared to schools. The early years inspection handbook also acknowledges the different legal requirements of registered early years providers.

Underpinning principles

In your letter, you suggest that the principles underpinning the review should reflect the principles of the EYFS itself, and that the review does not give sufficient emphasis to the uniqueness of every child.

¹ 'Early years inspection handbook for Ofsted-registered provision', Ofsted, November 2022; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-handbook-eif/early-years-inspection-handbook-for-ofsted-registered-provision-for-september-2022.

² 'Education inspection framework', Ofsted, July 2022; www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework.

The research review has a specific focus on the needs of all children. This is not to negate that every child is unique. Instead, our intention is to emphasise the importance of a high-quality education for all children and in particular, the most disadvantaged. The review emphasises the importance of knowing each child well, knowing their interests, what they can do and what they need to learn next. This is particularly important when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our youngest children. The principles underpinning the EYFS are already implicit in our work, and we inspect in line with them.

Limited engagement with research evidence

You express concerns about the selection of research references in the report.

We have been clear that, for this review, we drew on literature that supports the criteria for high-quality early education as set out in the EIF, and explore its key themes via reference to a range of sources.

We would further highlight that the research review is part one of a multi-part review. The academic sources cited in part one of the review, therefore, constitute only part of the body of evidence drawn upon to inform the overall body of work. Thus, while this report on its own was never intended to be a comprehensive systematic review, it has a clear purpose and clear principles underlay the choice of references.

Definition of curriculum

You disagree with Ofsted's definition of curriculum and suggest that it is narrow.

We published our definition of curriculum in 2019. The curriculum sets out what providers want children to learn. The areas of learning in the EYFS provide a broad outline of what children need to learn and what they should be able to do. A provider's curriculum then breaks down those requirements into achievable steps for children. Although our definition is relatively new, effective practitioners have always thought about what children need to learn and the smaller steps towards achieving success.

Definition of teaching

You are concerned that we have updated our definition of teaching by removing the first sentence which stated, 'Teaching in the early years should not be taken to imply a "top down" or formal way of working.'

We appreciate that this has become a valued definition since it was introduced in 2015. We decided to remove this sentence for brevity, as subsequent wording seemed adequate, and to clarify that more formal approaches to teaching may indeed be appropriate depending on what it is that children need to learn. For example, the original definition may have led early years practitioners to inadvertently think they could not use direct teaching as a way of teaching the youngest children new knowledge and concepts.

How children learn and cognitive science

You are concerned that this first review only references breakthroughs in cognitive science, and that cognitive science research is sometimes misapplied.

It is Ofsted's position that any account of how we learn necessarily involves attending to cognitive elements. Therefore, we want to understand and take account of what cognitive psychology can tell us about how humans learn. For example, across all age ranges, working memory is easily overloaded. Concepts therefore need to be broken down into smaller parts and introduced gradually.

In your letter, you have noted what appears to be an omission of the characteristics of effective teaching and learning (CoETL): 'playing and exploring', 'active learning' and 'creative and critical thinking'. Our review intends to build on what is established in the EYFS, particularly the way that cognitive science now acknowledges that to play, be active, create and think critically, children need the knowledge and skills necessary to take part in these kinds of activities. They also need to develop executive function, on which there is a large body of research, pertinent to very young children, in different fields such as developmental science and educational psychology. It is likely that future publications in this series will make connections with CoETL. In this publication, we simply wanted to introduce these concepts. Given the weight of evidence and research in the area of executive function, it will warrant further discussion in future publications.

Following children's interests

You are concerned that the review suggests that practitioners may limit children to their existing interests and will not provide opportunities to develop new ones. We acknowledge the importance of following children's interests in the report. However, we know that planning based purely on a child's interests can narrow a child's learning from a very young age. The review provides explicit examples about how this can be detrimental if it becomes a sole focus for practitioners. It is why we state that, 'It is important to ensure that all children have the opportunity to really develop and talk about a full range of interests.'

Play and reflecting the realities of early years practice

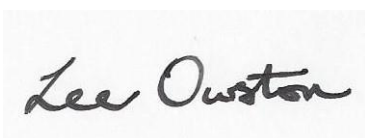
While you welcome the review's recognition of the importance of play, you are concerned that the review has not included all the literature on the topic. You also state that the examples used in the review to illustrate some of the findings are not well chosen or explained.

The publication is intended to be short, focused and accessible. We want to provide practitioners with helpful guiding principles and straightforward examples. The examples were chosen carefully to illustrate important points that most practitioners can relate to their own practice and experience. As we have said in part one itself, the report is not intended to be a systemic literature review.

Finally, you suggest that we trial the forthcoming research reviews with knowledgeable and experienced practitioners and researchers. I agree that this is important and can confirm that this is something we do regularly, for example, through our Early Education Curriculum Forum. This group represents a wide range of expertise, including academics, practitioners and representative bodies. We will continue to engage with this group as we work on future publications in the series.

Thank you again for taking the time to raise your concerns with us. We will give these due consideration as we develop our future research reviews and publications.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lee Owston".

Lee Owston HMI

Acting National Director, Education