

UKLA's Response to Consultation on Proposed Early Years Foundation Stage Reforms

January 2020

UKLA has submitted the following responses to key questions posed as part of a consultation on reforms to the Early Years Foundation Stage in England.

Further details on the scope of the consultation can be found here:

<https://consult.education.gov.uk/early-years-quality-outcomes/early-years-foundation-stage-reforms/>

Q8 - Please give us your views on whether the activities described in each of the proposed educational programme summaries support children's learning and development throughout the EYFS.

UKLA Response

It is important that early years teachers and practitioners are confident and knowledgeable and that policy frameworks enable them to make judgements about appropriate pedagogical practices to ensure good outcomes for all children. It is equally important that teachers adopt a responsive approach in the use of resources and teaching methods that is adapted to children's needs (Ellis and Smith, 2017). Therefore, it is welcome that the DfE state that the Early Years Foundation Stage framework does not prescribe a particular 'teaching approach', and that the practitioner 'responds appropriately to the age and needs of the children being taught'. It is also reassuring to read that the proposed Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is not intended to be used as an accountability measure for school performance. Indeed, with respect to the statutory assessment of English, the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) has repeatedly expressed concerns about high stakes testing and accountability measures that can lead to a narrow literacy curriculum, counterproductive to the aims of teaching pupils to read widely, for pleasure and for information and the associated educational benefits. The clearer focus on sharing stories and discussion in the proposed educational programmes for 'Communication and Language' and 'Literacy' is also welcomed by UKLA.

Our main concern is the way in which the proposed educational programmes for Communication and Language and for Literacy position literacy as purely a set of skills to be acquired. By presenting it in this way, literacy is set apart from the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs. UKLA recognises that (early) literacy is far more than a set of skills and is best understood as a social and cultural practice (Street, 1995) that varies significantly between contexts (Gutierrez, Bein, Seland and Pierce, 2011). Early literacy pedagogy radically shapes children's understandings of what literacy is, and who it is for (Levy, 2011). Children enter (and always have entered) early education settings with a broad range of literacy experiences that are influenced by their home and community. It is therefore important to recognise the diverse range of linguistic and cultural experiences and literacies that children bring to the classroom.

Where these home experiences differ from those literacies associated with schooling, children may be immediately placed at a disadvantage.

The revised orders for Literacy duly recognise that engagement and enjoyment impact positively on progress in reading (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998) and promote a curriculum that nurtures children's **will** to read as well as their **skill** to read (Cremin et al., 2014). Indeed, early literacy pedagogy should nurture positive experiences of reading and recognise book sharing and early writing as embodied and affective experiences. It is important that, as well as books, children are encouraged to have access to a wide range of reading materials. Given that reading in the 21st century requires children to read texts on and off screen (Davidson, 2009), these should include digital resources.

Whilst acknowledging that literacy is a central goal of early schooling, it is important that children encounter a flexible play-based pedagogy that looks more broadly at literacy (both reading and writing) and which recognises that:

- Children participate in schooled literacy as they remix this with their home and community experiences and concerns (Genishi and Dyson, 2009);
- Collaborative narrative play and the texts that arise from their play support children's narrative competence, which in turn supports the symbolic representation skills needed for reading and writing (Sawyer and De Zutter, 2007);
- Play can be seen as a productive preparation for literacy that draws on gestural, spatial, symbolic and material modes and offers children diverse sites for participation (Wohlwend, 2011);
- Children engage with digital and non-digital literacies across their home and school experiences (Davidson, 2009).

UKLA therefore proposes that:

- **The links between early literacy and other forms of meaning making, expression and representation (such as Expressive Arts, Design) are made more explicit.**
- **There is greater recognition of the significance of young children's experiences of interpreting the broad range of graphic/symbolic representations they encounter from day to day, such as cultural texts (e.g. greetings cards, event flyers, restaurant menus, etc.), environmental/commercial print and digital texts, in addition to more conventional book-based children's literature, poetry and non-fiction.**

Q9. Please give us your views on whether the proposed ELGs are clear, specific and easy to understand. Please provide your views below, being specific about which ELGs they apply to where appropriate.

UKLA Response

Whilst the holistic nature of children's development must be acknowledged, it is also necessary to articulate the ELGs as distinct areas of learning. As explicated in our response to Q6, UKLA welcomes the re-ordering of the ELG for literacy and the emphasis on comprehension through stories, non-fiction, poetry and role-play. However, it must also be acknowledged, in the ELGs for Listening, Attention and Understanding and for Comprehension, that children's responses to what they have heard, read or seen are shaped by the lived experiences that they bring to the text, and thus are personal, analytic and intertextual (Sipe, 2008). There needs to be clarity that there is no single 'correct' interpretation to be extracted from a text. Children may respond in

unpredictable ways and the individuality and diversity of their responses are often indicative of deep-level engagement.

Q10. Please give us your views on whether the proposed ELGs contribute to a well-rounded assessment of a child's development at the end of reception year. Please provide your views below, being specific about which ELGs they apply to where appropriate.

UKLA Response

UKLA welcomes the emphasis on young children's communication and language. However, research suggests that the expectations for speaking, word reading/comprehension and writing are currently too narrow. Below we suggest a series of ways in which the ELGs need to be expanded.

Proposed ELG - Speaking

Communication and Language in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum emphasises the importance of supporting young children's development in spoken language. As a prime area, it is given its rightful status. Early communication is seen as essential for the development of thinking and reasoning, self regulation, behaviour and access to education. As is clearly stated in the Early Years Foundation Stage practice guidance, *Development Matters*, children learn at different rates and in different ways. The ways in which young children (and all people) use expressive language are diverse and varied. This must be taken into account when considering the parameters of developmental norms (see Letts et al., 2013). Furthermore, children communicate through a multiplicity of modes (Kress, 2010), drawing on speech, action, gesture. Their communicative repertoires do not merely consist of the 'words' they produce. This suggests that the ELG should acknowledge all aspects of children's communication, and not just the words they speak. In addition, the ELG should be expressed in a way that allows and encourages teachers to build on children's interests and linguistic experiences, including sign language. Claxton and Carr (2014) propose that an environment that supports early language and communication will provide opportunities for children to express their views and collaborate in play and learning opportunities that match their interests. This suggests that a flexible pedagogy where practitioners skilfully build on children's language and communication across multiple modes, is required.

Unlike written language, spoken language is often spontaneous and fluid, that is, it is unrehearsed or unprepared. Therefore it is not appropriate to assume that children will always 'Express their ideas and feelings about their experiences using full sentences'. This view is based on understandings of the formality of written language, rather than the spontaneity of spoken language (Crystal, 2005). Rather, very often adults' spoken language contains false starts, hesitations, overlaps and fillers and, in order to engage in collaborative and exploratory talk and its associated cognitive and social benefits (Mercer and Dawes, 2008), children should not be pressurised to speak in 'full sentences'. In addition, the requirement for children to use accurate forms of past, present and future tenses does not recognise the virtuous errors and generalisations that young children use in spoken repertoires. The ELG should promote pedagogy that encourages children to use their developing vocabulary to express themselves in depth and detail. Too much emphasis on grammatical correctness at this stage may deter some children from taking part in classroom conversation. In addition, the requirement for accuracy may be particularly undermining to children whose heritage language is not English or whose regional dialect uses more generalised forms. To insist on accuracy at this young age has the potential to stifle and undermine young children's confidence and participation.

The requirement to use 'recently introduced vocabulary' marks the transition from children's receptive language to their expressive language. This is an important step in young children's communicative repertoires. However, it also needs to be emphasised that teachers need to be sensitive to and recognise the language children bring to their experiences, not just children's adoption of those forms introduced in schools.

In summary UKLA proposes that the ELG for speaking needs to be broadened to include the following statements:

- **Children talk about their experiences, thoughts and ideas with other children and adults, with increasing confidence and detail.**
- **Children enjoy learning new words and often bring these into their play and other interactions with peers and adults.**

Proposed ELGs – Word Reading / Comprehension

A broad and balanced approach to teaching reading involves recognising the process as multidimensional; the reader must synthesise phonic knowledge, word recognition, linguistic knowledge, subject knowledge and contextual information in the process of making sense of written text. UKLA agrees that some systematic phonics instruction is beneficial to children's reading development (Castles et al., 2018) and that literacy pedagogy requires the explicit teaching of metacognitive and comprehension strategies (Concannon-Gibney and Murphy, 2010). However, we do not agree that the 'Simple View of Reading' (Gough and Tunmer, 1986), i.e. 'decoding + word comprehension = reading', provides an adequate model of reading development. Recognising the complexity and multiple dimensions of reading would enable teachers and children to see that literacy (both reading and writing) involves communication and understanding and not just decoding (Anderson et al., 1988; Taylor and Pearson, 2002).

In summary, UKLA proposes that the ELG for Word Reading should include the following statement:

- **Children incorporate a range of strategies to begin to read a wide range of texts, drawing on their knowledge of letter - sound correspondence, knowledge of language structure, contextual information, word recognition and subject knowledge.**

Proposed ELG- Writing

The proposed ELG for writing focuses on children's ability to author a written text with pen and paper. There is a risk here that this would lead to an over-emphasis on the assessment of fine motor control and transcription (spelling and letter formation). A focus on transcription draws attention away from the important process of writing and leads to an over-emphasis on the product (DfCSF, 2008). UKLA recommends that children are provided with opportunities to explore the meaning-making and mark-making potential of a wide range of materials (Bromley, 2006). By legitimising children's writing through digital media, for example, or through other non-conventional forms (magnetic letters or poster-style texts), the ELG would offer a more effective tool for assessing children's writing development. UKLA also recommends that children should experience a flexible pedagogy for writing that involves shared and guided writing, teacher modelling, and teaching transcription skills (spelling and letter formation). The teaching of transcription skills alone is not an effective way of teaching early writing.

The ELG needs to recognise that writing is a form of purposeful communication. While transcription is part of learning to write, children are motivated to write when provided with

authentic audiences and when writing for a communicative purpose. It is through such experiences that children develop an awareness of what writing is and what writing can do. The role of playful exploration in the process of creating written texts should not be underestimated. Children should be provided with the opportunities and a range of materials to explore what their early representations and marks can mean to themselves and others. Children's early mark making profiles are fuelled by their play interests and play behaviours (Rowe, 2010) and a flexible pedagogy where purposeful mark-making is encouraged is needed.

In summary, UKLA proposes that the ELG for Writing should include the following statements:

- **Children communicate simple messages in play, fictional and everyday contexts for a range of purposes.**
- **Children explore the potential of creating multimodal texts including digital texts.**
- **Children draw on a range of available materials and mark-making tools to express and share meanings.**

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