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Insights Into a High-Quality Early Years Curriculum

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Executive Summary

The quality of early years education and childcare (EYE&CC) is well established as facilitating the holistic development of young children and providing the foundations to their life-long learning. However, while the quality of EYE&CC has been well researched and theorised, there has been less of a specific focus on the quality of the early years curriculum. Early years curriculum has been identified as an area of struggle, generating questions about its content and coherence (and how these are determined?)¹. In the English context, there has been a tendency to focus on guidance documents and frameworks in support of facilitating children’s development, rather than having a specific early years curriculum. In fact, Ofsted (as the regulatory body for EYE&CC provision in England) clearly states that it does not have a preferred way for how settings design their early years curriculum². However, Ofsted do make the distinction between curriculum as ‘what is taught’ and pedagogy as ‘how it is taught’³, but inevitably there is a close relationship between the two that warrants further exploration as to what constitutes a high-quality early years curriculum and what does this look like in practice?

The aim of the *Insights Into a High-Quality Early Years Curriculum* project was therefore to explore the perspectives of multiple stakeholders on what are the features of a high-quality early years curriculum? The research was undertaken in four core stages:

1. A Delphi survey of experts (e.g. academics, sector representatives)
2. Nominal group technique focus groups with educators
3. An appreciative inquiry of practice
4. Learning walks with educators

The mix of methods and participants ensured the research collected the views of a range of stakeholders, providing rich and broad data on the core question of what are the features of a high-quality early years curriculum? All data were analysed for core themes, with a consideration for where themes complemented each other across the different data sources and for evidence of consensus and/or contradiction.

Across the data, common themes emerged around following the child, the importance of trained educators, the role of the environment, inclusion, working with families, observation and assessment and children’s development. There was a strong sense that the curriculum was open ended, focusing on the uniqueness of the child in support of their social and emotional development. Educators were seen to require the knowledge and skills to be able to follow the child and to provide learning opportunities in the moment, based on the needs and interests of the child. There was recognition for

¹ Wood, E., & Hedges, H. (2016) Curriculum in early childhood education: critical questions about content, coherence, and control, *The Curriculum Journal*, 27:3, 387-405, DOI: 10.1080/09585176.2015.1129981

² [Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611212/statutory-framework-for-the-early-years-foundation-stage.pdf)

³ [Best start in life: a research review for early years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/research-data-and-analysis/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years)

acknowledging the cultural contexts of children and the families and communities that they were from, signaling the importance of parental partnership. In part, this related to ensuring the approach to the curriculum was inclusive, irrespective of a child's background, but inclusion also brought about discussions on differentiation in support of providing a range of learning opportunities to support children's learning.

The environment was seen as being able to facilitate providing opportunities for enriching children's learning and facilitating their agency, while reflecting the needs and interests of the child. Examples from practice illustrated how educators utilise the environment and the resources in it to offer prompts and stimulations in support of children's learning. The prompts would be informed by aspects of developmentalism, but would seek to be based upon the interests of the child. The curriculum therefore did not reflect a model whereby there were distinct subjects with a specific course of study (as can be found in other stages of education), but was instead thematic in its approach, with integration across themes and subjects. 'What is taught' was therefore grounded in children's needs and interests, often emerging in the moment to support children's expression and interests. The professional knowledge of educators was found to be essential in facilitating this unique and distinct model of curriculum.

Key Findings

- **The early years curriculum is distinct to all other stages of education**, requiring a clear definition to facilitate its articulation. A curriculum typically sets out a course of study in line with the transmission of knowledge and skills, but an early years curriculum is less prescriptive and more iterative.
- **The early years curriculum is an emergent, expressive and contextual curriculum**, with an emphasis on responding to the needs and interests of the child, while offering autonomy of exploration, in support of their development.
- **The early years curriculum is a collaborative curriculum**, where the pedagogy of the early years curriculum upholds an approach that follows the child and supports the child's expression through a collaboration between the child and the educator.
- **The early years curriculum is an integrated curriculum**, cutting across subjects, topics and forms of knowledge.
- **The knowledge and expertise of educators is central to the quality of an early years curriculum**. Educators utilise knowledge of child development in their interactions with children to support a personalised approach to learning, that differentiates for an inclusive curriculum.
- **Curriculum in early years education is most strongly represented through practice**, but it can be hard to articulate and would benefit from a set of linked concepts. Current concepts are more associated with pedagogy and need to be reframed in the context of discussions on curriculum.
- **Initial and continued training for staff in early years education should include content on curriculum to create confidence in its articulation.**

A High-Quality Early Years Curriculum Is...

An emergent curriculum

Responding to the needs, interests and stage of development of a child.

Educators will understand trajectories of child development and will draw on this knowledge while building on children's interests in support of their learning. The curriculum therefore might evolve in the moment, but it is not completely free. Educators will provide resources and interact with children to guide their learning and development in ways that support their future educational trajectory.

A contextual curriculum

Recognising the ecological context of the child and the diverse backgrounds that children will come from.

The curriculum responds to and supports children to express their interests and capabilities, building on their cultural capital in support of their life-long learning.

An expressive curriculum

Builds on the autonomy of the child, whereby children shape the curriculum through their active participation in the EYE&CC setting.

There is an emphasis on children as capable and for children to be able to express themselves in terms of their capabilities, set against the context of building on their interests and an understanding of their ecological context.