

Response to the Revised Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage

September 2011

Introduction

1. The National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Education's Consultation on a Revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). NALDIC supports the retention of the 'Overarching Principles' within the EYFS.
2. Overall the revised EYFS focuses too heavily on children's 'school readiness' and the importance of early phonic learning. We are disappointed that the revised EYFS displays little regard for the importance of the breadth of early years' learning and early years' language learning in particular.
3. Of particular concern is the suggestion that although home languages can be used in learning and play, communication, language and literacy skills must be assessed only in English and any delays for bilingual children in reaching expected levels in English are around '*language delay*'. It is suggested that providers contact parents and explore the child's first language skills only when some delay in English learning has occurred.
4. In our view, settings should be talking to parents, mapping and planning for the development of **all of a child's languages on entry**, not only when potential problems set in. The focus within the framework on 'English only' and the lack of tangible support for communication across languages is unhelpful at a time when our early years settings become more multilingual by the day.
5. We are concerned about the impact this will have on early years settings, particularly when combined with the impact of early reading assessments later on in children's educational experience. We have already noted an increase in formalised assessment of speech and language difficulties which pay scant regard to a child's 'other' languages or their learning of EAL (as opposed to the learning of English as a mother-tongue which is a different). Both a child's first language learning and their learning of EAL or other languages are an essential part of their linguistic make-up.
6. Tickell in her independent report on the EYFS made a recommendation that '***the government investigate urgently how the development of children's English language skills can be effectively supported and assessed***'. We see no evidence of this recommendation being acted upon within the revised EYFS which is a missed opportunity.

7. Within the document there is an encouragement for settings to provide opportunities for first language activities and opportunities to learn and reach a good standard in English language during the EYFS. This is admirable. However this positive stance is limited by the requirement for an English-only' early assessment which is standardised on English mother tongue norms.
8. This demonstrates a lack of recognition that the process of learning English as an additional language **is different from** the process of learning a first language. This is a concern as it also leads directly to the erroneous assumption that where bilingual children are not reaching expected levels, the default answer is language delay.
9. This is unhelpful in diagnosing real language delays within the bilingual population and wasteful of resources as the vast majority of bilingual children could be falsely identified as having a language delay when in fact they are learning EAL but are being assessed as English mother tongue speakers.

The learning and development requirements with particular reference to Q6

10. The learning and development requirements emphasise the importance of children being 'school-ready' but make no attempt to define the meaning of school-readiness. NALDIC is concerned that without a clear definition some practitioners may interpret it in a way which leads to a 'too formal too soon' approach for young children. The EYFS is not simply a preparation for 'school-readiness' but a distinct and important phase in its own right.
11. There is an additional danger that for some practitioners school readiness may mean 'reading readiness' and a focus on formal phonic learning in particular before children are developmentally ready. This can have a negative impact on learning and a child's overall enjoyment of learning, particularly for bilingual children.
12. The Revised EYFS includes none of the Tickell Review recommendations on the appropriateness of provision and pedagogy in the early years and instead focuses on 'instruction' and 'accuracy', particularly in the 'Communication and Language' section. As noted above it also fails to include the Tickell Review recommendations on the need to develop appropriate language assessments and support. This is a concern.
13. In reference specifically to paragraph 1.7 which says that

For children whose home language is not English, providers must provide opportunities to develop and use the child's home language in play and learning, supporting their language development at home. Providers must also ensure that children have sufficient opportunities to learn and reach a good standard in English language during the EYFS, ensuring children are ready to benefit from the opportunities available to them when they begin Key Stage 1. When assessing communication, language and literacy skills, practitioners must assess children's skills in English. If a child is not reaching the expected level in English, practitioners should explore with parents the child's skills in the home language to establish whether there is a language delay'.

We do not believe that Communication, Language and Literacy can or should be assessed only through English. To do so, and to mark bilingual children against age related expectations would mean that a high proportion may 'fail' and this would have hugely negative consequences for bilingual children, their families and staff who work with these families.

14. Put simply, whilst a child may be able to 'retell a simple past event in the correct order and talk about things that will happen' at age four in their own first language, they may not be able to do so in English if they are still learning that language. We regard the acceptance of English only as discriminatory and believe this practice will impact negatively on children who are from ethnic minority backgrounds.
15. We also believe that this will be unhelpful with regard to practitioners and settings relationships with parents from ethnic minority backgrounds as they seek to explain, possibly in writing, the child's 'failure' to meet certain benchmarks.
16. A lack of recognition that the process of learning English as an additional language is different from the process of learning a first language is not helpful in 'narrowing gaps' and improving outcomes for all learners. In contrast it leads directly to the erroneous assumption that where bilingual children are not reaching expected levels, the answer is likely to be language delay.
17. In order to reflect our multilingual reality within this statutory framework we suggest the Communication and language section should be rewritten to reflect 'language' rather than English language, and make clear when the document is referring to English language and when to language more generally.
18. The section on communication and language would then read

Communication and language

Listening and attention – children listen attentively in a range of situations. They listen to stories **in English or in other languages with which they are familiar**, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments and questions or actions. They can give their attention to what is being said to them and respond appropriately, while remaining involved in an activity.

Understanding – children can follow instructions **in English or in other languages with which they are familiar**, involving several ideas or actions. They answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories or events

Speaking – children express themselves effectively **in English or in other languages with which they are familiar**, showing awareness of listeners' needs. They use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. They develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events.

Literacy in English

Reading – children read and understand simple sentences in stories and information books **in English**, using phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately. They demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read, or what has been read to them.

Writing – children write their own labels, captions, messages and simple stories **in English** which can be read by themselves and others. They use their phonic

knowledge of English to spell words in ways which match their spoken sounds. They make use of letter patterns and sequences found in many English words.

19. We believe that the Tickell recommendations should be put in place and that any developmental benchmarks for children aged 2-4 should be redrafted and resourced to support the development and tracking of 'language' rather than English.
20. Across the specific areas of learning and development there should be a clearer demarcation between those skills which would be exceeding expectations and those which are expected. For example, most children at age five cannot write simple stories and it is inappropriate for that expectation to be included as a specific area of learning and development.
21. It is important to emphasise that any guidance on skills levels and achievements which may be expected of children at a certain age or stage remain as guidance or suggestions for practitioners and parents, and do not become subject to target setting procedures for either staff or settings. There should be no suggestion that most children's progression will be linear and uniform. This is particularly the case for bilingual children.
22. Q6 notes that *'The Government is keen to ensure that the EYFS helps ensure children's English language skills are sufficiently developed to allow them to take full advantage of Key Stage 1 and the opportunities that schools offer. It also recognises that bilingualism is an important asset conferring positive advantages for children's learning and development. The revised draft EYFS tries to strike a balance between supporting children's overall language development, and ensuring appropriate opportunities are provided for children to reach a good standard of English and be ready for school. It also seeks to ensure that the assessment requirements appropriately measure children's progress in English, taking due account of the needs of children who have not had the appropriate time or support to develop their English language skills.'* The consultation asks for views on whether the government has got this balance right. We would say that it has not.

Assessment and in particular Q16

23. Paragraph 1.7 states that *'When assessing communication, language and literacy skills, practitioners must assess children's skills in English. If a child is not reaching the expected level in English, practitioners should explore with parents the child's skills in the home language to establish whether there is a language delay'*.
24. We do not believe that Communication and Language can or should be assessed only through English. To do so, and to mark bilingual children against age related expectations would mean that a high proportion may 'fail' and have huge negative consequences for bilingual children, their families and staff who work with these families.
25. This approach is unhelpful in diagnosing real language delays within the bilingual population and wasteful of resources as the vast majority of bilingual children could be falsely identified as having a language delay when in fact they are learning EAL but are being assessed as English mother tongue speakers.
26. This is true both for any 24-36 month developmental assessment and the end of EYFS assessment. In particular any proposed integrated developmental assessment at age 2 which refers only to communication and language in English is simply nonsensical and a complete waste of resources for the approximately 1 in 7 children who are bilingual.
27. We would urge the government to provide first and English language support in the EYFS in line with the Tickell recommendations, and, as Tickell further suggested, undertake a full

review of assessment so that children's language development can be assessed formatively in both in their first language and in the English they are/will be learning.

Staffing and staff training

28. NALDIC reiterates the importance of the quality of the delivery of the EYFS and the importance of staffing and the learning environment. In order to accommodate the individual requirements of all children, a much greater focus should be given to the extension of the role of bilingual staff within the environment.
29. Para 3.24 contains '*Providers must ensure that staff have sufficient grasp of English to ensure the well-being of children in their care. For example, settings must be in a position to keep records in English, to liaise with other agencies in English, to summon emergency help, and to understand instructions such as those for the safety of medicines or food hygiene*'.
30. Whilst there are justifiable reasons for continuing with this requirement, this should be balanced by a requirement for settings to actively ensure they have access to staff who are bilingual in the languages of the children included in the setting. Whilst it is important to be able to summon emergency help in English, it is also important for staff to be able to understand the distress of a child whose first language is not English and has not yet learnt enough English to explain their difficulties.
31. NALDIC believes that all early years settings should contain a range of staff who work as a team. Early years teams should include qualified teachers, Early Years Professionals (EYP), nursery officers and specialist support staff for bilingual children. This range of expertise is vital if all the social, emotional and learning needs of very young children are to be met.
32. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) research found that "*settings which have staff with higher qualifications, especially with a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff, show higher quality and their children make more progress*". NALDIC would argue that bilingual staff with higher qualifications and specialist expertise are vital to the maintenance of provision which is of excellent quality.
33. Practitioners should receive high quality initial and CPD training to enable them to: formatively assess bilingual and monolingual children through observation of day to day activities within the setting; and use this information in planning activities which will support the child and move them on in their development. This high quality training must include an understanding of how children learn their first and additional languages and the differences and similarities between the two.
34. NALDIC believes that the EYFS must maintain its play-based 'language-rich' approach to learning. Attempts to introduce formal interventions, such as phonics programmes, run contrary to the principles of the EYFS and research indicates are not necessarily successful. Earlier is not necessarily better, particularly in the case of bilingual children who need to be able to develop a whole range of communication and English language skills rather than focus on one aspect. A knowledge of phonics can only help bilingual children read if accompanied by a good understanding of how English works in day-to-day use. The EYFS should concentrate on developing the latter as the building blocks for the learning to come.

Conclusion

35. NALDIC believes that the revision of the EYFS has missed opportunities in key areas to improve practice and provision in relation to bilingual children.

36. NALDIC strongly suggests the Government redraft paragraph 1.7 and makes clear the role and importance of all languages in learning and assessment. It should make clear that whilst a snapshot of English language proficiency at the end of the EYFS may have a use, formative assessment and planning for bilingual learners should build on their knowledge of all languages. This should be an interim measure only whilst the government implements fully the recommendations of the Tickell report.
37. It is particularly important that paragraph 2.3 is substantially revised to clarify that it is essential that any developmental or progress checks carried out between 24 and 48 months MUST include observations on the communication and language development of the first language of the child as well as English. To proceed in any other way would be discriminatory and is a waste of resources as it will not lead to an earlier identification of language or other learning difficulties, nor will it help in the planning of provision for that child.