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## Practitioners' Experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage

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### Introduction

This research report describes the context, design, conduct and findings of an inquiry into practitioners' experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The study sought to elicit the views of practitioners working in all sectors of the children's workforce on the implementation of the EYFS framework during its first 18 months of operation (from September 2008 to March 2010).

### Methods

The study took the form of a qualitative and exploratory survey undertaken in two phases in six regions of England. Unlike other recent inquiries into the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage, it was qualitative rather than quantitative, offering practitioners the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences of applying the new framework in their daily work with children and families. The first phase consisted of focus group discussions with seven different practitioner groups in each region. The second phase, undertaken after the preliminary analysis of transcripts, consisted of individual interviews with 42 practitioners. The majority of the individual interviews were conducted with volunteers from the focus groups, who were invited to expand on and clarify the issues discussed in the groups, but a small proportion were new participants who had not been able to attend group discussions. Over 190 practitioners contributed their views to the study.

### Questions

The study posed three broad questions within its overarching theme of describing practitioners' experiences of the EYFS:

- How does the EYFS influence day-to-day practice with children and families?
- How, if at all, has the EYFS supported improvements in the care and education offered by practitioners?
- What, if any obstacles and difficulties do practitioners face in the effective use of the EYFS?

These questions in turn generated another fifteen more detailed topics for discussion by the focus groups, while the analysis of focus group data prompted a new set of ten interview questions. These questions asked for further clarification of the impact of the framework on different groups (boys, children with additional needs, bilingual children) and the impact of specific requirements such as the outdoor curriculum.

## Findings

The principal findings are summarised here. Practitioners report that:

- 1. The EYFS is a major influence on practice:** The EYFS framework received high levels of support from all practitioner groups, and there is a broad consensus that it influences many aspects of daily practice, and improves the quality of experience for young children and their parents. However, a small number of respondents (from childminder and playworker groups) argue that the strong emphasis on learning and assessment which they find in the framework is contrary to the ethos of their work.
- 2. The EYFS is a play-based and child-led framework:** All practitioner groups welcome the play-based and child-led nature of the guidance and view it as a validation of early years principles, or as a return to early years approaches after a period in which pre-school was conceptualised as preparation for school: many participants are relieved that the period from birth to five is now recognised as an important phase of development *per se*.
- 3. The EYFS areas of learning are generally appropriate although not all goals are felt to be well-judged:** All practitioner groups report that the areas of learning are appropriate and closely matched the interests of the children in their settings. Many participants described how the guidance, including the outdoor provision, enabled children from different groups to succeed. However, there is some disagreement over the appropriateness of the later statements and goals (in the EYFSP), and criticism of the levels required by the Communication, Language and Literacy, and Problem-Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy goals. For reception teachers, assessing children against these statements in preparation for year one is often a cause of tension and frustration.
- 4. The 'Development Matters' statements are criticised by some practitioners:** The developmental guidance (Development Matters) within the EYFS was not liked universally by practitioners. Although some practitioners felt it was helpful to be able to assess children against the descriptors and identify their developmental level, a greater number expressed disagreement with the decision to attach age-phases, and photographs, to the descriptors, feeling that the 'labelling' of young children is contrary to the principle of the Unique Child which is for many the most important theme of the EYFS.

5. **Assessment practices within the EYFS are variable:** Practitioners report that achieving continuity in the assessment of children is challenging. Children are evaluated differently by different practitioners, with the main differences located between private and maintained providers, and between pre-school and school practitioners. The effects of assessment are felt to change from positive to negative, and from formative to summative, as children move closer to year one, and are assessed against criteria associated with the school curriculum.
6. **The EYFS has improved continuity of provision although some transition points remain problematic:** Practitioners broadly welcome improvements to continuity in the guidance, care requirements and areas of learning throughout the five years of the early years phase, although certain transition points remain problematic. For many children, the move from nursery into reception class and from reception to year one, involve significantly different experiences of ratios, routines, environments and pedagogy.
7. **The EYFS promotes partnership with parents but parents need more information:** Practitioners welcome the commitment to working in close partnership with parents in all aspects of children's development. However, they also report that in order to work collaboratively most parents require more information on, and a deeper understanding of, the EYFS. Parents' engagement with key workers in assessing their children's learning has been very successful in some settings, but not universally.
8. **Practitioners welcome the overall design, content and format of the EYFS but describe significant variations in training and confidence:** Practitioners' responses to the documentation and training which accompanied the introduction of the EYFS are very mixed, with some groups receiving excellent and ongoing training, and others left confused and dispirited by the guidance they received. The written framework, posters, cards and CD-Rom were all described very positively although they had initially seemed complex to some groups. Overall, practitioners report that the EYFS has contributed to the professionalism of the workforce. Many practitioners were enthusiastic about the ways in which they had adapted their planning, provision and assessment to meet the EYFS requirements, and are insistent that they wish the framework to continue with as little revision as possible.

## **Recommendations**

The report recommends that any planned revision of the Early Years Foundation Stage should take account of practitioners' overwhelming expression of satisfaction with the current requirements, as well as of the areas which they criticise. The majority of respondents would like to see only minor changes in the EYFS, and would prefer 'no change' to radical change in the current requirements.

Aside from the actual requirements of the framework, there is a need to examine its implementation; the level of information, training and support offered to different practitioner groups by different local authorities is demonstrated to be very variable, and some arrangements could be described as inequitable. Many of the dissatisfactions expressed by practitioner groups stem from the implementation of the EYFS rather than from the documentation itself, which is widely viewed as embodying the beliefs, principles and practices to which most practitioners adhere.

### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at [www.education.gov.uk/research](http://www.education.gov.uk/research)  
Further information about this research can be obtained from

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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.