

Case Study:

A true reflection of building and leading a new curriculum in an early year's setting.

A case study by Carly Polak



My name is Carly Polak and I have worked in the Early Years sector for over 20 years. I knew from a young age I wanted to work with children, so left school and completed the NNEB and went straight into nurseries. I have since worked in various roles including, working in a special educational needs school, as a childminder, for a childminding agency and with Ofsted.

I currently work for Charnwood Nursery and Pre School as Head of Education.

I am extremely passionate about all things early years and have become a 'learning addict'. I have been fortunate to have the opportunities to network, train and learn from some truly inspirational people, including the Pen Green team where I completed my Masters degree.

"I CANNOT TEACH ANYBODY ANYTHING, I CAN ONLY MAKE THEM THINK".

Socrates (c470-399bce)

Background

I have worked in the early years sector for more than 20 years. I have always been passionate about our youngest human beings and so went straight to college to complete the NNEB. Since then, I have worked in various roles, including private day nurseries, a special educational needs school, a childminder agency as childminders mentor and trainer and for Ofsted. I currently work three days a week for a group of nurseries across Leicestershire called Charnwood Nursery and Preschool group as their head of Education. This is where my journey with the 'curriculum started'. I was studying for my masters degree at Pen Green and like most degree's you work through different assignments/modules. I never started that degree with any inspiration or desire to find out about a curriculum, however, I ended it with a dissertation about curriculum and leadership in the early years. I have come to understand that the two go hand in hand. Sharing this case study has meant that I have had to share my vulnerabilities and be brave, as Brene Brown would say. It is a true account of the journey I went on alongside some staff at my workplace to introduce a new curriculum.

I have previously written a blog that discusses the word curriculum in more detail and goes through my understanding of what a curriculum is to the early years sector. I will reiterate here that through my research I have come to understand that the very word curriculum can be daunting to lots of practitioners and that Wiggins and Mc Tighe (2012) found 83 different definitions for curriculum in educational literature.

As early years professionals we have not seen the word curriculum used as commonly as schools have, for example, our current Early Years Curriculum, Birth to five Matters or Development matters (2021) does not contain the very word curriculum in it. I feel that this is the very reason many early year's professionals and parents feel that a curriculum is something for our older children.

THE START OF BUILDING OUR OWN CURRICULUM

Through my role as Head of Education and working for Ofsted I became very interested in writing a curriculum that was unique to our setting and the children we look after. I was fortunate that the director of the setting and the operations manager were also both completing their masters degree at Pen Green too. This made for an easy conversation when I discussed my ambitions for implementing a new curriculum. The three of us had previously discussed our own values and morals as part of the course content for the degree. Knowing your own values and morals and what is important to you when it comes to building your own curriculum is the foundation. It is imperative that you share these with your team and find out your teams values and morals so that you can align these and truly understand what it is you want your children to learn and be supported with while they are with you.

**** WARNING, THIS TASK IS NOT AS EASY AS ONE MIGHT THINK****

I had spent many hours reading around curriculum design, understanding what a curriculum is and what it is not. I had read papers and research from different countries, trying to equip myself with the knowledge to lay the foundations down for writing a bespoke curriculum. One point that stood out to me that I came across several times, was around the importance of not narrowing your curriculum. This is where you would heavily focus on one area of curriculum. We do this as we believe we are supporting our children in an area of need. For example, we have become aware that evidence shows that the recent pandemic has led to young children being delayed in physical development, due to not having access to open spaces, parks, etc. You might use this evidence to focus heavily on this area of development and in turn 'narrow your curriculum to focus on this one domain. Although we need to be aware of evidence like this and ensure we are providing opportunities for children to enhance their physical development it is important that we don't lose sight of all the other curriculum domains we feel are important for our children.

FIRST MISTAKE

As a senior leadership team we created a curriculum for our setting. It had four strands to it, these strands are holistic health, love for learning, being curious about the world and positive sense of self. As we are a setting with a high proportion of children who speak English as an additional language, it could have been easy to narrow the curriculum and focus on communication and language (which comes under our love for learning strand), but I was aware of this narrowing, and also how being outside, understanding nature and the impact we are having on our world was just as important for example.

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Then within each strand we created subheadings. We had spent lots of time talking about each strand, understanding what they meant and why each strand was important to us. I was feeling quite pleased and to be honest proud of what we had created and was excited to role this out to the team. I had shared this with the settings practice-based manager (at our setting we have a manager who is responsible for supporting staff with the teaching and learning, she works with the staff on a day-to-day basis). I had gone through the new curriculum, what this would mean, how it might look in practice and how she would support staff. I explained that we would be having a full staff training day to introduce the new curriculum and then we would offer follow up support etc. She was very enthusiastic, asked lots of questions and understood the new curriculum well. The mistake I made here, which I learnt several months after the role out of the curriculum was that as she was a new member of the management team, I did not know her understanding or capabilities of leading a change.



BELOW IS AN EXTRACT FROM MY OWN REFLECTIVE JOURNAL WHEN I WAS COMPLETING MY DEGREE. IT WAS A REFLECTIVE ACCOUNT OF A SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW I COMPLETED WITH THE PRACTICE-BASED MANAGER ABOUT THE INTRODUCTION OF THE CURRICULUM.

Extract 2- Missing the 'Middle man'

How can it be this difficult, I have just revisited the PMB answers, I went over and over it and was thinking how hard it was to pull out data and then realised like a complete idiot that I had completely 'forgotten' about supporting her and leading her. I feel utterly stupid and almost like I have wasted my time with her interview, all her questions were around her previous knowledge, how she felt the staff had received the training from me, what was her understanding of it, what were the barriers to the staff, when the questions should have been about what she needed from me to be able to lead the practitioners, what was her understanding and knowledge around leading, what were her barriers to supporting the team.

The mistake I made here, and a mistake I see a lot among leaders is that I assumed she 'would just know how to lead' but from previous research I am aware all too well that there is a lack of training for early-years leaders and managers, and most just 'fall' into the management position (Rodd, 1997). I had been thinking about the impact of change for the practitioners and focussing all my plans for support for them, and completely bypassed the one person who was actually going to lead the team. Strong leadership is essential for the development, monitoring and support of a high-quality curriculum. Greenier (2020) stresses that leaders must support cycles of professional development as some practitioners may have gaps in their knowledge. Thinking about what Greenier is saying, we need to ensure that we look at our leaders first, the ones on front line and identify if they have any gaps in their understanding of leadership and change. We talk about the importance of sequencing a curriculum, but before this we need to sequence training, support and professional development to our leaders. These might be managers, deputy's room leaders. The people who are going to truly implement your new curriculum and help staff to share your curriculum vision.

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SECOND MISTAKE - TRAINING DAY

I had carefully planned a training day for the whole staff team to come together. I had sat several times with the senior leadership team and looked at how this would be implemented. We carefully thought about what we had learnt at Pen Green about change and thought about what the barriers might be for some practitioners. One easy lesson we had learnt about change, was to prepare staff that it was coming. Therefore, I sent out a brief information email a month before, then again a week before to all the staff explaining the training day, that the content would be around the introduction of a new curriculum and the logistics of the day. The training day went well, the morning felt 'slow and hard' but by the afternoon staff seemed more positive and most staff were engaging in the group discussions. After the training day, I met with a group of room leaders to have a focus group discussion around how they were feeling. The room leaders come together once a week over a lunch time, so we could have professional discussions and offer them a space to talk, so this was nothing new. I am aware that being a deputy or room leader can be an extremely difficult role as they are responsible for being a role model, for the leading the team in their room but they also work and form strong relationships with the people they are leading. This can be difficult at times, and by offering a weekly safe space to discuss any concerns, frustrations and anxieties they may have offers some containment (Bion, 1959).

I ASKED THE PRACTITIONERS THEIR THOUGHTS ON HOW TRAINING DAY WENT;

“I think it would have been good to have an understanding of the curriculum first before the other staff, as we found out at the same time but was then expected to guide and support them as their room leader”

“I felt like a rabbit in headlights and a bit stupid because I couldn't answer their questions on the table as I was trying to digest the information too”

“The training day went well for me, I get it I love the new curriculum and now I need to work out all the little things, like how it will impact observations etc for my team. It will take me a term to do this before, I am ready to support my team. I don't want to teach them wrong”

These were all excellent and honest points. I could hear their frustrations and hearing them out loud seemed so obvious. I had been so focussed on writing the curriculum and getting this part right I had not put as much thought into the sequencing of the implementation part. If I had used these meetings to talk about the upcoming change, I think I could have eliminated some of these anxieties and the resistance to change that first occurred. I believe the practitioners would have been a positive force (Lewin, 1948) and demonstrated a positive and challenging behaviour (Huffington, 2004).

Another excellent point that came out after training day in the evaluations was that practitioners were very nervous about the training day being on a curriculum. As previously documented the very word curriculum can feel daunting to early years practitioners. As like most early years settings, I work with a very diverse and unique team. We have practitioners just starting out on their early years journey and some who have been in early years for many years. The very word curriculum can mean something different to each member of my team, what I did identify is that the word was very misunderstood and scared the majority of my team.

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IF I HAD EXPLAINED THAT THE TRAINING DAY WAS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING AND NOT USED THE WORD CURRICULUM, WOULD THIS HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE?

ALL PRACTITIONERS ANSWERED WITH CONFIDENCE THAT IT WOULD HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE.

Practitioner one “I would have felt less stressed as this is something we know, we do it all the time”

Practitioner five “definitely, I would not have seen this as a change”

Practitioner three “Yes, because curriculum is about formal teaching to me, not about play or learning at nursery”

Practitioner two said “I am not going to lie, before training I thought a curriculum was a school thing”

What I took from the focus group discussions and the evaluations is that I needed to share the training day content with the room leaders prior to training day, so that they could be confident they understood the content first and if they had any questions or ideas they could be put forward in a safe space first. I should have included a paragraph on what a curriculum is, how we already have a curriculum in place and how many early years practitioners do not use or understand the term curriculum. This would have illuminated some, if not all of their anxieties before they came to training day and they would not have wasted the whole morning trying to figure out what curriculum means.

HINDSIGHT

A WORD WE HEAR ALL THE TIME,

“the ability to understand an event or situation only after it has happened”

I love this definition and feel that it is a sentence I should have on a dictaphone ready to share in meetings. Alongside, reflection on action (Schon, 1983). Reflecting on action simply means that we thinking about what we would do differently next time, taking time to process. Reflecting on our practice is important as a tool to self improve and develop. We can become better leaders when we learn from our reflections and gain insight. So, I thought I would share my reflection on action thoughts. When thinking about building your own curriculum you need to understand that it is more than curriculum content. Curriculum building and strong leadership go hand in hand. You cannot implement a curriculum without strong leadership. Strong leadership requires an in-depth understanding about the different types of leadership there are and about change management. The importance of sequencing a curriculum is no more important than sequencing professional development to help you implement change. Grennier (2019) emphasises that if we are going to develop our thinking about the curriculum in the Early Years, we must provide better support through professional development. We need to put more emphasis on curriculum and high-quality pedagogy. Moore (2007) makes a valid point that in early years and education change is a recurrent theme and therefore the ability to lead change is expected. If I was to plan to devise a curriculum again I would plan time for both, Curriculum design and the implementation of this and leadership and change management.

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Accompanying Blog and Webinar

Carly's Blog on Curriculum Development can be found on our website;

<https://www.pengreen.org/stronger-practice-hub/sph-blogs-and-case-studies/>

Our webinar on Curriculum Development is on Tuesday 12th March 5-6pm.

<https://www.pengreen.org/event/webinar-curriculum-development/>



Professional Development Conference

Charnwood Nursery and Pre-School
Saturday 16th March 10am-3pm

Join us to celebrate the success of our first year as a Stronger Practice Hub.

The conference is free to attend for all, with priority places going to early years settings and childminders in North and West Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Leicester, Rutland and Lincolnshire.

<https://www.pengreen.org/event/stronger-practice-hub-charnwood-conference/>

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