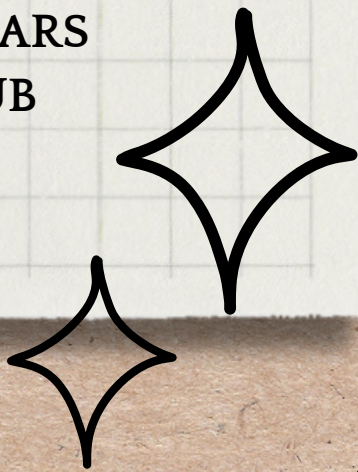


WHAT IS A CURRICULUM IN THE EYFS?

By Jan Dubiel

EAST MIDLANDS EARLY YEARS
STRONGER PRACTICE HUB



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Jan Dubiel is a prominent figure in the field of early childhood education, particularly known for his expertise in assessment and curriculum development. He has worked extensively in the UK and internationally to influence early years policy and practice.

The word 'Curriculum' itself can, and has, sometimes conjured up ideas of rigid formality and prescription in ways that seem to conflict with our principles and knowledge of how best to support young children's development and progress. We can sometimes think of a curriculum as a detached monolith of expectations that are more applicable to older children and their need to cram bodies of knowledge that can be repeated on demand.

In fact, the Curriculum lies at the heart of what we do. The word itself needs to be fully understood, reclaimed and 'owned' by EYFS educators. Equally, there needs to be a full recognition of the idea of 'Curriculum progression'. We need to embrace the knowledge that, because of what we do, children 'know more and remember more' (1) and become more confident, articulate and thoughtful learners.

(1) OFSTED (2024) Guidance: The EYFS in Schools.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-eif-inspections-and-the-eyfs/the-eyfs-in-schools>

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Put simply, the 'curriculum' is what children need to learn, the knowledge, skills and behaviours that they acquire and accumulate through their time with us. While the EYFS is not a Curriculum, it sets out the Goals and aspirations of what we have for children. The Areas of Learning and Development (AoL&D), coupled with the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning (CoET&L) provide the broad content of what we want children to learn. However, the curriculum lives within this and is, critically, owned by the educators that deliver it. The EYFS Framework could not be clearer:

"Practitioners need to decide what they want children in their setting to learn, and the most effective ways to teach it."(2)

This means that it is our responsibility as educators to decide how best to enable this. We do this by knowing the children and the context they come from, being aware of what their previous experiences are and being clear about their starting points so that each interaction, each activity, each decision we take builds on this and takes them, ultimately to the outcomes we all want.



(2) Department for Education (2024) Statutory guidance Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>

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Central to this is acknowledging that any curriculum truly addresses everything that children need to learn. While of course this includes the knowledges and skills outlined in the AoL&D it critically also needs to address the 'Learning Behaviours' are expressed within the CoEL&T. While the outcomes for the latter might not be 'measured' in the same way as the former, it is important that they are seen as part of the Curriculum itself. The American Educator Lilian Katz stated that:

An appropriate curriculum in the early years then is one that includes the encouragement and motivation of the children to seek mastery of basic academic skills, ... in the service of their intellectual pursuits."(3) .

The purpose of children acquiring knowledge and becoming more skilful is precisely to be able to use that in pursuing their fascinations and interests - in whatever that might be - and in doing so consolidating, embedding and owning what they have been taught. The curriculum empowers them to do this and this is why 'curriculum delivery' lies at the heart of what we do.

Far from being static, the Curriculum is continually evolving and progressing. Children's learning never stops but continues to grow. They relentlessly add to existing knowledge, refine and adapt skills and deepen their learning behaviours as a result.

(3) Katz, Lilian (2015) 'Lively Minds – Distinctions between academic versus intellectual goals for young children, DEY.

<https://dey.org/publication/kindergarten-readiness-academic-instruction-or-intellectual-goals/#:~:text=by%20Lilian%20G.%20Katz,%20Ph.D.%20The%20extent%20to>

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The idea of progression is vital to ensure this and EYFS educators needs to be continually aware that each interaction, planned activity and enhancement of the learning environment is dedicated to ensure that this happens. With a curriculum progression in mind, EYFS educators can ensure that they are continually challenging and extending children. It is worth considering that progress is accumulative as children gain, refine and internalise skills, knowledge and behaviours.

We can, and should, expect that 'progress occurs' when the opportunities, experiences and the quality of all aspects of teaching enable this to happen. We also need to be aware that progress is also non-linear and 'deepened' as the experiences, teaching and provision enable the curriculum to be fully 'owned' by the child, meaning that they are able to use knowledges and skills confidently and expertly to support ideas, fascinations and self-motivated threads of thinking, communication and expression. This 'deepening' of the curriculum is crucial in ensuring that learning is authentic rather than superficial, and we need to be ever vigilant that we are not simply engaged in 'coverage' of specific statements.



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So, the key considerations for this are:

1. The Curriculum (derived from the EYFS Statutory framework) drives the central core of expectation, content and progression. While they form a strategy for teaching and learning, they inevitably need to be supplemented and enhanced by the experiences provided. This will always need to be further defined by the context of the group, the knowledge of the educators and the directions of learning that the children themselves are driven to take.
2. A broad 'direction of travel', a sense of the kinds of contents that are going to be important and necessary for the children provides the starting points for teaching and learning. While this will of course need to be fluid, responsive, flexible and adaptable, a clear sense of purpose and outcome needs to be established.
3. The direct teaching of aspects of the curriculum is vital to introduce what 'needs to be learned'. This is consolidated by the day to day, moment by moment interactions build curriculum outcomes by consolidating and extending knowledge, skills and behaviours and thus deepening what is being learned.

By understanding the nature and importance of curriculum and how it structures our understanding of the content of what children need to learn, we can carefully decide how this is best achieved. By shaping this around our knowledge of the children we work with we can be confident that we are empowering them as successful learners.

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