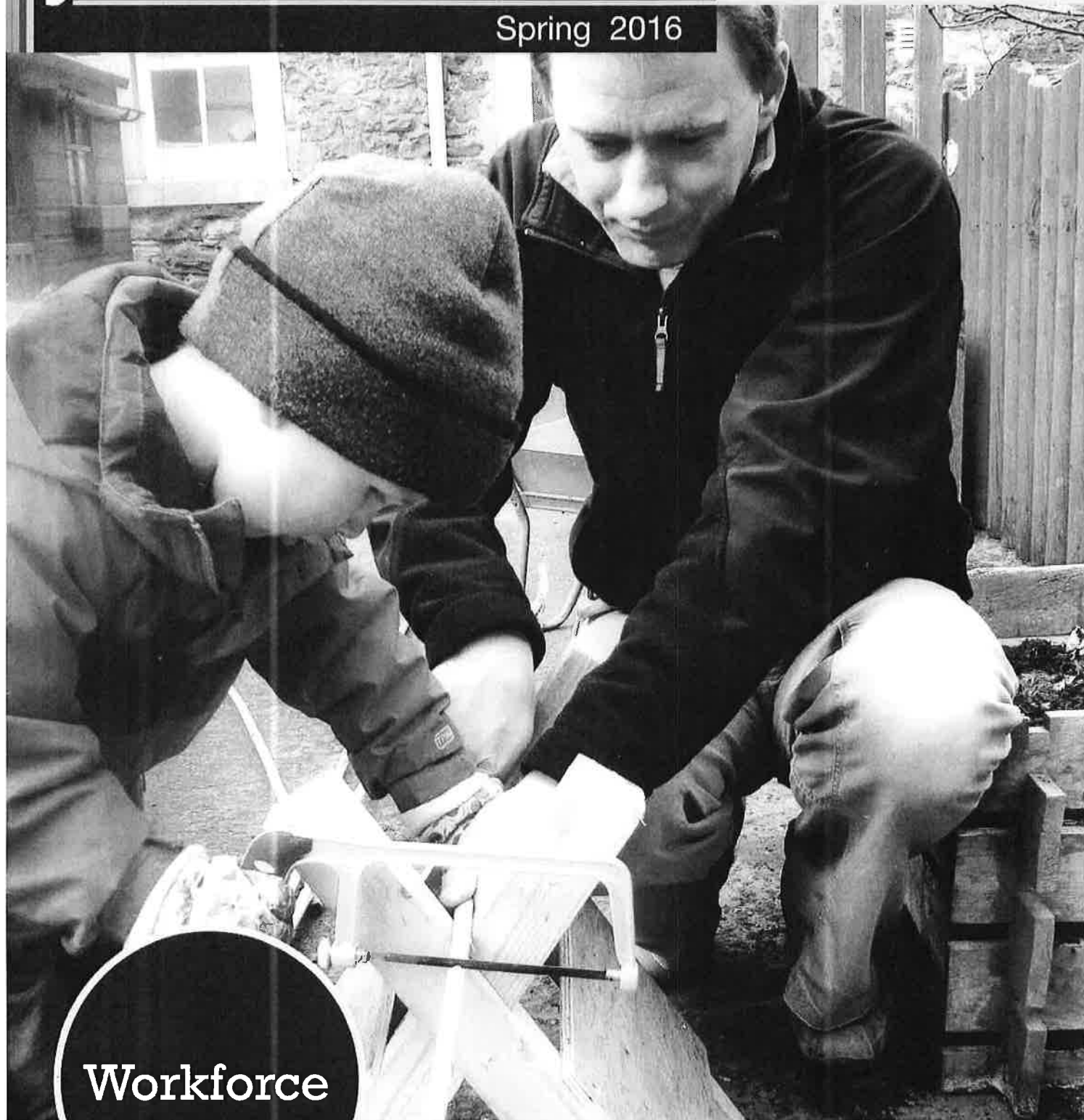


Early Education Journal

No 78

Spring 2016



Workforce

Early Education
The British Association for Early Childhood Education

Professional knowledge, assessment and accountability: a perspective from England

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There are well-established links between high quality provision for young children, and their subsequent outcomes in educational achievement, wellbeing and social capabilities. We know that “high quality” is associated with a range of different factors to do with the structure of provision (environment, facilities, staffing) and the processes (curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices and adult-child relationships). Structural and process characteristics are all reliant on the professional knowledge of practitioners, which means that workforce reform is central to achieving the standards and aspirations set by governments that are developing or improving their early childhood education (ECE) systems.

Training and qualifications

Policy aspirations in the UK (England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) share this commitment to high quality provision in all four ECE frameworks. However, there are varying levels of qualifications across the sector, including those who have leadership roles in ECE settings and organisations. These variations play out in different ways. First, practitioners draw on similar knowledge bases in their training, but there may be different interpretations and emphases. A key example here is the dominance of child development theories in training programmes, and the different ways in which these may be interpreted. ECE practitioners may understand child development as a natural/biological process, but may not understand the implications for

planning curricula, interacting with children in their play, or making accurate assessments of their learning.

Second, these different levels of qualifications may limit the extent to which ECE staff can discuss and address critical issues, and develop innovative practices. Without such engagement, there is a danger that conformity to the Early Years Foundation Stage (or indeed to ECE policy frameworks in any country) becomes the dominant way of organising provision and practice. Such conformity is a problem in societies that are “super-diverse”, where children and families belong to multilingual, multicultural, and multifairth communities. From this perspective, there are different “learners”, who may have different developmental pathways according to their diverse family and community backgrounds. However, assessing children’s outcomes against developmental indicators and learning goals demands attention to “regularities” and not to unique or idiosyncratic characteristics.

Taking these complex issues into account, I will explore assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England. First, I will look at the structures for assessment in the EYFS, and then at the processes. I intend to provoke some critical reflection on assessment, and to consider the extent to which practitioners are able to exercise their professional knowledge in making assessments about children’s learning and development how practitioners may draw on

different forms of knowledge to make those assessments, and the implications this has for “reliability”.

Assessment in the EYFS

The EYFS in England includes children from birth to five. Most children aged 4 to 5 are full-time in a Reception (or Foundation 2) class in a primary school, because there is usually one entry point in September. The assessment structure for the EYFS includes:

- ▶ developmental check at age 24-36 months
- ▶ assessment against seventeen Early Learning Goals at age 4-5

Currently we are moving from EYFS Profile (revised version introduced in 2013) to the new Baseline Assessment format (introduced in 2015). The revised EYFS Profile requires practitioners to assess children against a set of 17 **learning goals** (ELGs). Practitioners should use their judgement to decide whether children have met each ELG or whether their **level of attainment** is above or below that described in the ELGs. This will result in a judgement of “expected”, “emerging” or “exceeding” for each child. (STA, 2013:5)

Three baseline assessment schemes have been approved from Early Excellence, National Foundation for Educational Research, and the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (University of Durham). Each scheme has a different approach, so whatever “score” a child achieves will be influenced by the scheme, the setting in which the scheme is used, the knowledge and judgements of the practitioners, and how each scheme is interpreted. A further problem is the confusion between learning and development in the EYFS.

Practitioners must indicate whether children are meeting expected levels of **development**, or if they are exceeding expected levels, or not yet reaching expected levels (“emerging”). This is the EYFS Profile. (DfE, 2012:11)

I have highlighted the words **learning goals**, **attainment**, and **development** because practitioners are being expected to make assessments of different processes. Think about putting on a pair of glasses – what you see depends upon the lens you are looking through. The EYFS presents us with many lenses. Practitioners are expected to agree upon what is a “good” level of development, and to make a judgement about whether children are “emerging”, “expected” or “exceeding” the **learning goals**. The child’s



“score” is also an indicator of **attainment** and of their readiness for school. Taken together, these scores also act as indicators of the quality of the setting, and the effectiveness of practitioners in enabling children to achieve those outcomes.

So, what we have in the EYFS is a process of assessment that “measures” child outcomes and their school readiness, and the practitioners’ performance, regardless of the differences in their levels of qualifications and experience, or the settings in which they work. Government “standards” work in mysterious ways – the EYFS outcomes are being used as indicators of quite different things in order to create accountability to Ofsted, to parents and to society. And when we add into this mysterious process the varied levels of staff qualifications, then the reliability of those measures must be called into question.

Let’s think about these problems through a practical example. When you read this description of an episode of play, think about your own setting, your personal beliefs and values, and what opportunities for assessment are presented.

Free play on the climbing frame – different lenses, different views

A group of children (all boys) are playing together outdoors. There is a large climbing frame with ropes tied to a hoist on the top railing. The boys bring five scooters to the climbing frame and develop a plan for hoisting them to the top. They co-operate in tying on the scooters, with two boys at the bottom and two at the top to do the hoisting and untying. More boys gather as the activity develops. Five minutes later, five scooters are on the platform, and five boys are riding them around in a small space, sometimes dodging, and sometimes deliberately crashing into each other. This is a noisy, lively and excited activity – freely chosen and organised by the boys. One boy, Majed, is newly arrived at the school, with a few words of English. Korby shows Majed how to tie the scooter on the rope and physically helps him onto the platform. Majed chooses not to ride a scooter but laughs, claps and jumps excitedly at the edge of the platform. A practitioner stops the activity on the grounds of safety and helps the children to bring down and untie the scooters.

How you look and what you see

Let’s come back to this idea of the “assessment” lens – what you see depends upon the lens you are looking through. As a researcher, I saw this activity as presenting some interesting evidence of children’s

learning, notably: their social and co-operative capabilities (by including Majed, Korby showed empathy and relationship skills), collaborative problem-setting (how to get the scooters up to the platform) and problem-solving (tying and hoisting). The children showed initiative, creativity and inventiveness in their game and there was much emotional excitement, engagement and attention to the activity. There was sustained communication – through words, gestures and facial expressions. The practitioners had perhaps not anticipated that the hoist would be used for items other than buckets with handles, but children often take an activity in their own directions, with or without the approval of adults. It is through such choices that children enact free play based on their personal and collective agendas.

At the end of the day, I discussed this observation with the practitioners, whose qualifications ranged from a teacher with a degree and QTS, a Nursery Nurse with NNEB qualifications, a Learning Support Assistant with Level 3 qualifications; to an unqualified Teaching Assistant who supported children with learning English. Each practitioner interpreted this episode in different ways, as shown in some of their comments:

“The boys were being naughty, this is not allowed.”

“Well, yes but it was quite creative wasn’t it? I mean, well, we give them some choice, so it’s hard when they choose things and then we say no, you can’t do that.”

“I’m just thinking about this now...you noticed that Korby helped Majed, and I have seen Korby doing this before. He is kind, helpful. But you won’t find him sitting at any table-top activities, he always likes to be outside.”

“But we do have to do the health and safety thing – it was all chaos at the top of the climbing frame, no room, and I could see an accident coming.”

“Was it all chaos? I think there were some rules – Harry said “five, only five scooters”, and they were very co-operative with the tying and lifting them on to the top of the climbing frame.”

“Yes, they were really developing their co-operation, and Majed, well you could see that he was involved and really enjoying that.”

The discussion developed into more general issues about assessment, and all the

practitioners agreed that it was much easier to make assessments about children’s learning in adult-directed activities, with a specific focus that reflected the EYFS learning goals. Assessing children’s learning and development through play presented problems which they recognised as stemming from their values and beliefs, the structures and rules of the setting, and the unpredictable flow within free play activities.

We can now go back to the two issues raised earlier.

- ▶ The extent to which practitioners are able to exercise their professional knowledge in making assessments about children’s learning and development.
- ▶ How practitioners may draw on different forms of knowledge to make those assessments, and the implications this has for “reliability”.

In relation to the first point, the practitioners were all making judgements and assessments about this activity, based on their knowledge as well as personal beliefs and values. The reflections show the overlap between personal judgement and interpretation and a more objective assessment (with the latter being required for the EYFS Profile). This is clearly not a straightforward process. The practitioners have some understanding of what is expected, what children can already do, and what is emerging (for example Majed’s confidence to get involved). It is often the case that practitioners focus on interesting or overlapping skills (such as Korby’s empathy and sensitivity to including Majed) rather than the kinds of discrete or isolated skills that are identified in the EYFS Learning Outcomes.

What is interesting about this episode (and this applies to many activities in EYFS settings) is that children often act more competently when they are in a collective activity, rather than in an individual activity. This has implications for reliability and consistency of assessments that are made.

In relation to the second point, we can see that the practitioners are drawing on different forms of knowledge to make those assessments, but it is not clear whether they are identifying children’s learning, or their development. When thinking about the reliability of assessments, Early Education has some practical advice, taken from *Development Matters*:

Children develop at their own rates, and in their own ways. The development statements and their order should not be taken as necessary steps for individual children.

They should not be used as checklists. The age/stage bands overlap because these are not fixed age boundaries but suggest a typical range of development. (Early Education, 2012)

Here we have a clear statement that helps practitioners to think about some complex issues – namely the apparent regularity of children's development, as presented in the EYFS, and the ways in which development may vary over time (and not just with age). The episode of play also shows how children's learning and development can be influenced by context, especially where they are co-operating and supporting each other.



This takes us back to the idea of assessments being valid and reliable (as Ofsted tells us they should be). Assessing children's learning and development is not an exact science, not least because these processes are themselves complex. There are many variables that influence how assessments are made: what we see depends on the lens

we are looking through, and this in turn influences our interpretations. Different levels of training, qualifications and professional knowledge bring additional variations into the assessment processes. This is not an argument for more standardisation in the EYFS and in training.

It is an argument for more time and space for reflective dialogue between practitioners, for looking closely at children's learning and development, for considering how we talk about children's progress and achievements. Reliability does not only come through using the Learning Goals and Baseline Profiles,

but how these are understood and used by practitioners in their provision and practice.

Read more about these issues

If you are interested in reading more about the challenges of assessment in the EYFS, these two articles provide some food for thought and discussion.

Bradbury, A. (2014) *Learning, assessment and equality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings in England*, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 22:3, 347-354.

Basford, J. & Bath, C. (2014) *Playing the assessment game: an English early childhood education perspective*, *Early Years*, 34:2, 119-132.

For more information on the baseline assessment schemes, see: www.cem.org earlyexcellence.com nfer.ac.uk

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