

Characteristics of Effective Learning

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Annex 8: Detailed rationale behind proposals for revised areas of learning

Development and learning

Children's learning and development in the early years has been described as arising from the interplay between the 'inter-connected and dynamic facets of the unique child with surrounding relationships and experiences' (Evangelou, 2009: p23). Although there is a sequence of development which all children follow, the way genetic patterns are expressed is influenced by experiences which trigger and shape both neural connections and learned behaviours. Children's development therefore is seen to occur not in a predictable linear progression, but in a web of multiple strands with rates of progress varying between children, and subject to influences by factors both within and outside of the child.

Children's learning and development from birth to five occurs as the result of a complex interaction between the child and her/his experiences within relationships, and in the environment. This process is described in the literature as occurring "within the 'interactionist tradition' that conceives of development as located within nested social contexts" (Bronfenbrenner in Evangelou et al 2009). The Bronfenbrenner model is reflected in the themes of the EYFS which positions the unique child at the centre of the framework enabled by positive relationships and enabling environments which support the child's learning and development. All these themes emerge from Bronfenbrenner's three ecological domains: the family, the settings attended and the community in which the child lives.

Elaborating on the Bronfenbrenner model, Myers (1992) (in Evangelou et al 2009) identifies how value systems and beliefs mediate these ecological domains. The central argument here is of the powerful influence of these factors brought together in the social context and impacting on the child's learning. This model is both the backdrop and the underpinning to the re-articulation of the EYFS areas of learning and development. The model for the areas of learning which is proposed is intended to clarify the complex interactions within children's development and learning:

- Babies and children are active participants rather than passive recipients of adult interaction and the world around them. The ways in which children are agents in their own development are highlighted in the characteristics of effective learning;
- Fundamental aspects of development and learning are present as inborn developmental sequences, which are triggered and supported by environmental experiences including relationships with others. These include developing abilities which enable children to be successful in their learning in all areas, and are represented as the prime areas of learning and development; and

- Other areas of learning are more specific to certain domains of knowledge and skill which are necessary for children's successful engagement in their particular society, and are identified as specific areas of learning and development.

Success in the early years – becoming an effective learner for life

There is a significant body of developmental psychology research which has established the central place of self-regulation in the early years, along with emotional and social aspects of development, as principal determinants of later academic success. Self-regulation is a concept that involves attitudes and dispositions for learning (the motivation, or 'will'), and an ability to be aware of one's own thinking (cognitive strategies, or 'skill'). It also includes managing feelings and behaviour. The development of cognitive and motivational self-regulation – 'skill' and 'will' – vary among individuals. As in other areas of development, these are highly sensitive to experience and therefore can be enhanced by effective practice in early years settings (Dignath, Buettner and Langfeldt, 2008). It is critical, therefore, to bring into sharp focus the elements of self-regulation which underpin learning across all areas, developing from birth and supporting lifelong learning (Bronson, 2000). In the following annexes, elements of self-regulation are identified within the prime areas, particularly in personal, social and emotional development (for example, controlling one's own behaviours, managing emotions, negotiating and planning with others) and communication and language (for example, using talk to support thinking, giving reasons and explanations). Other aspects of self-regulation are included within the characteristics of effective learning, which focus on how rather than what children learn.

Overview of the characteristics of effective learning – how children learn

In addition to the prime and specific areas of learning, this report proposes that a number of characteristics are highlighted, describing factors arising within the child which play a central role in learning, and in becoming an effective learner. These learning characteristics run through and underpin all seven areas of learning and development. As enduring characteristics, pertaining to lifelong learning, they need to be continuously observed and fostered but cannot be described in a developmental sequence. The strands of the characteristics of effective learning are related to key themes in early childhood development, and are grouped within the EYFS commitments. The proposed characteristics of learning are:

- Playing and Exploring
 - Finding out and exploring
 - Using what they know in their play
 - Being willing to have a go
- Active Learning
 - Being involved and concentrating
 - Keeping on trying
 - Enjoying achieving what they set out to do
- Creating and Thinking Critically
 - Having their own idea
 - Using what they already know to learn new things
 - Choosing ways to do things and finding new ways

The learning characteristics represent processes rather than outcomes. This has implications for assessment. How a child exhibits these characteristics could be observed within formative assessment, in order to better understand the child and support their development as learners; it is not considered appropriate to specify particular ages or stages for the development of

learning characteristics, which apply alike to children and adults, nor to assess the extent to which these have been achieved in a summative form. Early learning goals, therefore, have not been developed for the characteristics of learning in the proposed model.

The characteristics underline the 'will', or motivational factors, which enable the learner to employ the effortful control necessary for effective learning (Evangelou, 2009: p5). The will arises naturally within the child, according to theories of intrinsic motivation which describe a natural, inherent drive to seek out challenges and new possibilities. In neuroscience this is related to animal behaviour as 'a spontaneous tendency (of the being) to explore and learn about its environment' in anticipation of rewards. Examples of these anticipatory and satisfaction-seeking behaviours which arouse this system in human beings are 'intense interest', 'engaged curiosity' and 'eager anticipation' (Panksepp, 2005).

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) describes universal, innate human needs for competence and control, as well as for being related to others (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim and Kaplan, 2003). Dweck's work points to the greater success of individuals whose motivation arises from a desire for mastery (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). This is supported by the theories of Bandura (1977) whose notion of self-efficacy describes those who view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered, develop deeper interest in the activities in which they participate, form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities, and recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments. According to Bandura, beliefs and attitudes supporting self-efficacy form in early childhood, while the growth of self-efficacy continues to evolve throughout life as people acquire new skills, experiences, and understanding (Bandura, 1992).

Children are seen as inherently proactive in developing their potential and acquiring self-regulation; development of positive motivation, however, can be helped or hindered by the social environment (Deci and Vansteenkiste, 2004), which underlines the importance of recognising and fostering these characteristics. The motivational factors are brought to bear in all areas of learning; for example, 'A crucial aspect of early literacy development is personal autonomy – the clear establishment of a sense of control over one's learning experiences. According to Whitehead (2004), progress in writing is bound with autonomy and children need to be involved from the start in forming opinions and having views about their own writing successes and difficulties' (Evangelou, 2009: p35).

Detailed rationale for the characteristics of learning

Playing and exploring – engagement

"Play is the prime context for development." (Evangelou, 2009: p4) Alongside development in all areas of learning which is enhanced in play, this strand particularly highlights the agency of the child in actively constructing knowledge and understanding through playful qualities of engaging with their environment and with others.

- *Finding out and exploring* is concerned with children's open-ended, hands-on experiences which result from innate curiosity and provide the raw sensory material from which children build concepts, test ideas, and find out;
- *Using what they know in their play* describes the importance of play as a context for children to bring together their current understandings, flexibly combining, refining and exploring their ideas in imaginative ways. Representing experiences through imaginative play supports development of narrative thought, the ability to see from other perspectives, and symbolic thinking (Evangelou, 2009: p78); and

- *Being willing to have a go* refers to the role of play in children finding an interest, initiating activities, seeking challenge, having a 'can do' orientation, being willing to take a risk in new

Active learning – motivation

This strand highlights key characteristics which arise from intrinsic motivation to achieve mastery – to experience competence, understanding, and autonomy.

- *Being involved and concentrating* describes the intensity of attention that arises from children concentrating on following a line of interest in their activities. This supports the deep level learning (Ferre Laevers) which should be a goal of early education: 'In enhancing children's thinking, it is more important to aim at depth and not breadth. Deep understanding is more important than superficial coverage.' (Evangelou, 2009: p8);
- *Keeping on trying* refers to the importance of persistence even in the face of challenge or difficulties, an element of purposeful control which supports resilience; and
- *Enjoying achieving what they set out to do* refers to the reward of meeting one's own goals, building on the intrinsic motivation which supports long-term success, rather than relying on the approval of others.

Creating and thinking critically – thinking

Babies and children are thinkers who make sense of their experiences through perceiving patterns and developing concepts. As they engage in activities they actively think about the meaning of what they encounter, and over time begin to develop more awareness of their own thinking (metacognition). Awareness of oneself as a thinker and learner is a key aspect of success in learning (Whitebread and Pasternak, 2010).

- *Having their own ideas* covers the critical area of creativity – of generating new ideas and approaches in all areas of endeavour. Being inventive allows children to find new problems as they seek challenge, and to explore ways of solving these;
- *Using what they already know to learn new things* begins in infancy as babies organise their sensory information to assess patterns and make predictions, with brains generating rules based on small datasets (Evangelou, 2009: p5). Thinking becomes more conscious as concepts are developed and linked together, finding meaning in sequence, in cause and effect, and in intentions of others through both narrative and scientific modes of thought; and
- *Choosing ways to do things and finding new ways* involves approaching goal-directed activity in organised ways, making choices and decisions about how to approach tasks, planning and monitoring what to do, and being able to change strategies. Siegler and colleagues (2005) describe toddlers and young children learning in 'overlapping waves' as they choose from older or newer strategies to suit the demands of the task. Recent research identifies that children giving explanations about how they solve a problem learn more than when simply given positive feedback and explaining errors leads to greater learning than explaining why something is correct – suggesting that understanding the processes of how problems are solved is more important than the right answer (Evangelou, 2009: pp51, 79).