

28 March 2014

Sir Michael Wilshaw  
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector  
Ofsted  
Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

Dear Sir Michael

### **Your letter to Early Years Inspectors**

We welcome the interest you are taking in Early Years provision, as evidenced by the proposals to add separate judgements for Early Years in schools, and next week's launch of the Early Years Annual report. We know you share the sector's concern about the need to build up Early Years expertise amongst the inspection teams, to ensure that those inspecting the Early Years understand the distinctive features of provision for the youngest children and the proven effectiveness of learning through play. In that spirit, we are glad to see you writing separately to early years inspectors to ensure the messages they receive are in keeping with the Early Years Foundation Stage.

However, there are some aspects of your letter which are not in line with the current statutory EYFS Framework, and we are concerned that this gives confusing messages to inspectors, especially those who are less knowledgeable about the early years.

It is also confusing to early years practitioners who expect to be judged on how well they meet the terms of the EYFS. Especially for those settings who are less confident about their practice and as such follow Ofsted guidance 'as read' without understanding the 'big picture' into which this guidance fits, there are statements in your letter which although meant to impact positively on children's learning may have an adverse effect.

Like you we are keen to see the tail of poor provision in the sector raised to a much higher standard so that all children can benefit from high quality early years education. We believe that in order to do so it is vital that Ofsted inspections closely follow the developmental principles of the EYFS, and that formal models of teaching

inappropriate to early years are not imported from compulsory schooling, including in the Reception Year which should be a seamless experience with the rest of the EYFS. In particular, it would be helpful to draw inspectors' attention to the EYFS statutory framework (1.9) where it says that 'each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play', which can be outdoors as well as indoors.

We absolutely agree that the emphasis must be on education and holistic development, not just on care and supervision. However, you say that you "clearly set out our expectation that adults must teach young children". While we would of course agree that adult-led and adult-initiated learning has an important role to play in the early years, the use of the word "teach" can give rise to expectations of overly formal approaches. In particular, it implies a pedagogy that is not suited to the needs of babies and very young children. In line with the EYFS it would be more helpful to define teaching as a reference to supporting learning, care and development explicitly. Where 'teaching' is referred to, the description provided in Ofsted guidance for inspectors for the Early Years Register gives a more complete and balanced view of the role of the adult:

"Teaching should not be taken to imply a 'top down' or formal way of working. It is a broad term which covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn.....Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do as well as take account of their interests and dispositions to learning (characteristics of effective learning), and use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and monitor their progress."

*(Evaluation schedule for inspections of registered early years provision, Guidance and grade descriptors for inspecting registered early years provision from 4 November 2013, p7, footnote 8).*

We suggest that, rather than asking inspectors to focus only on what makes teaching and assessment effective, you should ask them to focus on the evidence that children's learning, care and development is being effectively supported and monitored. As the EYFS Statutory Framework makes clear, positive relationships (with early years practitioners and with other children), enabling environments and the unique child, seen as an active and capable learner, all contribute to learning and development. It is therefore important that inspectors understand and take account of how each of these principles contributes to learning and developmental outcomes, and how outcomes are evidenced for individual children.

Inspectors need to have a clear understanding of how formative assessment contributes to young children's learning and is used by early years professionals to support delivery of the EYFS to a diverse body of early learners. The Early Years Outcomes document, we would argue, is not helpful in this respect, omitting as it does the context provided in Development Matters and bypassing guidance on the Characteristics of Effective Learning, referred to clearly in the Framework and in the January 2014 Ofsted Subsidiary Guidance for Maintained Schools and Academies. Whilst we acknowledge that Development Matters is non-statutory and agree with this status, we know many practitioners find it extremely helpful.

We would also stress that the EYFS should not be narrowed to an instrumental focus on school readiness. Young children should be nurtured and valued in their own right as competent early learners, rather than treated as a means to a next stage. Whilst it is essential to equip young children with a love for learning, and to prepare older children for transition into primary school, early learners must be respected for who they are, rather than viewed simplistically and judgmentally in terms of who they might one day become.


There is extensive evidence that pressurising children too early into behaviour for which they are not yet developmentally ready such as sitting still to engage in formal literacy and numeracy activity is detrimental to children's later progress<sup>1</sup>. Inspectors need to understand, for example, the value of children engaging in physical activity which supports their health, welfare and capacity to concentrate, building learning dispositions which create an enthusiasm for learning, developing the gross and fine motor skills which are the foundation of writing, and so on. Children who are being taught to sit still and perform the three Rs before they are ready are being given the worst rather than the best preparation for later learning.

We hope that you will be able to convey these messages to all Early Years inspectors and ensure that they are able to engage positively in helping all settings and practitioners deliver the EYFS as effectively as possible.

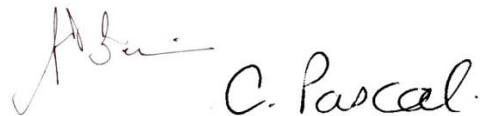
Yours sincerely



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<sup>1</sup> See Bingham S & Whitebread D (2011) The 'Readiness' literature review 2011 available at <http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-paper/occasional-paper2.pdf>