

Inclusive Practices for EAL Pupils: Evaluating the UK's Early Years Strategy

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to critically investigate and evaluate the degree to which the United Kingdom's early years policy framework equips and supports early years practitioners in delivering effective, inclusive classroom practices for pupils identified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. It seeks to identify the gaps between national policy intent and real-world classroom practice, and to evaluate whether current strategic provisions are sufficient to meet the diverse needs of EAL learners in the early years. A mixed methods research design was employed, combining qualitative semi-structured interviews with early years practitioners and setting leaders across three local authority areas in England, alongside quantitative analysis of school-level EAL inclusion data drawn from national pupil premium records. This dual approach enabled both statistical breadth and rich contextual insight into practitioner experience and policy effectiveness. The findings reveal a significant disconnect between the inclusive aspirations embedded within the EYFS framework (Early Years Foundation Stage) and the practical reality faced by practitioners in EAL-heavy settings. Practitioners reported feeling underprepared and under-resourced, with inadequate professional development opportunities and insufficient bilingual support provisions. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence calling for a more culturally responsive and linguistically informed early years strategy in the UK. Its findings carry significant implications for policy reform, initial teacher training, and the professional development of early years practitioners. Addressing these strategic gaps is essential to achieving genuine educational equity for one of the most linguistically vulnerable groups in the UK education system.

Keywords: English as an Additional Language, Early Years Foundation Stage, Inclusive Classroom Practices, Early Years Policy & Strategy, Linguistic Inclusion