



## **Early Excellence Baseline Assessment (EExBA): Not the answer**

Among the contenders offering baseline assessment schemes, Early Excellence has gathered the majority of schools who have opted to sign up to a scheme for the pilot year. Schools have in essence voted with their feet, rejecting the test-based models in favour of the scheme which most closely matched what they are doing already within appropriate early years assessment practices. Although EExBA is preferable to the other schemes, however, there are compelling reasons to avoid its use as a baseline assessment system.

EExBA is unique among the schemes in several important ways – it is based solely on observations across a range of contexts; it takes account of information from parents and previous settings; it covers a much wider range including the characteristics of effective learning and the prime areas as well as literacy and mathematics; it takes account of children's well-being and involvement in timing the assessment. Because these features sit more comfortably with early years principles, schools have identified the scheme as preferable to the more narrow test-based models – it is reported that over 11,000 out of 17,000 have gone with EExBA, while some thousands have opted out completely for this year. EExBA may go some way toward making the best of a bad situation, ***but children and schools would still be better without baseline.***

### **Waste of money**

Schools already have on-entry assessment systems in place which enable them to support learning and teaching, and to track progress – 100% of schools surveyed in research commissioned by the DfE reported that they currently use observation alongside other sources of information to find out where new reception children are in their learning and development. Good teachers are able to assess children as they work with them, tailoring the assessment to each individual child, at no additional cost. Anecdotally, schools report that they are planning to retain their own EYFS-based initial assessments *and* carry out the new baseline assessments, thus duplicating work and wasting money. EExBA is essentially formalising the EYFS processes already in place in schools, and taking in *millions of pounds of public money* which could be much better spent on supporting and improving quality in early years settings and schools.

### **Too much, too soon – for children and teachers**

For children who appear to be confident, settled and engaged on entry to school EExBA recommends that the assessment should be made within the first 2-3 weeks in the reception class, while others will be assessed at 3-4 weeks and according to DfE rules all must be assessed within 6 weeks. Most schools currently aim to complete existing on-entry assessments around the end of the first half-term, at 6-8 weeks into the term, recognising that children often do not show their capabilities in a new situation and that becoming confident and at ease precede intellectual engagement.

For teachers, in this vital period where their focus should be on supporting children to make the

transition into school successfully, nationally reported baseline assessment for accountability purposes adds new burdens. With EExBA there will be pressure to create opportunities to observe and make specific judgements for each child on levels of well-being and involvement, as well as nearly 50 yes/no judgements on criteria which are then translated to numerical scores. This system of judgements against a set of specific scale points is very similar to the pre-2012 Foundation Stage Profile, but that assessment followed a year of observing and getting to know each child and was supported by extensive training and moderation. The current EYFS Profile and most on-entry approaches used in schools employ best-fit judgements which significantly reduce the assessment burden, as well as offering a picture of children's attainment which is truer to the complex varieties of children's own patterns of learning and development.

### **Limited concept of children and learning**

EExBA is broader than the other baseline models, making a creditable attempt to cover vital areas of early development beyond literacy and mathematics. While not including all areas of learning and development of the EYFS, it weights the point score in favour of judgements on the characteristics of effective learning and the prime areas. However, the model still by necessity provides an over-simplified and distorted view of individual children's learning and development.

The scheme uses descriptors drawn mainly from the larger set of statements in *Development Matters in the EYFS*, selected from the 30-50 and 40-60 month bands and Early Learning Goals. In *Development Matters* the descriptors are presented as **examples** of typical development within age/stage bands, supported by the statement reproduced on each page: '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.' Given that learning is not predictably linear, and that children will demonstrate a wide range of individual learning and development that cannot be covered in a simple list, the statements in *Development Matters* are meant to support a best-fit approach to identifying a child's development in relation to typical progress while recognising that no two children's learning will be the same.

EExBA, however, identifies a much smaller range of statements which are used to construct **expected** learning and development for each child, and also dictates the order of these – some statements cannot be scored until 'earlier' ones are achieved. Since many of the statements are meant to describe children at the end of the EYFS, there are even fewer points which a child entering reception would be likely to demonstrate. In the end, the richness of experience, knowledge and understanding of each individual child is reduced to a single score, adding together the 'yes' scores into one undifferentiated and unrevealing total.

### **Influence of assessment on practice**

Assessment inevitably shapes practice – what is assessed is what is noticed, and what is supported. The narrower, prescriptive view of children's learning contained in the EExBA descriptors could become a funnel down which the broad, holistic understanding of early learning is pushed. Since the EExBA statements will remain the same from year to year, these descriptors will come to be seen as the curriculum. This can result in top-down pressure on younger children, with parents believing they should prepare their children for the assessment and nurseries attempting to prove their effectiveness by 'teaching to the test'.

### **Extra work**

Where schools avoid this narrowing process, they will have the extra workload of adding EExBA on top while maintaining their existing more complete and sensitive assessment systems, including

assessment at the end of the reception year. Many nurseries are using a best-fit model of assessment, and this approach can be used effectively to track progress throughout the EYFS, with no need for the extra baseline scores.

### **Unfair to children**

Some children will not be able to show their abilities and achievements, and are likely to be disadvantaged by the assessment since labels can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Summer-born children, children with English as an additional language, boys who may be developing more slowly in some areas, children with special needs – all of these will be judged on the same scale. Being nearly a year younger does not mean that a child is less able; not understanding or using mathematical language in English does not indicate a failure to understand mathematical concepts. Without contextual understanding, the total generated through the rigid scoring process is at best meaningless, and at worst harmful to young children's learning and development. It also risks creating unnecessary stress and concern for parents.

### **Unreliable predictor**

The EExBA scales have attempted to include some elements of areas which evidence shows do predict later attainment, such as self-regulation and personal and social development. This is partial coverage, however. And there is no evidence that the literacy and numeracy descriptors are reliable predictors of children's attainment several years later. Understandably, Early Excellence designed the scales in line with government specification that these areas must be included, but the whole project of using baseline assessment in this way is flawed.

### **Assessment for the wrong reasons**

Assessment in order to support teaching and learning has a central place in early years practice. Assessment in order to judge the effectiveness of primary schools, however, is part of an accountability culture which burdens and limits education and undermines professional assessment and response to children. Research commissioned by the DfE points to the possibility of 'gaming' when assessment is undertaken for high stakes accountability purposes, rather than for supporting children – teachers may underestimate children's achievements in order to show larger gains later. The early years are a crucial time in a child's education, and a teacher's sensitive alertness to the infinite variety presented by individual children should not be dulled by formulaic point scores. The on-entry assessments which schools already make are for the primary purpose of getting to know each child in order to plan how best to support their on-going development and learning. That is how it should remain.

### ***Better without baseline***

The proposed system of baseline assessment, including EExBA, is therefore:

- wasteful of public money in a time of austerity
- unreliable
- unfair
- burdensome
- and pressurises teachers, children and parents at a delicate time of transition.

**We urge government and schools to rethink: drop baseline assessment plans**