



## **TACTYC response to**

### **Primary assessment in England Government consultation**

**6. The EYFSP measures a child's development against the ELGs set out in the EYFS statutory framework. Should the profile be improved to better assess a child's knowledge, skill, understanding and level of development at the end of the early years? If so, please describe which elements could be added, removed or modified.**

1. Any changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) must be undertaken carefully and only with good evidence that the change would be an improvement which would outweigh the costs of the training and development necessary to support implementation. The early years sector must be fully involved in the process for determining any changes, in order to ensure that the Profile remains an appropriate and trusted assessment.

2. The EYFSP is widely respected, providing a reliable judgement of children's development largely because it is a summative assessment based on sound approaches to assessment used throughout the EYFS. It is not a separate assessment, unrelated to daily practice. Instead it pulls together in a brief summary form the knowledge that the reception teacher has gained across the year in working alongside each child in a range of situations – including children's play as well as experiences planned and led by adults. It also includes insights from parents' observations at home and any other adults who know the child well, and draws on the child's own views about their learning. This thorough, panoramic approach to assessment should be retained.

3. The EYFSP is primarily designed to support children's transition from reception into year 1, and forms the foundation of a discussion between teachers and parents which covers all areas of learning and development, as well as the crucially important Characteristics of Effective Learning (which are described but not scored).

4. Its secondary purpose for accountability is linked to data based on the EYFSP, the 'Good Level of Development' (GLD). By including the requirement to meet the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) for literacy and mathematical development, the GLD shows a lack of understanding of the most important foundations for future learning, and distorts children's experiences in the EYFS leading to an excessively formal

curriculum and approach to learning. There is no evidence that attainment of ELGs in those particular areas is a necessary basis for success in later learning.<sup>1</sup>

5. The literacy and mathematical development ELGs are limiting factors in the number of children attaining the 'GLD', and they should be reviewed to reflect realistic attainment for most children at the age of 5. They should be developed not through pushing inappropriate expectations downward from later key stages, but should reflect children's growing literacy and mathematical understanding developed in practical, imaginative, and problem-solving contexts.

6. In order to reflect areas that are of central importance in the early years, the EYFSP could usefully be modified to heighten attention to self-regulation and dispositions for learning, described in the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Descriptors in these areas could be scored on a graduated basis indicating a degree to which a child consistently demonstrates these learning behaviours. For example, Bristol City Council has developed an assessment tool and supporting documentation which enables such a profile to be produced ([www.bristolearlyyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Bristol-EY-CoEL-Final-Document.pdf](http://www.bristolearlyyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Bristol-EY-CoEL-Final-Document.pdf)). Including the Characteristics of Effective Learning in the EYFSP scores would be a positive step toward increasing attention to practice which supports children's development not only in curricular content, but as strong learners. There would be training implications to support school staff in observing and recognising these strands, as well as in providing the high quality environments and relationships for learning that support children's development as learners as well as in content areas.

7. Oral language is an area of learning and development that justly receives focus as a prime area (communication and language). It would not be helpful to identify vocabulary size as an aspect of the ELG, since teachers are not skilled in determining the number of words a child uses. However, as vocabulary increases the uses of language also increase, and these could be better identified in the ELG. For example, the 40-60+ band in Development Matters identifies 'Uses language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences in play situations', 'Uses talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events'. Including these in the ELG would improve focus on important aspects of language and its role in thinking and learning.<sup>2</sup> Again, there is a need to invest in training to improve teacher skills in observing, supporting, and assessing development in oral language.

**7. The EYFSP currently provides an assessment as to whether a child is 'emerging, expecting or exceeding' the level of development in each ELG. Is this categorisation the right approach? Is it the right approach for children with SEND?**

As a best-fit judgement, the three descriptions are sufficient for summative data purposes. The term 'expected' is misleading, however, in that children's rates and

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885200612000397>

<sup>2</sup> Gooch and Lambirth 2016 [https://www.amazon.co.uk/Teaching-Early-Reading-Phonics-Gooch/dp/1473918901/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1495566333&sr=8-1&keywords=Gooch+and+Lambirth+phonics](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Teaching-Early-Reading-Phonics-Gooch/dp/1473918901/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1495566333&sr=8-1&keywords=Gooch+and+Lambirth+phonics)

patterns of development vary widely, so there can be no clear expectation for any individual child. It may be more helpful to describe the central broad band as describing 'typical' development.

Such broad-brush statements are of course not sufficient for providing useful information about any particular child, and the EYFSP is designed as a starting point for conversations with parents and in transition discussions. Children with SEND should have further information included (for example, through use of the Early Support materials). Similarly, children who are judged to be exceeding the ELG also should have their learning described in further detail. For all children, the best-fit approach will mean that the picture of their individual learning is far richer than what is captured in the EYFSP alone.

The existing practice of reporting results for the whole cohort with no adjustment for age is damaging to younger children in the group. Too many summer-born children, particularly boys, are misdiagnosed as having special needs when their scores are lower for developmental reasons and through relative lack of experience. By the end of KS1, an August-born child is 90% more likely to be diagnosed with SEND than a September-born child.<sup>3</sup>

#### **8. What steps could we take to reduce the workload and time burden on those involved in administering the EYFSP?**

Completing the EYFSP is not an onerous task, since it is a simple summary of assessment that has been undertaken on a continual basis throughout the year. The ELGs are meant to be used on a best-fit basis to describe the culmination of all that the teacher has understood about the child's learning throughout the year. ELGs are not designed as a curriculum to dictate assessment approaches throughout the reception year.

Workload issues around assessment have arisen because of mistaken understanding, often exacerbated by electronic assessment systems, which uses isolated descriptors from Development Matters and ELGs as a checklist, leading to time-consuming and unnecessary recording of observations linked to each descriptor. While the EYFS explicitly says that paperwork should be kept to the absolute minimum required to support learning and development, there is still widespread practice of amassing recorded evidence rather than relying on teachers' professional knowledge. Professional development in assessment is required to free teachers from obsessive tracking of narrow curricular targets. Teachers need support to use ongoing assessment to understand children's current learning and development, and plan to enhance and support further learning through skilful interaction and challenging opportunities well matched to children's interests and motivations.

The EYFSP thus becomes a brief process of matching what is understood about each child's learning to the best-fit bands related to the ELGs. Many settings and

---

<sup>3</sup> Research Report DFE-RR017, Month of Birth and Education, Schools Analysis and Research Division, July 2010

schools across the EYFS already undertake this process two or three times each year, using Development Matters age/stage bands to understand how children are progressing and consider how best to meet the needs of individuals and groups of children.

It should be noted that concern over workload issues should preclude introducing a baseline assessment as an additional assessment within the same year. Because baseline assessment does not tell teachers what they need to know to support children's learning, it adds an extra layer to the assessment teachers already undertake.

### **9. How could we improve the consistency and effectiveness of the EYFSP moderation process whilst reducing burdens?**

Moderation should be a continual process of reflection, as teams within schools discuss their assessments as part of the planning process. This could be supported by inter-school assessment clusters, which are especially valuable in small schools. Moderation for the EYFSP should be undertaken by local authority moderators, who should be nationally trained and accredited in order to maintain consistency. Local authority teams have had significant reductions, and resources need to be put in to ensure a well-qualified workforce is in place in local authorities.

### **10. Any form of progress measure requires a starting point. Do you agree that it is best to move to a baseline assessment in reception to cover the time a child is in primary school (reception to key stage 2)? If you agree, then please tell us what you think the key characteristics of a baseline assessment in reception should be. If you do not agree, then please explain why.**

No, we do not agree.

This proposal is fundamentally flawed. While children's progress must clearly be taken into account in establishing school accountability, we do not believe that it is possible to develop an accurate or reliable measurement for comparing children's later attainment with a starting point. There is no evidence that it is possible to accurately predict children's later attainment from the reception year. Any attempt to do so would leave schools in the uncomfortable position of being judged six years later on the spurious basis of an assumed direct link. Instead, schools should be inspected and judged on the robustness of their own systems for tracking children's progress throughout their time in primary school. Schools can compare the progress of their children with national descriptors, both within school and in inter-school moderation. Nationally, a sampling approach can be used to assess the effectiveness of policy and delivery.

There are three central reasons we oppose the proposal to establish a baseline assessment.

#### **1. Baseline assessment would be detrimental to children.**

- Children may be labelled as of lower ability on the basis of an unreliable assessment, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations and low attainment. This would apply particularly to children who have not had preschool experiences which highlight the areas assessed in a baseline, those who are unfamiliar with the format of the assessment, children from deprived backgrounds, those whose home language is not English, summer born children, and children with additional needs.
- The baseline process would distract teachers from their core role early in the reception year of welcoming children and parents to the school, establishing trusting relationships, supporting emotional well-being and observing children to understand their development and their needs.
- A high-stakes, narrow focus on particular subject areas would have a negative effect on children's experiences. A baseline assessment with its focus on a narrow range of knowledge and skills is likely to lead to a narrow range of experiences for children at even earlier ages. Practitioners in nurseries and preschools will be under pressure to demonstrate that their children are 'ready for school' and so may 'teach to the test'. Reception teachers will be expected to show progress in these narrow measures within children's final year of the EYFS. In consequence, children would be increasingly subjected to inappropriate and unnecessary formal teaching that would detract from the rich exploratory, playful, creative, and intellectual experiences which we know from research benefit children in the early years<sup>4</sup>.
- Both teachers and parents would feel pressure to emphasise learning content, rather than focusing on the more important aspects of children's well-being and capacities as self-regulating learners. Effective support for character and resilience cannot be provided through a narrow focus on curricular targets, but requires the knowledge and understanding of expert practitioners who can establish the conditions for children's growth and respond optimally to individual children moment to moment. These will include rich play and other meaningful learning contexts where children are making choices, solving real problems, and engaging in extended conversations about their thoughts, feelings, and activities.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. **Baseline assessment is an invalid way of holding schools to account.**

- One-off assessments cannot provide statistically valid or reliable information about children's starting points, as many children will not be able to demonstrate what they know and can do in a 'test' situation. The varied nature of children's learning and development cannot be captured in simple numerical scores.
- Early assessments conducted in English cannot reflect the current development, nor predict the progress, of children with other first languages.
- Attainment in curriculum content areas at age 4 is not a strong predictor of future success. Assessments based on narrow checklists of basic skills and knowledge do not take account of the different ways and rates at which children learn and develop, nor of the ability of children to build conceptual understanding and apply their knowledge. Longer term academic progress is better predicted by qualities such as motivation, persistence, emotional well-

<sup>4</sup> Moyles, J. (2015) *The Excellence of Play* (4edn). Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill

<sup>5</sup> Marcon, R (2002) Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol 4 No 1.



being and social skills which are not reflected effectively in baseline assessment schemes.

- Mobility of children during the primary years makes nonsense of using entry data to compare to different cohorts of children six years apart. It is estimated that about 40% of children move school at some stage between the reception year and Year 6.

### 3. This flawed policy has already been tried and failed – it will not work.

- Baseline assessment was abandoned as unworkable when it was tried in 1997-2003. The original plans for introducing baseline in 2017 were withdrawn when the pilot proved that the results between different schemes were not comparable. It is ill-advised to assume, without evidence, that choosing any one scheme would provide a valid and useful measure.
- Baseline assessment has already been rejected by the early years sector. In the last consultation on this subject the majority of respondents opposed instituting a baseline assessment.
- Though most schools used a baseline assessment in the pilot year, their experiences were not positive. Three-quarters reported an increased workload for teachers, while only 7.7% believed it was a fair and accurate way to assess children and 6.7% thought it was a fair way to assess primary schools.
- It is significant that schools were offered the baseline schemes for free in 2016/17, and encouraged by the private providers to use them, yet only around one in four schools chose to use them this year. Schools already have in place much better ways of assessing children and understanding their progress.
- Baseline assessment policy has already wasted millions of pounds of public money.<sup>6 7</sup> At a time of funding crisis in education there is no justification for wasting yet more on this unworkable programme.
- The intention to start a baseline assessment in September 2019 means that there would be insufficient time for thorough development, pilots and evaluation. Reception children would be used in an experimental programme, which would be of no benefit to their development and learning.

### **11. If we were to introduce a reception baseline, at what point in the reception year do you think it should be administered? In particular, we are interested in the impact on schools, pupils and teaching of administering the assessment at different times.**

The reception baseline should not be administered at all. In addition to the reasons given above, there are problems associated with a baseline within the reception year.

---

<sup>6</sup> Clark, M. (2017) 'Synthetic Phonics and Baseline Assessment under the Searchlight in 2017: are they value for money in a time of cuts?' *Education Journal* 299: 16-19.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, M. (2017) *Understanding research in Early Education: the relevance for the future of lessons from the past* Routledge

- Early administration is disruptive to the vital settling-in period in the first weeks.
- The high stakes nature of an assessment used for accountability purposes tends to lead to 'gaming' in order to have a low baseline from which to demonstrate progress. In some cases reception teachers were advised not to teach children before the baseline had been done.
- The EYFS is a key stage in its own right, and the assessment at the end (EYFSP) is an appropriate stage in which to consider the effectiveness of the phase. It makes no sense to have a baseline when there is a year of EYFS ahead. Although 'starting school' may be taken to mean starting in reception, in fact many schools have attached nurseries and children start at age 2 and 3. This raises the question of whether children's learning could be compromised in nurseries in order to have a low baseline for the school.

**12. Our view is that it would be difficult to change key stage 1 assessment in order that it could be used as the baseline for progress in the long term. If you disagree, what could be done to improve the key stage 1 assessments so that they would be sufficiently detailed, and trusted as a fair and robust baseline?**

The acknowledged difficulties in developing key stage 1 assessments that would serve as a baseline for progress and be trusted as fair and robust are magnified in the case of a reception baseline two years earlier. It is nonsense to suppose that it is possible to predict a child's attainment 6 years in the future, when there is agreement that the smaller interval from Year 2 to Year 6 does not show sufficient correlation. Baseline proposals should be abandoned.

**14. If a baseline assessment is introduced in reception, in the longer term, would you favour removing the statutory requirement for all-through primary schools to administer assessments at the end of key stage 1?**

There have been many valid arguments put forward for removing statutory assessments in year 2, including the narrowing effects on the curriculum of high-stakes testing, the excessive stress on children and teachers, and the lack of predictive ability of the tests. All of these arguments also apply to a reception baseline, and it is not a solution to push the problem into the EYFS. A thorough reform of accountability approaches is needed which does not involve high stakes assessments of every pupil.

**24. Do you think that any of our proposals could have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific students, in particular those with 'relevant protected characteristics' (including disability, gender, race and religion or belief)? Please provide evidence to support your response.**

Research evidence has shown (Gillborn, 2008; Bradbury, 2013) that class, racialised and gendered stereotypes can negatively affect teacher assessments of children. Children with SEND can be labelled narrowly through stereotypes of their disability (Brock et al, 2014). It takes time for children to settle into school and form relationships with their teachers, especially when there are cultural and language differences or learning 'impairments'. This two-way process needs space for adults

in classes of thirty, four year olds to review their initial first impressions of children. Opportunities would be fewer if administration of the baseline is required in reception classes and initial impressions may inform baseline judgements. If children are assessed negatively in the early years of school this can impact on learner identities throughout their education.

Gillborn, D. 2008, *Racism and Education – Coincidence or conspiracy?* Routledge, Oxon.

Brock A. et al, 2014, *Perspectives on Play*, Routledge, Oxon.

Bradbury, A. 2013, *Understanding Early Years Inequality*, Routledge, Oxon.

**25. How could any adverse impact be reduced and are there any ways we could better advance equality of opportunity? Please provide evidence to support your response.**

Professional development could be funded for an awareness of how racialised and gendered stereotypes can impact on baseline assessment and how this can be challenged through a critical, reflective early years pedagogy.