



Ofsted's 'Bold Beginnings' UKLA response

On November 30th Ofsted published their report Bold beginnings: [The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools](#)

Although welcoming some of the viewpoints and observations within the report, UKLA has some serious concerns and reservations regarding the possible impact that some of the statements might have on the future development of the early years curriculum. Ofsted guidance has the potential to be a powerful force in the development of school curricular and pedagogy. With thanks to early years experts, Karen Daniels and Lucy Rodriguez-Leon for their depth and breadth of knowledge and academic consideration of the report, UKLA offers the following response.

We agree with the report that the reception year is important, and a well-planned YR classroom coupled with high quality, appropriate teaching will provide an environment in which all children can thrive and develop positive attitudes to learning.

However, YR children are not a homogenous group; this must be reflected in the curriculum, which must consider that:

- the youngest children entering YR are just 48-months-old
- children begin YR with diverse life experiences, skills, and knowledge bases
- some children are in the early stages of learning English
- adjusting to the school environment can be problematic for some children with SEND or those disadvantaged by various social or economic factors.

An appropriate YR curriculum therefore, is essential to ensure all have equal access to learning, to avoid perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage and widening the educational attainment gap. A YR curriculum that enables every child to develop literacy skills appropriate for the 21st century must be evidence based. We therefore support our response with such evidence in the sections that follow.

Point 1

Firstly, in our response to this document, we acknowledge literacy as more than simply a linear progression of print literacy skills to be acquired (Genishi and Dyson, 2009, Rowe, 2008), and instead as a social and cultural practice (Street, 1995, Gee, 2008) that varies significantly across time and place (Guitierrez, Bein, Selland and Pierce, 2010). Cultural and linguistic diversity is a feature of contemporary society and children inhabit many different social spaces (Pahl and Burnett, 2013). Dissonances between home and school literacy practices exist (Heath, 1983, Brooker, 2002, Levy, 2011) and teachers need to be well-equipped with a broad repertoire of responsive strategies and approaches to support and scaffold early literacy learning. An increased focus on the teaching of isolated print literacy skills

may be counterproductive to this endeavour. We provide further rationale for this concern below.

Point 2

We agree that the YR curriculum requires a balance of direct whole-class teaching, small-group teaching, partner work and play. However, the report appears to present the concepts of children learning through play and learning through direct teaching as an either / or dichotomy. High quality teaching through play effectively promotes children's literacy learning. This approach requires teachers to make moment by moment decisions grounded in their deep and detailed knowledge of pedagogy and child development, to guide the child through a meaningful learning process. The increased focus on the print literacy skills associated with reading and writing that the document recommends may be positioned as at odds with the importance of play in the Early Years (see for example, Moyles, 1994). Exploratory play has been seen of upmost significance in early (and later) literacy learning. Kress (1997) suggests that young children are guided by synesthetic activates which drawn on all their senses; Dyson (2009) illustrates how children 'take-hold' of schooled literacy as they remix this with their home and community experiences and concerns. Wohlwend (2008, 2011) describes children's play as a productive literacy, and draws attention to the gestural, spatial and materials modes of play and how these offer children diverse sites for participation. Indeed, collaborative narrative play and the play texts children produce have has been seen as supporting children's narrative competence (Nicolopolou, 1996) which in turn supports the symbolic representation skills needed for reading and writing (Sawyer and De Zutter, 2007).

Point 3

Play is a 'contested resource' in early years practice (Rogers and Lapping, 2012, p247) and a focus on print literacy skills may provide further limitations on the time, space and other resources allocated to play. We recommend that practitioners are supported in further recognising the complex relationships between literacies (including print literacies) and children's exploratory play within a supportive environment. In this way, practitioners will be well-equipped to support and scaffold the literacy learning needs of the diverse range of children they work with.

Point 4

Literacy pedagogy radically shapes children's understandings of what literacy is and who it is for (Levy, 2011). How we conceptualise literacy in national policy can have a significant influence on how it is experienced by children. The EYFS curriculum was introduced in 2008 and it recognised early childhood as a distinct phase in a person's life. This distinct phase involves recognising the ways in which children's experiences are holistic and not subdivided into discrete subject areas. *Bold beginnings* appears to separate out the 'Reception' year and re-position this as preparation for the National Curriculum. Furthermore, it separates literacy development from other aspects of learning. While we acknowledge that high expectations of children's capabilities are paramount to their success in the education system, we are concerned that the early move to more sedentary or

decontextualized activities (such as sitting at tables) may be counter to the varied pathways that children take in becoming literate. It is therefore of concern that the report seems to endorse YR children sitting at tables to write and doing so with the correct pencil grip to develop control. Some YR children are not developmentally ready to sit for a prolonged time and need to develop the hand muscles through activities such as manipulating play dough or mark-making with chunky paint brushes or chinks to support their fine motor development and pencil control.

Point 5

YR should remain firmly within the EYFS as part of this distinct phase of the educational system. Downward pressure from the curriculums of KS1 and beyond must not be allowed to devalue the play and inquiry based approach to learning. This curriculum model has great potential to enhance young children's reading and writing development through promoting their curiosity, creativity and imagination. Children need, not only to be exposed to a range of texts, but have opportunity to interact with and explore those texts, especially those of personal interest to them. They need opportunities and space to discover how their thoughts, ideas and experiences can be represented through the mediums of play, art, dance, and music as well as through oracy and writing.

Point 6

We were pleased to see that the report acknowledges the significance of developing children's reading for pleasure and the importance of stories, rhymes, and poems in early literacy learning. It is crucial however, that children are not regarded simply as passive recipients of these activities, but are enabled to be active participants in their literacy learning. Research evidences how this can be achieved through providing opportunity for book-related dialogue (Cohrssen et al., 2016) through promoting and valuing children's own stories (Cremin et al., 2017) and providing resources and space for children to create texts based on their own interests (Daniels 2014).

Point 7

In this era of instant access to information, it is more important than ever that children develop the knowledge and skills to engage critically with a variety of texts. (National Literacy Trust, 2017). Indeed, any children engage with digital resources from an early age (Levy, 2009). Being equipped for reading in the 21st Century needs to go beyond surface level word comprehension and explore possible interpretations and implicit meanings. The foundations of these skills begin in early childhood and are promoted when young children are encouraged and supported to interact with and discuss picture storybooks or informational texts, rather than simply decode them. Therefore, it is disappointing that the review promotes and endorses the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics as *the* primary method of teaching reading and writing. While we agree that there is value in developing children's phonic knowledge, there is clear research evidence supporting a broad and balanced

approach to the teaching of early literacy (see Wyse & Goswami, 2008 and Torgerson et al. 2006). Suggesting that systematic synthetic phonics is **the** route to decoding words fails to recognise the importance of comprehension and response, and reading for pleasure.

As Ofsted state in the report, the Reception year is a unique and important year for young children's educational and holistic development. The proposed recommendation for Ofsted to 'use the findings of this survey to help shape the new education inspection framework for September 2019' raises serious concerns regarding the potential changes that might be made to schools' EYFS curriculum. UKLA will continue to support the Better than Baseline campaign to ensure that the curriculum that our youngest children enjoy is fit for purpose and focuses on the development of every child.

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