
Still Not Listening? Ofsted's Influence on the Shape of the Reception Year, the Teaching of Early Years Reading in England, and Other Concerns from an Early Years Perspective

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ABSTRACT There is widespread concern about aspects of government policy relating to early years education. Current proposals for baseline assessment and changes to the early learning goals reveal a lack of insight into the nature of early learning, and little understanding and respect for effective early years pedagogy. Indeed, it is apparent that the Reception year in primary schools is now explicitly seen as preparation for Year 1, instead of being celebrated as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The role of Ofsted in reinforcing this development is regrettable, reflecting as it does the politicisation of education and the loss of informed impartial professional advice both to schools and to policymakers.

England has always had an exceptionally early school starting age, and recent changes have led to children being admitted to primary school in the September of the year in which they become five; this is a year before statutory school starting age for summer-born children. In the past, most local authorities operated a system of termly starting dates, which allowed for the effective settling in of small groups of children, and avoided the pressure of trying to accommodate the varying needs of up to 30 four-year-old new entrants to school, all with very different previous life experience. This policy's impact on feeder nursery settings has not been taken into account, but it has resulted in the annual admission of very large groups of very young children into the wide range of private, voluntary and maintained-sector nurseries. This split in provision for the Foundation Stage contrasts unfavourably with the common

model of at least three years' consistent kindergarten experience up to the age of six or seven in other countries. It is beyond irony that the government is now inviting Chinese educators to advise on the role of play in the early years curriculum (*China Daily*, 2018). The British Council funded a strong programme of support for China between 1999 and 2005 in response to China's request for advice in developing its early years provision. Having looked around the world for excellent practice, Chinese academics recognised the powerful and principled British heritage of effective early years education and care, and chose this as the model they wished to follow. I had the privilege of leading delegations to China over several years, and know that others continue the dialogue that started nearly 20 years ago. If only our politicians would also recognise the value and effectiveness of our provision, and listen to the experts, including practitioners, who understand and respect the complexity of young children's learning, and also the vital influence of parents on each individual child's progress.

The Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, in a speech to the Resolution Foundation (Hinds, 2018), described the fact that some children are starting school unable to communicate in full sentences or having barely opened a book as a 'persistent scandal' which means that some children never catch up with their more advantaged peers. He is right to draw attention to this issue, which was recognised by the Labour government 20 years ago, and which Sure Start was designed to counter. High-quality care and education coupled with multi-professional support for parents was signalled in the title of the then Department for Children, Schools and Families. The promise that 'Every Child Matters' was backed by investment in the early years, where it can make the most effective difference to children's prospects. However, many of the Sure Start Children's Centres have closed, and the flagship early years programme is reduced to a signposting service. Meanwhile, deep cuts to local authority budgets and to schools mean that services such as parenting support, speech and language therapy, mental health support and the sort of extracurricular activities that Hinds acknowledges as helpful in building resilience are also disappearing.

Since the advent of the coalition government in 2010, anything unrelated to core academic learning is seen to be irrelevant. Nick Gibb, the schools minister, has described the idea of social and emotional learning in the curriculum as 'ghastly'. The gap in GCSE results between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the rest is still around 19 months, and at the current rate of progress it will take 50 years to close. There has been increasing downward pressure on primary schools, including limited and limiting expectations of school readiness, and the suggestion, recommended in the Keeble Report (Keeble, 2016), that the Reception year should be seen in terms of preparation for Year 1. The proposal to introduce assessments of children when they enter the Reception class as a baseline measure of progress over the primary years is seriously flawed and potentially damaging (MTAS, 2018; TACTYC, 2018). As Clark (2017, 2018) and Clark & Glazzard (2018) show,

the phonics check that has been applied to all children in Year 1 since 2012 undermines effective early years practice in relation to early literacy.

Overreaching

It is of concern that ministers have not listened to professional reservations about these developments. In the past, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI), a cadre of highly experienced professionals, provided advice to government about the quality and standards of education in England. HMI were seen to be independent; their advice was informed by their experience and by collective judgements based on detailed observation and dialogue with pupils and staff. They produced informed guidance on early literacy (HMI, 1990) not long before a radical change took place in the inspection of schools through the introduction of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Since the advent of the National Curriculum in 1988, government involvement has increased, not only in the content of the curriculum, but also in how to teach and assess it, and how to train teachers to work in approved ways. Ofsted was formed under the Education (Schools) Act 1992, as part of a major overhaul and centralisation of the school system. As a non-ministerial government department, Ofsted reports directly to Parliament, and is responsible for inspecting and regulating education and training for learners of all ages in England and those services which care for children and young people.

Ofsted has been a controversial body over its short history. It has created a state of tension with schools and other educational institutions because of its perceived critical focus and changing criteria. It was described as 'not fit for purpose' by the House of Commons Education Select Committee in 2012 (*TES*, 3 February 2012), and a report by Policy Exchange (2014) asserted that many Ofsted inspectors lack the knowledge required to make fair judgements of lessons.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has recently stated:

The substance of the curriculum is a matter for government policy. Ofsted has a role in judging how well schools reflect the government's intentions and don't distort the aims that have been set. (Spielman, 2017)

There is current concern about the impact of government interventions, which go beyond defining the content of the curriculum. Systematic synthetic phonics is now prescribed in England as the method for the teaching of reading. It is important to make the point that phonics has always been a recognised part of the repertoire of skills introduced by teachers in support of early reading (Raban et al, 1994). However, the insistence on the use of synthetic phonics 'first, fast and only' has grown over the past 20 years. In 1997, Ofsted released *Literacy Matters*, a video (which is no longer available) that it claimed exemplified good practice in phonics teaching based on Read Write Inc., now a commercially

successful scheme; but while this video illustrated enthusiastic teaching, it offered little evidence of learning. Nevertheless, since 2012 there has been a mandatory requirement, driven by the schools minister, for a phonics check for all children in Year 1 based on the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics as the only acceptable approach to early reading.

Research Ignored

Although the evidence for this limited method of teaching is open to challenge, it was endorsed by the recommendations from the review of early reading published over ten years ago by a former Ofsted Director of Inspection (Rose, 2006). This has been influential in shaping policy, and exclusive, intensive, systematic, explicit synthetic phonics instruction has been widely adopted in England since then in spite of its restricted evidence base (see Clark, 2017). Significantly, in 2007 the sentence 'Children will be encouraged to use a range of strategies to make sense of what they read' was removed from the National Curriculum.

Indeed, some years ago, a university was instructed by Ofsted inspectors to remove from its library a particular text that challenged the current orthodoxy in teaching reading. Other university staff have had direct experience of their research being ignored and their teaching being criticised when it does not support the government view (Gardner, 2017).

Jo Johnson MP, when Minister for Universities and Science, said recently that free speech must be protected: 'In universities in America and worryingly in the UK, we have seen examples of groups seeking to stifle those who do not agree with them... We must not allow this to happen.'[1] He was referring to censorship of debates, but his remarks are surely also relevant to students' and teachers' rights to have access to a full range of rigorous research.

I have personal experience of the schools minister putting his hands over his ears and saying, 'I'm not listening' when, as part of a delegation of primary subject specialists, I tried to explain the importance of a rich literacy environment, the dangers of top-down approaches to early literacy, the need to find out what individual children already know, and how best to promote their learning, in line with the detailed advice on effective support for the complex processes involved in early reading provided by the National Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE, 2017). This is endorsed by the National Association of Advisers in English, the National Association for the Teachers of English, the United Kingdom Literacy Association and the English and Media Centre.

Not only is Ofsted inspecting uncritically in the context of government policy, it is also failing to interrogate the evidence and to challenge the ill-conceived approach that is being imposed on young children. Indeed, the pressures on schools to show achievement and progress at all costs and the fear of the effects of a weak Ofsted report are leading to counterproductive ways of working in many classrooms. It is very damaging for a school to be deemed to

require improvement, and almost impossible to get an Ofsted judgement altered (Santry, 2017). Yet in 2015, 40% of the inspectors who were brought back in house from the agencies who had managed inspections for several years had their employment terminated, as they were deemed to be unfit for the task, and very few inspectors have early years qualifications and experience.

Tiny Sample; Leading Questions

Ofsted (2017) has recently published *Bold Beginnings*, a survey of what it describes as good practice in Reception classes, which recommends that the Reception year should be aligned to the expectations of Year 1. This is not compatible with an earlier good-practice survey commissioned by the Chief Inspector to gather evidence to counter the recurring myth that teaching and play are separate (Ofsted, 2015), nor with Ofsted's published definition of teaching in the early years (Ofsted, 2016, p. 64, n. 65).

Bold Beginnings reports on practice in the Reception classes of 41 schools deemed to be particularly successful in advancing the achievement of disadvantaged children. Its lack of acknowledgement of the principles underpinning the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) coupled with its strong recommendations for the use of synthetic phonics and an emphasis on formal approaches to writing and maths have led early years experts across the field to challenge the structure of the survey and the conclusions reached (KEYU, 2018; Richards, 2018). In response to Freedom of Information questions, Ofsted has published further information (Annex C; see Ofsted, 2018). It is instructive to look at the specific interview schedule for inspectors, which includes the following:

Observation 1 – the teaching of early reading:

Complete a direct observation of practice relating to the teaching of early reading during the course of the day... When investigating children's reading, please focus your observations and questions around whether staff ensure that children are clearly and consistently taught to apply phonic knowledge and skill as the route to decoding words; strenuously avoid multi-cueing for word reading at all times.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this report has been heavily influenced by government policy on early reading, as the inspection questionnaire contains leading questions – for example:

To what extent is the curriculum in the Reception year fit-for-purpose in preparing children for Year 1 and the demands of the National Curriculum across key stage 1?
How do you teach reading comprehension in Reception? Explore the extent to which children are taught to:
1. apply phonic knowledge and skills to decode unfamiliar words accurately, before trying to understand them...

Responses to the questionnaire included in the review are not clearly analysed and explained in Annex C.

Defending the *Bold Beginnings* report, Gill Jones HMI, Ofsted's Early Education Deputy Director, acknowledged:

We were to some extent caught in the debate about phonics. But I hope it is clear that reading is much more than recognising words on a page... By reading, we mean children hearing and joining in with stories and rhymes, and singing with their friends. Learning stories and rhymes by heart is a great way to develop language and literacy. By hearing and repeating stories and ideas about the world around them, children increase their vocabulary and understanding. And that will be the foundation for all learning from Year 1 onwards.[2]

Her statement contrasts with the recommendations in *Bold Beginnings*, and with the fact that there is not one mention of 'play' in the report's recommendations, whereas there are 15 separate references to phonics, reading, writing and maths. Ofsted's insistence on the importance of ensuring that children in the Reception year are taught as it recommends is not consistent with its acknowledgement that the statutory school starting age is the term after a child's fifth birthday, which, for the summer-born group, is the start of Year 1.

A further weakness is that only six schools met the initial criteria for inclusion in the study; these criteria were relaxed in order to accommodate the final number of 41 schools. It is not possible to substantiate a case from such a small sample, representing 0.25% of primary schools in England. It is the case that schools serving similarly disadvantaged areas can demonstrate successful outcomes through the use of broader strategies to support early reading (Quirk & Pettett, 2018).

Subverting the Curriculum

Members of TACTYC, the association for professional development in early years, and of Early Education met with Gill Jones after the publication of *Bold Beginnings*.^[3] Along with other early years organisations, they disagree with the Ofsted view that the teaching of reading through systematic synthetic phonics is the core purpose of the Reception year. It is therefore deeply concerning that although Ofsted has done some important work in encouraging schools to do what they think is best for their children and has reiterated that 'Ofsted has no preferred method of teaching', the inspectors have not included mention of their own definition of effective early years pedagogy (to be found on p. 58 of the Ofsted School Inspection Handbook [Ofsted, 2016]) in this report. It states:

Teaching should not be taken to imply a 'top down' or formal way of working. It is a broad term that covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn. It includes their interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities: communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining,

demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what they are doing, facilitating and setting challenges. It takes account of the equipment adults provide and the attention given to the physical environment, as well as the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations. Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do, as well as taking account of their interests and dispositions to learn (characteristics of effective learning), and how practitioners use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and monitor their progress. (Ofsted, 2016)

A recent England-wide survey of heads, teachers and parents raises serious questions about the value of the phonics check (Clark & Glazzard, 2018). As Clark and Glazzard note, at this preliminary stage it is possible to identify some policy implications from the responses to the questionnaire. They state:

It is the view of those who completed this survey that the government should address the following:

1. The views expressed by the head teachers, teachers and parents who responded to this questionnaire indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the phonics check or making it voluntary. If the check is to be continued, then children who fail it in Year 1 should not be required to re-sit it in Year 2; this could be an optional decision which schools make.
2. Most heads and teachers who responded to the survey do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo words within the check, stressing the effect of these on their practice in the early years, including on children who can already read. Parental comments also indicated that a number of parents disagreed with the inclusion of pseudo words; where their child could already read these led to confusion and were detrimental to their child's progress. Thus, it should be seriously considered whether to remove these if the check is to be continued.
3. Most teachers reported that they had witnessed some children becoming stressed during the implementation of the check. Many parental comments also referred to stress and anxiety. If the check is to be continued, consideration should be given to it becoming a formative assessment tool only to be used to support teachers in planning to address individual needs.
4. The use of Phonics Screening Check data as a benchmark to measure overall school improvement appeared to be regarded as unhelpful by many. Additionally, the emphasis given to the pass rates in Ofsted inspections was not felt to be helpful. It appears that the 'high-stakes' status of the check results may place pressure on teachers which is passed down onto children, resulting in some becoming stressed.

5. Given the proportion of teachers (47.47%), Head Teachers (62.22%) and parents (55.93%) who disagree with government policy, the government should consider a broad repertoire of approaches for teaching children to read. The Teachers' Standards in England currently require all trainee teachers and teachers to 'demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' (TS3). The inclusion of synthetic phonics within the Teachers' Standards makes this method of teaching reading mandatory. In the light of these results, government should consider amending this so that it emphasises the role of synthetic phonics within a broad range of approaches for teaching children to read rather than as the only method of teaching reading to all children.

6. The response to this survey by head teachers, teachers and parents to the multiple-choice questions, and the detailed comments they added to many questions, suggest that they are concerned about current literacy policy. Thus, surely it would be valuable for the government to involve all stakeholders in discussion on the future of both the Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement that the only method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics. The lack so far of any attempt by government to undertake any such consultation and to seek the views of practitioners was the reason for us to undertake this independent survey.

One of the contributors to the book has interviewed pupils as part of her doctorate study (Carter, 2018). Her abstract states in part:

The Phonics Screening Check was introduced in England in 2012 for Year 1 children. There have been criticisms of the Check in relation to its reliability and appropriateness as an assessment for early reading although supporters of the Check see it as a valuable tool in securing the progress of early reading. The government's own evaluation [DfE, 2015, p. 8] concluded, however, that it 'did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC'... The [present] study has found that there is a subversion of the curriculum in Year 1 with PSC preparation having a disproportionate focus. Test preparation has become part of the curriculum to the detriment of specific groups of learners. Teachers are using the assessment tools of the PSC as their curriculum, including teaching pseudo word reading rather than using pseudo words as an assessment tool. Children see phonics as a separate subject, one that is disconnected from the meaning making process of reading. Children is continue to try and provide explanations for classroom teaching with some of these suggestions

having possible negative implications for children developing as readers...

As indicated, the review of the evidence carried out by the National Foundation for Education Research (DfE, 2015) suggests that although phonics attainment, as measured by the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard on the check, improved over three years, and there is some evidence that this may have been an impact of the introduction of the check, the analysis which was undertaken of national results, together with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and one year later, at the end of Key Stage 1, did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' literacy performance, or in their progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the phonics check. Nevertheless, the phonics check continues, in spite of reservations from practitioners and parents as well as researchers.

The authoritative Cambridge Primary Review (CPRE) (Alexander, 2010) upheld the principle that it is not for government or government agencies to tell teachers how to teach. It pointed out that the criteria and the methodology for Ofsted inspections have changed frequently, and the expertise, training and approaches of the inspection teams themselves are highly variable, and thus inconsistent. CPRE recommends that the relationship between government, national agencies, local authorities and schools should be rebalanced, and the centralising thrust of recent policy should be reversed. Government micro-management of teaching should end, and national agencies and local authorities should be independent advisers able to argue their cases with due rigour, rather than being political cheerleaders or enforcers. The checks and balances which are so vital to the formulation of sound policy should be restored.

Notes

- [1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-42481329>
- [2] <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/opinion/1163156/reception-is-for-learning-as-well-as-playing>
- [3] An account of their meeting can be found at <https://early-education.org.uk/news/dialogue-ofsted-bold-beginnings-report>, and TACTYC's detailed response is available at <http://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bold-Beginnings-TACTYC-response-FINAL-09.12.17.pdf>

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