
Bold Assertions: a comment on the *Bold Beginnings* debate

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ABSTRACT The Ofsted report *Bold Beginnings* was met with virulent opposition from the early years community. It tried to foreclose, rather than open up, debate about the Reception year; its wording was particularly incendiary. Almost a year on, straws in the wind suggest that the community's reaction was justified and that a battle for the soul of Reception is well under way.

The battle for the soul of Reception continues, as other articles in this issue of *FORUM* illustrate. It is clear that Ofsted mismanaged both the writing and the reception of its report *Bold Beginnings*. There was counterproductive recrimination both by inspectors and by critics. It is time that rational discussion replaces rhetoric and injured self-justification.

Let's be clear. There *is* a case for re-examining policy and practice in the Reception year; but then there's equally a case for re-examining policy and practice in Year 1, and for that matter, in every year of primary education. *Bold Beginnings* critiques Reception but assumes the appropriateness of provision thereafter, especially in Year 1.

A major part of the controversy rested with the wording of the report, especially its 'recommendations'. The predictable fury of early years specialists was understandable given the insensitive drafting of Ofsted's recommendations – note, not just for 'the schools inspected' but for 'all schools'.

Take the very first one: 'All primary schools should make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the reception year.'

Note its tone: not a recommendation to consider, but one to act upon. Note the readership: every school in England without exception, whatever its circumstances. Note '*the* core purpose' – not '*a* core purpose' (i.e. one among others). Note 'the teaching of reading', not 'the learning and teaching of

reading'. Note the paramountcy of 'systematic synthetic phonics' – with no acknowledgement of the relevance of other approaches to reading.

Would there have been such a violent outcry if it had been rephrased more carefully, with a better sense of 'audience' and with a conscious intent to open up, not foreclose, debate? Perhaps along the lines of 'Primary schools should consider whether the learning and teaching of reading is being given sufficient attention as one among a number of purposes of Reception class education'?

And then take the second recommendation: 'All primary schools should attach greater importance to the teaching of numbers in building children's fluency in counting, recognising small numbers of items, comparing numbers and solving problems.' Wouldn't it have been more appropriate and sensitive to context if it had been phrased along the lines of 'Primary schools should consider whether adequate attention is being paid to the learning and teaching of number in the context of other demands on the Reception year curriculum'?

Or the fourth: 'All primary schools should devote sufficient time each day to the direct teaching of reading, writing and mathematics, including frequent opportunities for children to practise and consolidate their skills.' More adroit phrasing might have prompted a more considered reaction from many readers – for example, 'Primary schools should consider the place of direct teaching, as well as informal learning, in early language, reading writing and mathematics, and should provide opportunities for children to consolidate their understanding and skills through a range of activities and contexts.'

It would have helped, too, if Ofsted had added an extra recommendation linked to its last main finding, along the lines of: 'Primary schools should acknowledge the importance of play in Reception class settings and keep under review its role in furthering children's understanding in the different areas of learning.'

Such rephrased recommendations would have been an invitation to deliberate on current policy and practice in Reception-class education – not a set of injunctions to follow because of the need to prepare young children for a not-to-be-questioned Year 1 curriculum assumed to have no shortcomings.

The reaction to *Bold Beginnings* was fierce and emotional. Anyone less committed to early years education might have seen it as an overreaction; I wondered that myself ... momentarily. But since then I have been much more sympathetic to that reaction. There have been a number of ominous straws in the wind. In the light of the opposition it unleashed, Ofsted has refused to post one of its 'myth-exploding' blogs' to clarify its position; presumably it does not want to rein back on any of its assertions and recommendations. The Department for Education (DfE) is pushing forward with a form of test-based baseline assessment which is being opposed by large sectors of the early years community. Then there has been the removal of shape, space and measure from the newly drafted early years goals, resulting in an ever-increasing focus on number in the Reception year. The working group proposing those goals has been unrepresentative of the early years community as whole and has included

prominent individuals with a vested and mercenary interest in the kinds of emphases regarded as ‘core’ in *Bold Beginnings*. More recently still, the chief inspector has announced the designation of some of her colleagues as ‘synthetic phonics champions’ – a challenge to those, both in the early years community and beyond, who challenge the notion of one ‘fast and furious’ approach to early reading and who believe in the professional autonomy of practitioners to decide on pedagogy – free from the trammels of Ofsted prescription. These recent initiatives pose a severe threat to the quality of Reception year education.

Of course, given the values, sensitivities and experience of many early years specialists, there was bound to have been debate over and controversy to *Bold Beginnings* – but not as virulent or impassioned as we witnessed immediately after its publication and now, many months on.

As an inspector I always trod carefully when visiting Reception classes – and not just in an attempt to avoid paint splashes on my suit! Ofsted needed, and still needs, to do the same. But it hasn’t appeared thus far to learn its lesson from *Bold Beginnings*. Judging by the contents of this issue of *FORUM*, the early years community will continue – rightly, in my view – to battle for the soul of Reception, for its long-established and research-informed values and practices and, most importantly, for what it sees as the educational well-being of young learners.

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