
***Bold Beginnings* and the Rhetoric of ‘School Readiness’**

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ABSTRACT The ‘school-readiness’ agenda is becoming increasingly dominant in recent policy discourse, and this article explores how the *Bold Beginnings* report builds on this agenda. By focusing on the curricular gap between the end of Reception and Year 1, and on the importance of mathematical and literacy outcomes, it is argued that *Bold Beginnings* clearly establishes the Reception year as a site to ‘ready’ children for school. Using a rhetorical analysis approach, this article considers how the text is constructed as a persuasive discourse advocating the further formalisation of the early years.

In January 2017, an Ofsted-wide review of the Reception curriculum in England was commissioned by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI), Amanda Spielman. Entitled *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b), its aim was to provide ‘fresh insight’ into how the Reception curriculum was implemented, the impact on outcomes for pupils, and how it prepared them for ‘the rest of their education and beyond’ (p. 2). The annual Ofsted report (2017a) states that this review has ‘raised questions’ about whether the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014/2017) is ‘appropriately designed to prepare pupils for Year 1’. It was also highlighted how the current early learning goals (ELGs) as an expected attainment at the end of Reception left a curricular gap that ‘did not get pupils to a level that was high enough to set them up for success in Year 1’ (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 14).

As the final year of the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017), Reception has traditionally been positioned as the ‘transition’ year between the early years curriculum and the more formal Key Stage 1 (Faulkner & Coates, 2013, p. 255). However, in the current EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017), it is stated that teaching and learning should ensure children’s ‘school readiness’ and give children ‘the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life’ (p. 2). Pascal et al (2017) argue that the increased prominence of the ‘school-readiness’ agenda

and the ‘accompanying schoolification of early years pedagogy’ are political actions that reflect a shift in beliefs about the purpose of early childhood education (ECE) from a policy perspective (p. 6). Within this context, ECE is repositioned as a vehicle for equipping children with the skills and knowledge they need to be ‘school ready’ (Brown, 2010, p. 136). This is reinforced in the *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) report where it is asserted that ‘[w]hile Year 1 may be the official start, it is clear that the Reception Year is more commonly recognised as the beginning of a child’s formal education’ (p. 8).

The following discussion contends that *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) furthers the ‘school-readiness’ agenda and clearly establishes Reception as a site to ‘ready’ children for school. As a way of framing this debate, a rhetorical analysis approach was used to highlight the prominent narratives around ‘school readiness’ and show how these are constructed as persuasive discourses within *Bold Beginnings*.

Rhetorical Analysis

It is broadly acknowledged that rhetoric, often associated with the art of persuasion, is a key part of the political process, used as a way of convincing and communicating effectively within the ‘context of shaping and implementing public policies’ (Gottweis, 2007, p. 240). Rhetorical analysis entails examining these persuasive discourses within a text, the problem to which the text is responding, and the intended audience (Winton, 2013, p. 162). Based on the work of Aristotle, there is a formal structure to the understanding of rhetoric based on three modes of persuasion – pathos, logos and ethos. Pathos is the capacity of the ‘speaker’ to appeal to the emotions of the audience, logos is the way in which the evidence of proof is presented, while ethos relates to the credibility of the ‘speaker’ (Edwards et al, 2004, p. 17). Aristotle’s conceptual triad will frame the discussion in order to examine how arguments are constructed to ‘persuade audiences to accept and support particular constructions of reality, truth and courses of action’ (Winton, 2013, p. 161). Through the examination of the words and phrases used in the document, considerations are made of how the text is constructed in such a way as to present a narrative of ‘school readiness’ as a justification for further formalisation of ECE.

Pathos

From the outset *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) asserts that ECE is a way of improving children’s life chances, by stating: ‘A good early education is the foundation for later success’ (p. 4). The report constructs one of its key justifications in terms of offering a way of reducing the gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers. It asserts, ‘Put simply, by the end of Reception, the ability to read, write and use numbers is fundamental’, and these areas of learning are described as ‘the building blocks for all other

learning' (p. 10). Here, the rhetoric makes a clear link between a 'good education' and the teaching of mathematics and literacy. It is argued that by focusing on these areas of learning, disadvantaged children will be able to 'forge ahead' (p. 9) and that with these foundations in place, their life chances will be improved.

Within a wider policy context, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: a strategy for social mobility* (Cabinet Office, 2011) highlights how '[c]hildren at the age of five living in poverty are the equivalent of around eight months behind their peers in terms of cognitive development' (p. 6) and claims that this impacts on social mobility, leaving 'the country's economic potential unfulfilled' (p. 5). The publication *State of the Nation 2015: social mobility and child poverty in Great Britain* (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015) states that 'less than half of the poorest children in England are ready for school' (p. vi), describing social mobility as the 'new holy grail of public policy' (p. iv). Within this discursive landscape, the agenda that is reinforced by the *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) report becomes 'central to the economic prosperity of society' (Osgood, 2009, p. 735), viewed by the government as a social panacea, a way of breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing future financial burdens on the welfare state (Kay, 2018, p. 21).

The language used to frame these issues is particularly emotive as the report describes how Reception is a 'missed opportunity' that can leave many children 'exposed' to the 'painful consequences' of falling behind their peers (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 4). Macagno and Walton (2014) argue that when we encounter words of this kind we do not simply acquire the information but feel an emotion towards the scenario, which then 'influences the way we regard the reality they represent' (p. 5). We want children to do well, to thrive and, if they are living in socio-economic disadvantage, to break out of the circle of poverty within which they exist. The way the logical solution is then presented becomes difficult to counter. The rhetoric constructs a 'hegemonic common sense' and any criticism of this goal can easily be portrayed as being 'negative, unambitious and harbouring low expectations of the disadvantaged' (Ng, 2008, p. 596).

Logos

Over the past 20 years, the logos of formalisation in ECE and the focus on prescribed learning outcomes have been strongly linked to providing children with a 'head start into Key Stage 1' (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 21). It is argued that *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) furthers the agenda to situate Reception as a site for 'school readiness' through a circular discourse of preparation for Year 1, and a focus on the direct teaching of mathematics and literacy as the core purpose of Reception. The report declares this problem space from the start, stating that 'the vital, smooth transition from the foundation stage to Year 1 was difficult because the early learning goals were not aligned with the now-increased expectations of the national curriculum' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 4). The language used to describe the transition from Reception into Year 1 focuses on

the children being 'equipped to meet the challenges' (p. 4) and prepared for the 'demands' of Year 1 (p. 12). Within the discourse of the *Bold Beginnings* report, these demands are continually reiterated as being the academic demands and challenges linked to mathematical and literacy outcomes.

The report asks, 'What is the body of knowledge that a child needs so that they will flourish in the future and not be left behind?' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 12). This is important when we consider the current educational context in England and how discourses around ECE are presented in policy texts. Over the course of the last few years, 'school readiness' has become increasingly prevalent in policy discourse, reflecting a key shift in beliefs about the purpose of the Reception year within policy making (Kay, 2018, p. 1). This has led to what Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues is the 'schoolification' of the early years, where the focus shifts away from specific pedagogical approaches traditionally suited to young children (OECD, 2015, p. 169). Mathematics and literacy are seen by the government as being 'crucial for later success, particularly in terms of children's readiness for school' (STA, 2013), illuminating a clear link between 'school readiness' and academic outcomes. It is argued that the *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) constructs a particular argumentation which gives mathematics and literacy prominence as the 'body of knowledge' within the early years curriculum, and these areas of learning are 'delivered' as a way of privileging 'readiness for school'.

Throughout the report the language used to remind the reader of the importance of these areas of learning is dominant. The report asserts that there should be a 'solid consensus about what education should deliver for each pupil' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 12), which suggests a didactic approach, whereby the child is the recipient of the teaching and learning outcomes. Indeed, schools that give mathematics and literacy 'sufficient direct teaching time every day' are described as being 'successful' (p. 4). Schools where children achieve outcomes above the national average demonstrate that certain elements of the Reception curriculum are done 'exceptionally well', including the teaching of reading in a systematic and structured way, building up children's phonic knowledge, and the direct teaching of writing composition, spelling and handwriting (p. 14). It is highlighted how schools that are 'preparing children very effectively for mathematics in Year 1' use content from the Year 1 curriculum (p. 24), further validating the pushing down of outcomes into Reception. Systematic synthetic phonics is embedded within the curriculum as playing a 'critical role' in teaching children the alphabet, in teaching spelling and in supporting children's early writing (p. 4). The logic of the argument in *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) shows a distinct shift towards 'effective teaching' and the acquisition of formal outcomes, and clearly establishes the role that Reception is now expected to play as the first year of school.

In addition to the shift towards formal learning outcomes in mathematics and literacy, there are also assertions made that 'the majority of teachers' in the sample did not agree with the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) handbook's claim that observational assessment was 'the most reliable form of

assessment'. This was reiterated with the declaration that 'most Year 1 teachers' believed the EYFSP provided only 'shallow and unnecessary information' about what a child can do (p. 26). Instead, it is claimed that the 'strongest performing schools' had found ways 'to improve their assessment processes and support transition' through practices such as screening tools, standardised tests, informal teacher assessments and 'scrutinies of children's work' that provide the 'essential information that Year 1 teachers needed' (p. 4). These endorsements, made by headteachers and teachers, serve to further strengthen the persuasive logos of the arguments made in the *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) report. However, the survey questionnaires that were used to generate this data mostly offered yes/no choices, with no opportunity to expand on the answers, calling into question the method of elicitation of the data and the trustworthiness of the endorsements.

Ethos

In rhetorical terms, the ethos, or moral basis, of the argument is determined by the credibility of the author or speaker. It has been well documented that Ofsted is a powerful player in the culture of performativity and accountability in England, determining what is 'valuable, effective or satisfactory' and 'what measures are considered valid' (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Keddie (2017) describes how Ofsted controls the 'field of judgement' for headteachers, and anxiety about Ofsted ratings is a major preoccupation for schools (p. 1249).

It is important to note that *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) only takes into account Reception classes in a hand-picked selection of schools used for this report, having been judged by Ofsted (2017c) to be 'among the highest performing primaries in more deprived areas'. 'Highest performing' is defined as those schools that achieved a good or outstanding grading for overall effectiveness at their previous inspection. This is problematic as the findings are based on what Ofsted judges to be good or outstanding, highlighting a circular discourse whereby Ofsted defines quality through inspection processes, and then uses this as a measure of quality in ECE. Using this measure in *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) creates an 'epistemic landscape' where Ofsted seeks evidence that is 'useful to [its] cause', and which can also be seen as 'the development of know-how related to a specific policy preference' (Dunlop, 2014, p. 219). It is argued that this 'specific policy preference' is the increasing formalisation of the early years, and a narrowing of the curriculum to prioritise mathematics and literacy as a way of 'readying children for school'. The power Ofsted has over schools positions *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) as an authoritative document with the potential to influence headteachers and teachers, and impact on pedagogical practices in the early years.

The Implications of a Persuasive Argument for the Formalisation of ECE

Rhetoric is a powerful tool within political discourse, as its aim is to persuade the reader of a particular course of action. We must therefore consider the implications of the recommendations made in *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) with regard to an early years curriculum that makes mathematics and literacy its key focus, and further reinforces the 'school-readiness' agenda.

The rhetoric of success that runs throughout the report gives explicit examples as to what needs to be done to be good or outstanding, conveying a powerful message for other schools working within the high-stakes inspection framework in England. The report advocates strongly, through the justification of children needing to be prepared for the rigor of the Year 1 curriculum and achieving improved outcomes in mathematics and literacy, for a more direct-teaching pedagogy. The use of direct-teaching methods is heavily endorsed throughout the report, and this is presented as a 'more efficient way' to teach mathematics and literacy rather than through a play-based approach (p.16). This suggests that there is a 'best way' to teach, and the multiple perspectives about early years pedagogy are ignored in favour of a more formal approach which continues to promote the 'school-readiness' agenda. This is interesting as the government does not adhere to one particular pedagogical approach, and in the EYFS there is an emphasis on 'sustained shared thinking', and a play-based approach to learning (Wall et al, 2015) built on findings from the government-funded 'Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project' (Sylva et al, 2004) and *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).

Alongside the dominant narrative in *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) of the importance of the teaching of mathematics and literacy, there is a direct assertion that notions of 'free play' are 'too rosy' and an 'unrealistic view of childhood' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 16). Some schools in the sample did not use free-flow provision between the indoor and outdoor classroom; rather, they had adapted a primary school model of fixed playtimes, with a focus on physical development and on 'getting children active' by 'raising their heart beat' (p. 16). *Bold Beginnings* discusses the importance of play, but it is highlighted how headteachers had criticised initial teacher education (ITE) as promoting only one view of early years practice, which 'downplayed the importance of reading, writing and mathematics for the under-fives in favour of play-based pedagogy and child-initiated learning'.

Ultimately it was felt that this prevented 'effective progression into Year 1' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 29). Throughout the report are persistent endorsements of whole-class, direct-teaching practices built on the premise that this is what happens in 'successful schools'. My, and others', concern with this is that the trajectory of formalisation of the early years curriculum that *Bold Beginnings* builds upon could further impact on pedagogy in Reception.

One of the key issues with the increasing formalisation and narrowing of the curriculum is the school starting age in England. The compulsory school age

is five years old, which is low compared with other countries in Europe, the most common starting age being six years old (DfE, 2014/2017). Yet, as a result of a one-point entry into Reception in September, the reality for most children is a school starting age of four. Policymakers argue that an earlier start into school, particularly for children living in socio-economic disadvantage, helps to 'make up the deficit in their academic skills' (Sharp, 2002, p. 1). However, the *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) report warns against the global pressures of formal ECE provision, arguing that early education is being driven by 'an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school' (p. 219). Research has highlighted how a more formal curriculum can place children 'under pressure' (Walsh et al, 2006, p. 213), as well as having a 'negative impact on children's self-esteem and motivation to learn' (Sharp, 2002, p. 18). Furthermore, within *Bold Beginnings*, Ofsted (2017b) constructs a very narrow view of 'readiness' which conflicts with other views that 'readiness' is multi-dimensional and includes 'the skills of the child, family and environmental factors, behavioral and cognitive aspects of a child's development, the child's adaptation to the classroom, and the characteristics of the educational and community systems available to the child and family' (Brown, 2015, p. 183).

There have been numerous organisations and publications calling for a delay to the start of 'formal schooling' in England (Hofkins & Northen, 2009; Whitebread, 2013; BERA/TACTYC, 2014), but in spite of these arguments, there are policy pressures underpinning the 'school-readiness' agenda, specifically focusing on mathematical and literacy attainment (Kay, 2018, p. 35). As has been argued throughout this discussion, *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) reinforces the 'school-readiness' trope, and advocates strongly for a shift towards more direct teaching and a focus on more formal learning outcomes. Further research in this area could explore the impact that *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017b) has had on Reception classrooms and identify whether schools have adjusted pedagogical practices in light of this report.

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