
***Bold Beginnings* or Pressure from the Start?**

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ABSTRACT In November 2017, Ofsted published *Bold Beginnings*, a report on its findings about teaching in the Reception year. Like very many practitioners in the early years, the author of this article believes this report to be of concern, as the recommendations it proposes would be so damaging for the early education of young children. She believes its recommendations are not developmentally appropriate for four- and five-year-olds, as insufficient importance is given to the prime areas of learning and development; the suggested curriculum would be too narrow and formal for such young children, and would remove opportunities for deep learning through play. There are also concerns about its impact on the professionalism of teachers and practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Introduction

Bold Beginnings, Ofsted's November 2017 report on teaching in the Reception year, sets recommendations to the Department for Education (DfE), early years practitioners, head teachers and initial teacher education (ITE) providers based on visits to a sample of 41 of the 18,063 primary schools in England and Wales (BESA, 2017). This has been met with a mixed response. Very many of those with experience of early childhood education have opposed the report, primarily on the basis that it presents too narrow a view of education in Reception and proposes pushing the Year 1 curriculum down into Reception. It might even be read as implying removing Reception from the umbrella of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). I profoundly believe that the findings of the report do not accurately reflect the experiences and needs of children or practitioners in the EYFS, and that the recommendations are inappropriate: they demonstrate inadequate understanding of early child development and learning, they represent a misinformed view of the purpose of the Reception year, and they propose a narrowing of the curriculum and experiences afforded to four-

and five-year-olds. I am very concerned about the potential effect of this report on children's well-being and breadth of education, as well as on the professionalism of early years teachers.

**Developmental Appropriateness: child development
and the importance of the prime areas of learning
and the characteristics of effective learning**

Bold Beginnings states that 'by the end of Reception, the ability to read, write and use numbers is fundamental' (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 10). However, experience and evidence show that it should be a far greater priority that children of this age have a secure grounding in the prime areas of learning – personal, social and emotional development (PSED), communication and language, and physical development – and that they develop strong learning skills through the characteristics of effective learning (CoEL). The EYFS framework states that these prime areas 'are particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive' (DfE, 2017, p. 7). *Bold Beginnings* briefly acknowledges the crucial importance of these skills in enabling a child to read, write and count, yet it fails to recognise that most Reception children are not yet secure in these areas. Therefore, pushing them out to make space for higher-level literacy and maths is not only damaging to children's holistic development, but is counter-intuitive. *Development Matters*, the non-statutory guidance issued by Early Education to support practitioners to implement the requirements of the EYFS, explains the importance of teaching the prime areas and the CoEL as a basis: 'the prime areas continue to be fundamental throughout the EYFS... The specific areas ... grow out of the prime areas, and provide important contexts for learning' (Early Education, 2012, p. 4). It therefore seems strange that *Bold Beginnings* chooses to remain 'guilty of ignoring these insights into infant learning' (Beard, 2018) by not recognising the ongoing importance of the prime areas and the CoEL in Reception, and, indeed, beyond. I fear that the consequence of this will be to render learning literacy and maths more difficult and less enjoyable, as well as inhibiting children's development of other essential skills and their ability to secure a good level of well-being. I believe that Ofsted's failure to mention the continued, crucial importance of these areas in Reception risks producing more misinformed views among practitioners, such as that of the Reception teacher who recently told me: 'They come in low so we have a big focus on Literacy and Maths, and almost all of the day is adult-directed.' Presumably, if the children 'come in low', they are still at a relatively early stage of developing in the prime areas and thus need time to develop these, through play and relationships, even more than other children. An intense focus on learning to read and write ever earlier means that teachers feel pressured to remove these other opportunities for children.

School Starting Age

The UK is part of a small minority globally in starting compulsory education at age five, compared with the rest of the world, where the starting age is most commonly six or seven. In practice, most children in the UK are only four when they start Reception, and summer-born children will not turn five until the end of the year. In *Bold Beginnings*, Ofsted claims that head teachers ‘were clear that children’s achievements up to the age of five can determine their life chances. They did not accept the view that some will “catch up later”’ (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 5). This view certainly seems misinformed, given the number of countries starting school after age five that perform better academically than the UK. Reports show, for example, that Scandinavian countries ‘have better academic achievement and child well-being, despite children not starting school until age 7’ (Whitebread & Bingham, 2013). We should also remember that this start ‘was introduced in 1870 in order to get women back into work, rather than on the basis of any educational benefit to children’ (Whitebread & Bingham, 2013). Therefore, Ofsted’s suggestion that children must urgently learn to read, write and secure mathematical skills before the end of Reception is unsupported by evidence. Rather, the evidence shows that beginning formal learning later has greater benefits:

A Cambridge study comparing groups of children who started formal literacy lessons at five and seven found that starting two years earlier made no difference at all to a child’s reading ability aged 11, ‘but the children who started at five developed less positive attitudes to reading, and showed poorer text comprehension than those who started later’. (Beard, 2018)

Beard points out that ‘no scientist believed you should start learning to read and write at an ever younger age. It was a fantasy of governments’ (Beard, 2018). We should therefore question why Ofsted has chosen to ignore the wealth of evidence showing this, and instead used its own questionable research to make recommendations to the DfE about Reception teaching.

How Best to Pitch Early Learning Goals?

One of the primary arguments of *Bold Beginnings* is that the early learning goals (ELGs) that children are currently expected to achieve by the end of Reception are too low and do not prepare children for the National Curriculum in Year 1: ‘Reception and Year 1 teachers agreed 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, 2017a, p. 4). However, evidence contained in *Bold Beginnings* shows fewer children achieving the ELGs in literacy and maths than in any other prime or specific areas. Ofsted implies that this is because teaching in these areas is inadequate. It surely cannot be true both that too few children are meeting the current literacy and maths ELGs and that these ELGs are too low. Surely a

more logical interpretation of the data would be that the ELGs for literacy and maths are too high, as considerably fewer children reach them by the end of Reception. Instead, Ofsted's stance here, in failing to take into account the opinions of teachers, and apparently placing blame on their teaching, not on the pitch of the ELGs, undermines teachers' professionalism and hard work, and piles on yet more pressure. This pressure is inevitably transferred to the children and creates a very real risk of seeing them as failures and damaging their self-esteem at an increasingly early age.

Method of Teaching: enjoyment and quality of learning

Although Ofsted has defended some specific aspects of *Bold Beginnings* in response to criticisms, the entire tone and content of the report suggests an inappropriately formal, top-down approach to Reception teaching. The level and type of content and expectations proposed would be unachievable without an overemphasis on this style of teaching. The level of formality is deeply worrying for those with early years experience, who know it to be ineffective and damaging at this age, as 'the basic architecture of a child's brain is forming during reception year' (Bennett et al, 2018). Children of this age are most engaged, and therefore learn best, during their self-initiated play, as anyone who has observed and assessed young children's engagement in different activities could attest. Good early years practitioners constantly teach children through their play, and the vast majority of nursery and Reception children happily choose to explore reading, writing and mathematical activities at a developmentally appropriate level when the choice is left open to them and they are not pressured to do so. In young children for whom this style of learning is the norm, engagement is high and attitudes towards learning are positive. This was made evident to me upon recently visiting a Reception class where children were free to lead their learning for most of the day. A large group of children had found a set of high-frequency words and were excitedly practising reading and writing them, desperate to show me, a visitor, how well they could read and write. Their attitude towards their learning could not have been further from that of the children in another Reception class I visited, who sat staring into space and dropping their heads, and had to be policed by two teaching assistants to keep them sitting on the carpet, during a 40-minute whole-class phonics lesson.

The Value of Play

Several commentators have noted that there is not one mention of 'play' in the recommendations from *Bold Beginnings*. At other points in the document where play is mentioned, it is brief and indicates a misunderstanding of its many benefits. For example, Ofsted states that 'play ... was used primarily for developing children's personal, social and emotional skills' (Ofsted, 2017a, p.

4). Play does, of course, help children to develop these skills, but its benefits are far broader. Play also develops, for example, creativity, investigation and communication, as well as literacy and maths. Further, the unusual point is made that ‘some headteachers did not believe in the notion of “free play” ... They believed that adults, including most parents, have always imposed limits on children’s play, setting the boundaries about when to be home and where children could go with friends’ (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 16). This statement suggests an interpretation of ‘free play’ that is not at all in line with that known by early years teachers. It surely goes without saying that adults rightly impose some boundaries, relating, for example, to safety, on children’s free play in all early years settings. Further, no practitioner I have met has taken ‘free play’ to mean that children are left entirely to their own resources to play without adult intervention. While this may sometimes be the best way for children to learn, good early years practitioners constantly teach children in their ‘free play’, through sensitive, meaningful interactions. Attempts to push out play from early education are highly concerning for those with an understanding of child development. Research showing that ‘free play isn’t just something children like to do – it’s something they need to do’ (O’Connor, 2017) is extensive and is based in psychological, neuroscientific and educational studies. For example, neuroscientific research has shown that ‘playful activity leads to the growth of more connections between neurons, particularly in the frontal lobe – the part of the brain responsible for uniquely human higher mental functions’ (Whitebread & Bingham, 2013). It is worth noting that the time children have for play at home is also diminishing, as free time is increasingly taken up with technology and/or overfilled with structured extra-curricular activities. This makes it even more essential to children’s development that they have plenty of opportunity to play in school.

Narrowing of Curriculum

Ultimately, the heavier the focus on reading, writing and maths, the less time is left for other activities, whether that be play, exploration or exciting new experiences. The Hundred Review, a study of practitioners’ views on Reception teaching, informed by over 4000 responses, shows that this is already a concern for practitioners: ‘there are concerns regarding the amount of coverage expected in YR [Reception Year], especially for specific aspects of Literacy and Mathematics, and this often detracts from opportunities to support other areas of children’s learning and development’ (Dubiel & Kilner, 2017, p. 11). The practitioners who responded to this review recognise that children are learning and developing in countless ways that can be harnessed by facilitating investigation and new experiences. But, rather than listening to teachers and helping schools to provide this, Ofsted calls for an even narrower focus on literacy and maths. An open letter published in response to *Bold Beginnings*, signed by over 1700 people, argues that ‘the report infers that reception classes should be taught like year 1. This would mean narrowing the curriculum to

focus more heavily on Literacy and Mathematics, overly formal teaching and less opportunity for play' (Bennett et al, 2018). While literacy and maths are of course important, children need as broad a range of learning and experience as possible if they are to develop in all areas. Unfortunately, an excessive emphasis on direct, formal teaching of literacy and maths reduces the potential for children to be provided with this breadth of learning.

Purpose of the Reception Year

The Judgement Record, used to direct and inform Ofsted inspectors carrying out this research, is led by the question 'To what extent is the Reception curriculum fit for-purpose in preparing children for Year 1 and the demands of the National Curriculum?' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 1). This question's bias in deciding that the purpose of the Reception Year is 'preparing children for Year 1', prior to seeking evidence and opinions, immediately suggests that the research is flawed. Again, Ofsted has begun with the assumption that it is young children who must be prepared for an increasingly demanding curriculum, not that the curriculum be made more suitable for them. In contrast, the Hundred Review asked: 'How are good outcomes secured in YR? What is effective teaching in YR and how do we know? What prevents or secures progress and attainment in YR?' (Dubiel & Kilner, 2017, p. 2). These more open-ended questions invite an accurate and truthful range of responses. *Bold Beginnings*, meanwhile, states that teachers should 'make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year' (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 7). It seems to me quite frightening that an entire year of a young child's life should be reduced to such a narrow 'core purpose', ignoring the whole range of vitally important experiences that a child should also have in their Reception year. The Hundred Review more broadly sums up the purpose of the Reception year as 'to engender children's love of learning and successfully acquire basic skills in the Prime Areas of Learning and Development, Literacy and Maths' (Dubiel & Kilner, 2017, p. 1). Some may argue that imposing any such expectations and 'purpose' on the Reception year is limiting; however, this summary is far broader and more open, and much closer to what one would expect and want a child's experience of and outcomes from a year in Reception to be.

Part of EYFS?

Another question that the Judgement Record asks Ofsted inspectors to seek answers to is: 'Is Reception an effective transition year from pre school to school?' (Ofsted, 2017b, p. 4). This again supposes the purpose of Reception before conducting the research. In the report, Ofsted describes Reception as 'the crucial bridge between the EYFS and, for most schools, the start of the national curriculum' (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 8). As Reception is recognised as being part of the EYFS, this is a statement that has raised concern in the early years

community, leading some to believe that *Bold Beginnings* is part of a push to remove Reception from the EYFS. One *TES* article claims that ‘clearly, the DfE and Ofsted are in collaboration regarding the EYFS profile. The DfE wants to change it, and now Ofsted has given them the necessary “research” to do so’ (Clements, 2017). There is a widespread feeling that removing Reception from the EYFS would be damaging for children, as it would make it easier to impose an increasingly formal and prescriptive curriculum, with less responsibility to take into account child development and the specific learning needs of four- and five-year-olds. The results of the Hundred Review evidence this feeling; it ‘revealed unanimous support for retaining the EYFS Statutory Framework and ensuring that YR remains within it’ (Dubiel & Kilner, 2017, p. 8). The way that *Bold Beginnings* describes Reception and the EYFS thus suggests an increasingly damaging change to come, one that is widely opposed by those working in the early years.

Professionalism, Freedom and Creativity of Practitioners

Many primary and secondary teachers would describe a significant increase in the prescriptiveness of the curriculum in recent years – for example, with the intense focus on systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) and through buying in very specific schemes. *Bold Beginnings* states that ‘many of the schools that were using a specific reading and/or writing programme bought in regular training to ensure that all staff taught the programme effectively’ (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 15). Teachers are inevitably less effective when following prescriptive schemes than when finding ways of teaching that are based in their own skills and knowledge of their children. Equally, when a teacher’s role is reduced to delivering a bought-in scheme, their professionalism and expertise are not acknowledged. Nonetheless, Ofsted overlooks this, recommending that ITE providers should ‘devote a greater proportion of their training programme to the teaching of reading, including SSP as the route to decoding words’ (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 7). This is despite widespread opposition from teachers, many of whom argue that SSP does not work for all children, and certainly not as the only permitted route. Yet, teachers are prevented from using their professional judgement to try an alternative or supplementary method that might be more effective for their children. One response to *Bold Beginnings* argues that ‘the idea that Reception classes need to be more formal carries an implication that teachers are not already teaching children’ (Ward, 2018). This is quite a dangerous attitude to take, considering the current teacher recruitment and retainment crisis. Teachers who are not trusted to do their job effectively will naturally feel less positive about their work, and prospective teachers are less likely to enter a career they do not feel is respected. This of course has a major impact on pupils: ‘the more teachers are preoccupied with this burden of measuring and accountability, the less time and energy they have for teaching, and the less children’s individual needs can be taken into account’ (Palmer, 2015, p. 214). Although prescriptive systems theoretically reduce teacher workload (and this is frequently used to

'sell' them to teachers), they reduce freedom and creativity. Workload is instead filled by meeting accountability measures and prescribed standards, simply redirecting teachers' time and energy away from children's actual learning.

Flawed, Biased, Disconnected, Damaging

Ultimately, I feel that *Bold Beginnings* is a flawed report, informed by biased questioning and inspections of an insufficient sample size. It gives recommendations based on this, which I feel are inappropriate to, and disconnected from, child development. Children's well-being and right to play must be protected, and *Bold Beginnings* does not appear to treat these things as priorities. Excessive pressure to meet unreasonable expectations and an overly heavy focus on literacy and maths are detrimental to children's self-esteem and attitudes towards learning. Ofsted claims that children need to have secured good skills in literacy and maths by age five to achieve well later in life, yet this is contrary to international evidence, where most children do not begin formally learning literacy and maths until age six or seven. These children have been proven to do at least as well academically as those who have an early school starting age and to feel more positive about learning. The scientific and pedagogical evidence is against starting formal teaching so early and there is a danger of causing real psychological harm to children if they are deprived of sufficient opportunity to play at such a young age. The report also suggests that the government has a lack of faith in teachers' professionalism and effectiveness, and as a result reduces respect for the profession. For all of these reasons, my view is that *Bold Beginnings* is a damaging report which teachers should disregard and **WHICH** Ofsted should withdraw.

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