



Association for Professional Development in Early Years

## OCCASIONAL PAPER 8 – Reception Baseline Assessment

**Dr. Guy Roberts-Holmes and Dr. Alice Bradbury**

*(University College London, Institute of Education)*

This Occasional Paper critically analyses the policy context and implementation of Reception Baseline Assessment (BA) introduced on a voluntary capacity in primary schools in England in September 2015 (DfE, 2014) and was part of the policy *Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools* (DfE, 2014). The paper reports on a national research sample of Reception staff and parents who stated that Baseline Assessment is a flawed, inappropriate and unethical means of assessing young children. The paper concludes by suggesting that BA can be understood not only as an accountability and governance measure but also as producing new forms of commercialized digital knowledges about young children and their families.

### **The policy context for Baseline Assessment**

The policy rationale was predicated upon an assumption that primary schools, including Reception classes, were underperforming in formal assessments and that 'current expectations for primary schools are set too low' (DfE, 2014: 4). At the time of writing (June 2016), Baseline Assessment has been withdrawn and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) has been made voluntary and non-statutory in 2016-2017. Despite this 'schools can opt to use baseline assessments as on-entry assessments in the 2016 to 2017 academic year' (DfE, 2016).

The assessment was conducted during the first few weeks of the autumn term with children entering the Reception year, aged four-to-five-years and was designed to produce a 'baseline' figure on the basis of which their progress during the primary years could be measured. The DfE's guidance and approval process (DfE, 2014) stipulated that 'each assessment item must require a single, objective, binary decision to be made by the scorer'. Hence all three BAs use binary statements requiring either a 'yes' or a 'no' answer. According to a DfE report from 2016, BA was to be 'the only measure used to assess the progress of children from entry (at age four-to-five-years) to the end of KS2 (age 10-11), alongside an attainment floor standard of 85 per cent' (DfE, 2014: 4). Although other measures could still be used to demonstrate progress to KS2 for children starting reception in the school year 2015/16, all schools were encouraged to use the new baseline assessment – and most did.

Baseline Assessment marked a significant change in the use of summative assessment in early years education in primary schools. As the current statutory assessment, EYFSP was conducted at the end of the Reception year and was based on formative observations of children over the school year. The EYFSP is not formally used in value added measures of children's progress and thus school performance. Baseline Assessment data was to form a key part of how schools were to be assessed in the future. The BA would have resulted in a

single score for each child: when they reach Year 6, each child in the cohort would have been measured against their BA score in order to judge the progress they had made while attending primary school. This BA attempted to reduce children's learning to a single numerical score, in effect, generating a 'data shadow' to govern the child (Kitchin, 2014). Baseline, therefore, represented a major shift in approaches to accountability in primary education, which involved the early years phase more than ever before.

Unprecedented in primary education is the use of private providers to produce the actual assessments. Contracts to provide a baseline assessment 'test' were put out to tender by the DfE in 2014. Six companies were selected and formed the 'approved list' from which schools were required to select an assessment. In 2015 schools paid these providers directly and were reimbursed by the DfE. After schools had selected their Baseline providers, the least popular providers were removed from the list leaving only the following:

- Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University (CEM)
- Early Excellence
- National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

### **The Image of the Child within Baseline Assessment**

By making the current EYFSP non-statutory and optional, BA significantly challenged and undermined early years practitioners' holistic and child-centred assessments. Malaguzzi insisted that 'a declaration [about the image of the child] is not only a necessary act of clarity and correctness, it is the necessary premise for any pedagogical theory and any pedagogical project' (Malaguzzi, from Cagliari *et al.*, 2016: 374). Within the 'pedagogical project' of the EYFS, this understanding and image of the child is, to a certain extent, reflected in the complex and contextually dependent EYFS formative and summative assessments. These assessments are narrative based, open-ended observations focusing upon children's knowledge, skills and understanding with the intention to make children's learning ever more stimulating, rich and successful. Within all this early years' teachers need to be co-constructors of knowledge, working closely with children and their families to make complex and context dependent assessments.

Within BA, however, there is a simplified image of the child as being 'in preparation' or 'in readiness' for school (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012). BA providers were told to focus upon and demonstrate 'a clear progression' towards the KS1 national curriculum in English and mathematics (DfE, 2014). Here pedagogy is reduced to a numerical representation for the purposes of comparison and ranking with other children, classes and schools to purportedly achieve higher results. Working within this scientific paradigm, assessment and,

therefore, pedagogy all too easily becomes reduced to governing children (and teachers) by numbers so that early years teachers are reduced to data collectors whose professional judgements are 'hollowed out' (Kitchin, 2015). Malaguzzi's pedagogical insights are helpful in understanding that BA 'is nothing but a ridiculous simplification of knowledge and a robbing of meaning from individual histories' (Malaguzzi, from Cagliari *et al.*, 2016: 378). Young children were inappropriately and unethically reduced to a data figure that was mined and used to make predictions for its maximum productivity gains in an attempt to demonstrate 'progress'. However, if a young child (and her/his family) were deemed as having a low score, this had effects such as potentially damaging children's and families' self-esteem. This approach towards young children was countered throughout our Reception BA report by teachers who noted, for example, that 'They are children... not robots, not machines'.

#### **'They are children... not robots, not machines'**

The research was carried out in the autumn term of 2015, using a mixed methods approach involving a nationwide survey and five case studies of Reception classes in primary schools. An online survey was distributed via the NUT and ATL e-mail databases using the Bristol Online Survey service, and was completed by 1,131 people. 57% of respondents were Reception teachers, 38% were EYFS or Phase Leaders, 7% Senior Leaders and the remainder were support staff or 'other'. Eighty-nine per-cent of respondents were very experienced teachers who had gone through significant policy changes regarding the early years curriculum and assessment during their careers. The majority of respondents (80%) worked in state funded non-academy schools and 16% worked in Academies. Most worked in schools graded by OfSTED as 'good' (63%) or 'outstanding' (21%). The BA provider used by survey respondents reflected the proportions nationally: 76% used Early Excellence, 10% CEM and 11% NFER. Results were analysed with this demographic data to see if there were differences in responses due to differences in school situations, roles, length of service and BA provider. The survey involved a number of questions for teachers and school leaders on their views and experiences of BA. For some questions respondents were asked if they 'agree a lot', 'agree a little', 'disagree a little' or 'disagree a lot' with key statements on Baseline Assessment.

Case studies were conducted in five primary schools across England using purposive sampling to ensure that they represented different types of school and different areas of England. At each school, Reception teachers, EYFS co-ordinators, headteachers, other school leaders and parents were interviewed using standard interview schedules. The parents were interviewed as a group but all others were interviewed individually, with the exception of one interview with two teachers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally for analysis. Qualitative data was analysed using the themes generated by the research questions. A total of 35 people were interviewed, comprising five headteachers; two assistant headteachers or EYFS co-ordinators; 13 Reception teachers and 15 parents. All of the case-study schools had chosen the Early Excellence Baseline Assessment, reflecting the trend across the country. Our sample of parents is also limited in terms of gender and social diversity, as most respondents were white mothers.

#### **The impact on children starting school**

Our overall finding was that Baseline Assessment had a distinct impact on the start of school in terms of teaching and curriculum. The survey data showed that a majority of

respondents (59%) agreed that '*The Baseline Assessment has disrupted the children's start to school*'. In all of the case-study schools, teachers described organising provision of activities around BA statements. Participants responded:

*Rather than go with the children's interests – of what they were interested in – I have geared what I have been setting up in the class to try to help me gather information for the purpose of this assessment. (Teacher 3, School C)*

Another more dramatic impact was the decision to 'stop teaching' until the BA was complete in order to provide a 'true baseline':

*We have stopped teaching. You know normally we would do very gentle settling in, rules, all of that. But then we would start with some of the more formal teaching activities, you know a little bit of phonics, but we have not, we have held back because we don't want to influence judgments. (Teacher 1, School A)*

It is also important to note in terms of impact on practice that there were some survey comments on the use of the BA results to group or stream children.

*There is no time given to these poor little children to settle in before they are assessed and in our school they are put into ability groups based on these results! (Reception teacher, NFER user)*

Ability grouping, and its attendant pedagogical differentiation, constrain and limit a child's possible educational potential, especially if it sets low expectations early on. In this way BA data is not a neutral calculation but rather a technical, social and economic construct with potentially inadvertent implications for fixing a child's present and future ability. The potential for setting low expectations is problematic especially because respondents stated that:

*The data is skewed and it didn't give an accurate result of children's ability on entry. (W, CEM user)*

*Baseline Assessment is the biggest farce I have undertaken during my entire teaching career. The potential for children to guess at answers or to misinterpret things is too vast to give a clear representation of where children are at. (W, NFER user)*

There were significant doubts about the use of BA as a measure of schools' performance: only 6.7% of respondents to the survey agreed it was 'a good way to measure schools' performance'. First and foremost, teachers and school leaders doubted the underlying principle of measuring progress from Reception to Year 6:

*I don't think you should [use it to measure progress]; I don't think you can, because they are children and they are not robots, not machines, they are children. You don't know what influences they have got from outside, what is going to happen in those seven years, so I think it is ridiculous. (Teacher 3, School C)*

Baseline purports to construct a mathematically linear relationship of progress from age four to age eleven, even though the content of the assessments are different: this was seen as a major flaw in the system. School leaders were concerned that they were now being unambiguously told that there was such a relationship between the early years and

Year 6 and they questioned why this had suddenly become possible. Furthermore, the variation between children and their rates of progress meant that a simple correlation between Reception and KS2 was impossible:

*Children's progress is going to be judged against how far they have gone in seven years. Now to my mind that is an almost impossible thing to do because you can't test children at 11 about the same things you were testing them at four. It just doesn't make sense. (School D, Head)*

### **The impact on building relationships**

The establishment of relationships between teachers, support staff and pupils is usually regarded as a key focus of the first few weeks of Reception, as it may be some children's first experience of a formal educational setting. Therefore, one important question in relation to BA is the impact on the teachers' ability to build effective relationships with children while conducting the assessment. Some comments on the survey and in the case-study interviews suggested the focus on assessment did have a detrimental effect on the 'settling in' period:

*I feel that the Baseline Assessment has to be completed too early in the year and means that teachers are madly trying to collect evidence, rather than concentrating on the welfare of their new pupils and helping to create a calm and relaxing environment which is vital for a positive start to their school life. (W, EExBA user)*

These findings, particularly on the social and emotional impact, add to the recent research on the impact of accountability measures on children throughout the education system (Hutchings, 2015). The knowledge provided by the BA was often compared negatively to these other on-entry assessments. For some, BA was a barrier to getting to know the children:

*We have a nursery intake so we know our children really well already. The Baseline Assessment didn't give us any information about the children that we didn't already know. (W, EExBA user)*

In contrast, there was strong support for the existing EYFS Profile assessment among both survey respondents and the teachers we interviewed. Eighty-two per-cent of respondents agreed that '*The EYFS Profile helps me to monitor the development of the reception class and plan for their learning*'.

### **Perceptions of the accuracy and validity of the data**

With all three BA providers there were serious concerns raised about the accuracy and validity of the assessment process. Issues such as guessing correctly on multiple choice computer-based statements, whether or not children had attended nursery, whether they took the test in week one or later on, and the interpretation to a binary statement of a complex learning process all brought the accuracy of the assessment into question. Only 7.7% of survey respondents agreed with the statement '*Baseline Assessment is a fair and accurate way to assess children*'. When asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement '*Scores obtained by the Baseline Assessment are an accurate reflection of children's attainment at this stage*', a total of almost 60% disagreed. The proportion that 'disagreed a lot' was high at 36%; suggesting there was real doubt as to the accuracy of the assessment. Some teachers argued that a standardised assessment in the first six weeks of school when most children are four-years-old was developmentally inappropriate and, therefore, they

questioned the assessment's accuracy and validity. Some commented that the new and unfamiliar school context and routine would not be conducive to children showing their 'true potential' and that young children, in their first six weeks of school, lacked the confidence to demonstrate what they were capable of doing:

*I did have children that were crying and I just couldn't get anything out of them at all because they were too upset to do anything, even when I left it to later on. Some children just refused or just weren't ready and I know they said you only assess them when they are ready, but some children, well, you got to the point where you had to assess them because it had to be done whether they were ready or not. And obviously then it is not accurate because they weren't at a stage when they wanted to say things. (Teacher 1, School C)*

*It's ridiculous. It's not a fair representation of children. Many young children are not yet confident enough to show their new teacher what they can do when put on the spot. (W, EExBA user)*

The Reception teachers in our case-study schools – and comments from the survey – showed frustration with such simplistic and unsophisticated binary phrasing of the complex learning statements. They strongly argued that children's learning was, in contrast, complicated and contradictory:

*It is a binary yes/no! And children aren't like that; children are more complicated than that ... those contradictions exist within the child and that is a true reflection of an individual, a unique child, who can be complicated. (Teacher 2, School B)*

### **The impact on teachers' roles and professionalism**

All three providers' Baseline Assessments had a significant impact on teachers' work-loads, particularly where existing arrangements were used alongside the new assessment. Teachers' feelings of professionalism were challenged and undermined by BA. However, they begrudgingly accepted the policy. A very high proportion of respondents (82%) agreed that BA had increased their work-load within the classroom, and a slightly higher proportion (84%) agreed it had increased their work-load outside the classroom. Baseline Assessment was seen as the cause of an unnecessary duplication of teachers' assessment-related work-load. Some teachers even reported that they carried out three baselines; the Development Matters baseline, a Local Authority baseline and the then Baseline Assessment.

The Reception teachers at our case-study schools reported that they were using their PPA (Planning, Preparation and Assessment) time to collate, moderate and input the data into online systems rather than engaging in planning, and that they were inputting the data online at home in the evenings and weekends just to stay 'on top' of all the data. In the largest case-study schools, the Deputy Head and/or the EYFS lead took responsibility for inputting data online as they were concerned that the extra work-load might adversely impact upon teachers' well-being. The increased data work-load was so great that one headteacher agreed to buy in supply cover to prevent the teachers from 'exploding'.

### **Parents and Baseline Assessment**

Parents of summer-born children were sensitive to the fact that carrying out BA in the first term of Reception was too early, and parents were also aware of the impact of attending a

nursery:

*My son he has only just turned four [...] He is very young in his year so obviously he is going to be compared with children who are a bit older. It does seem very early. (Parent, school B).*

Some parents were acutely aware of the tensions faced by teachers who had to conduct the assessment at the same time as settling children into school. The following parent felt guilty that their child's teacher was having to spend time cuddling their child rather than doing paperwork:

*In Reception there are still a lot of children who find it difficult to settle in. So my daughter wanted somebody to cuddle when she first comes in when I say goodbye, so I am thinking that the teachers have a pile of papers on their desk waiting and they have to think will I be there for the children or will I be there for the paperwork? So I can see that they get taken away from actually being there with the children when I just want them to play with the children and keep them safe and cuddle them. (Parent, School B)*

This quote reveals the main priorities of Reception parents: they want the staff to keep children safe and care for their emotional needs, rather than be 'taken away' by assessment. This finding coheres with the teachers' sense of being drawn away from their real purpose by BA.

### Conclusion

Within BA teachers felt that their professionalism was reduced to making simplified yes/no binary judgements as a sort of data collector. Within this critical perspective, the data is entered on to web-based packages, sent to the providers or 'edu-businesses' for algorithmic processing and then sent back to the teachers with suggestions for pedagogic interventions. Kitchin (2014) argues that such digital data has in itself become an important commodity in the growing educational data economy. Here new forms of digital knowledge, such as BA are generated, processed and commodified. Baseline assessment data can be understood as the production of new fluid and networked knowledge, which has the potential be 'scaled up' and aggregated into big datasets of potential commercial interest.

Ball (2013) argues that education policy and practice needs to be increasingly understood as being situated within a neoliberal economic framework and, within this context, schools are encouraged to act more like businesses; 'to compete, to promote themselves and to be enterprising' (2013: 15). So, for example, privatising the BA process was an attempt to further regulate early education along the lines of acting as 'edu-businesses'. Reception classes, teachers and children were constructed as purchasers of a product in a market place of competing accountability products. Within this process, the state encouraged schools to shop for an affordable and appropriate product. From such a perspective it can be argued that BA represented the continued expansion of privatised accountability systems and products into the early years. Specifically, BA might be understood as an attempt to regulate and commodify Reception children's knowledge as a product. For example, 11,500 primary schools adopted one of the three edu-businesses who were selected by the DfE to run the baseline assessments at an estimated cost of between £3.5-to-£4.5million (<http://www.atlspeakout.com/2016/02/12/counting-the-other-costs-of-baseline-assessment/>), excluding supply cover costs. Products for sale included (compulsory) training, booklets, and

'add ons' such as differently priced levels of data analysis. From a critical economic perspective, it can be argued that careful niche branding of child-centred observational assessments along with publicity material stating that it was not testing children (and, therefore, was distinct from other competitors) enabled one of the edu-businesses to rapidly capture a market share of over 70% of schools. Nevertheless, despite purporting to be child-centred, all of the providers had to strictly abide by the DfE's requirement for reductionist 'yes' or 'no' binary statements on individual children.

The above economic argument may be one reason why, although recently withdrawing baseline, the DfE still suggests that schools can 'opt' to buy the commercially produced assessments and indeed has recently re-introduced one of the original six providers. Within a high stakes accountability context, and given that the EYFSP data will not be collected by all Local Authorities or the DfE in 2017, some schools may feel under pressure to continue with BA. It should be noted, however, that OFSTED are not examining BA data. It should also be noted that Reception children are still in the early years, and that they do not 'officially' start school until they enter Y1.

From such an economic perspective it can be argued that, as a policy skirmish into the regulation of early years assessment, BA has to a certain extent demonstrated some aspects of the market potential of BA and more generally has begun to explore the potential of digital data in the governance of early years teachers and children. The DfE claims that baseline assessment was scrapped because the results from the three competing edu-businesses were incomparable (DfE, 2016). Rather than acknowledging that BA itself is educationally and ethically inappropriate, it was interesting to note that the DfE's concern was with the technical comparability of the data and not young children's educational development and well-being. The DfE focus on the belief that this latest iteration of BA was flawed because of deficiencies in the instruments and methods used, leaves open the possibility that if only the 'right' technical fix to the design can be found, then a further attempt at its introduction may be made.

### References

- Ball, S.J. (2013) *The Education Debate* Bristol, Policy Press.
- Bingham, S. and Whitebread, D. (2012) *School Readiness; a critical review of perspectives and evidence* Occasional Paper 2. TACTYC (available at <http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-paper/occasional-paper2.pdf>).
- Bradbury, A. and Roberts-Holmes, G. (2016) The Introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment: "They are Children...not robots, not machines" National Union of Teachers and Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) (available at <https://www.teachers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2014/baseline-assessment--final-10404.pdf>).
- Cagliari, P. Castagnetti, M. Giudici, C. Rinaldi, C. Vecchi, V. and Moss, P. (2016) *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A selection of his writings and speeches, 1945-1993* London, Routledge.
- Department for Education (DfE, 2014) *Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools*. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/297595/Primary\\_Accountability\\_and\\_Assessment\\_Consultation\\_Response.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/297595/Primary_Accountability_and_Assessment_Consultation_Response.pdf) (accessed 10 March 2014).
- Department for Education (DfE, 2016) *Reception baseline assessment: guide to signing up your school* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reception-baseline-assessment-guide-to-signing-up-your-school> (accessed 8th May, 2016).
- Kitchen, R. (2014) *The Data Revolution* London, Sage.
- Roberts-Holmes, G., and Bradbury, A. (2016). **Governance, accountability and the datafication of early years education in England.** *British Educational Research Journal*, n/a. doi:10.1002/berj.3221