

## What's wrong with **Bold Beginnings**? A summary for school leaders

### Introduction

Everyone agrees with Ofsted that the Reception year is of crucial importance for young children and Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* report does identify some good practice which is fully compatible with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). However, it also makes some highly contentious recommendations which are unsupported by child development and research evidence. This short paper summarises the main issues and suggests ways forward for school leaders. It is based on responses from Early Education, TACTYC, CREC and Early Excellence - more information and research references can be found on their websites (see below).

### Issues

- The whole report contains an **underlying agenda of downward pressure from KS1 to narrow the early years curriculum**. The report implicitly praises schools that have based their literacy and maths curriculum in the Reception year on National Curriculum expectations for Year 1.
- According to recommendation 1, schools should ensure “that the teaching of reading including systematic synthetic phonics is the **core purpose of the Reception Year**” (p7). This, along with other recommendations that emphasise formal writing and mathematics, ignores child development evidence and reduces the Reception year's purpose to a means for schools to meet “now increased expectations of the national curriculum” (p4).
- **The report ignores established evidence on the role of self-regulation** in forming strong dispositions for later learning and successful lives, and how to encourage those.. The characteristics of effective early learning and teaching (playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically) are based on this research evidence, have been part of the EYFS since its first iteration in 2008 and were further strengthened in the EYFS review of 2011 by becoming part of the statutory framework.
- Many practitioners and experts agree with Ofsted that the profile of **early years mathematics teaching** should be raised. However, the emphasis on “appropriate schemes and resources” (p7) is misguided. What is needed (as with literacy development) is deepening the understanding of play and of young children's cultural knowledge so that teachers and practitioners can build on children's existing knowledge. Integral to this is a need for staff to develop their understanding of how young children learn the abstract language of mathematics and how this can best be supported in Reception classes.
- **The report ignores children with English as an Additional Language as well as those with SEND, summer-born children, and those who face other forms of vulnerability**. The type of Reception curriculum emphasised in this report would exclude many children who, for a range of reasons, may be working at earlier levels of development and a premature focus on reading,

phonics and formal maths will lead to a great number of children being unnecessarily identified as SEND.

## Ways Forward

- Take into account that Reception children are **very young and most of them are not of compulsory school age**. Statutory schooling in England starts in the term after children reach their fifth birthday, which is earlier than almost all other countries internationally. In some cases children have only recently become four.
- The main goal of early years education should be the **development of dispositions to learn that are strongly indicative of school success**. All young children have a statutory entitlement to a curriculum and pedagogy reflecting this approach until at least the end of the EYFS, which is at the end of Reception.
- In line with the EYFS children in Reception need a **broad-based curriculum with particular emphasis on physical, social and emotional, and language and communication development** (the prime areas) All of these make positive contributions to the learning of subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics, which are not adequately supported through an approach limited to premature formal reading, writing and mathematics.
- Schools should **ensure that Reception class teachers are early years specialists with a strong understanding of child development and early years pedagogy**, who can argue for the important contribution that foundational aspects of learning and development make to future successful lives. These go well beyond meeting short-term targets imposed on schools, and focus on their intellectual, rather than premature academic, achievement.
- Rather than defining the EYFS as preparation for Year 1, **the content of the national curriculum for Year 1 should be reviewed**, so that there is greater alignment between the necessarily broad-based EYFS/EYFSP and the expectations for Year 1

## Further information

- Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* report [www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-curriculum-in-good-and-outstanding-primary-schools-bold-beginnings](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-curriculum-in-good-and-outstanding-primary-schools-bold-beginnings)
- TACTYC's very detailed evidence based response to *Bold Beginnings* <http://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bold-Beginnings-TACTYC-response-FINAL-09.12.17.pdf>
- Shorter responses from Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) and Early Education:
  - [www.crec.co.uk/announcements/our-response-to-ofsted-paper-bold-beginnings](http://www.crec.co.uk/announcements/our-response-to-ofsted-paper-bold-beginnings)
  - [www.early-education.org.uk/press-release/ofsted-report-reception-year-hit-and-miss-affair](http://www.early-education.org.uk/press-release/ofsted-report-reception-year-hit-and-miss-affair)
- Details about Early Excellence's review of Reception practice - The Hundred Review <http://earlyexcellence.com/hundredreview/> and the research base that informed it [http://earlyexcellence.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/10\\_100-Review\\_CREC\\_March\\_2017.pdf](http://earlyexcellence.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/10_100-Review_CREC_March_2017.pdf)