**Select Committee for Science and Technology**

**Inquiry into** [**evidence-based early-years intervention**](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/evidence-based-early-years-intervention-17-19/)

**Submission from TACTYC, the Association for Professional Development in Early Years**

April 2018

**TACTYC promotes the highest quality professional development for all early years educators in order to enhance the educational well-being of the youngest children.**

Our activities include:

* **advocacy and lobbying** – providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce;
* **informing** – developing the knowledge-base of all those concerned with early years education and care by disseminating research findings through our international *Early Years* Journal, annual conference, website and occasional publications;
* **supporting**– encouraging informed and constructive discussion and debate and supporting practitioner reflection, the use of evidence-based practice and practitioner-research through, for example, our newsletter and website [www.tactyc.org.uk](http://www.tactyc.org.uk)

TACTYC welcomes the inquiry into evidence-based early years intervention undertaken by the Select Committee for Science and Technology, as this is a vitally important issue that is not widely understood or appreciated. The low levels of qualifications and pay of many staff, together with the decision by government not to grant Qualified Teacher Status to Early Years Teachers who meet comparable standards to graduate staff working in other phases, show a lack of esteem for people working in the early years, and a lack of appreciation of the complexity of their work. The continuing loss of Children’s Centres, and the inadequate funding for the current expansion of childcare, illustrate the low priority and poor understanding of the contribution that high quality education and care in the early years can make to wider society as well as to young children and their families.

As your many respondents show, the evidence is that high quality provision, supported by multi-disciplinary working across health, education and social services, coupled with proactive links with parents and carers, can and will transform children’s lives. Multi-professional working can make a significant and effective contribution to narrowing the gap in achievement between disadvantaged children, including those suffering from adverse childhood experiences, and their more fortunate peers.

There is a well-established relationship between high quality provision in early years education and care and the quality of the professional workforce. Given the macro problems of deprivation and its effects, however, solutions must go beyond formal qualifications to include 'competent systems' (Urban 2014), where there are reciprocal relations between individuals, institutions, and the governance of the system.  The necessary dialogue between government and the professions, including examination and response to evidence, can be seen to be sadly lacking in current policy developments.

Given the potential of high quality multi-agency approaches to improve the lives and life chances of disadvantaged children, it is very disappointing that so many Children’s Centres, which have been shown to contribute powerfully to effective multi-professional preventive work, have closed, and the remainder are now largely reduced to limited targeted work and signposting services which are increasingly unable to provide help for needy families. As Professor Melhuish pointed out when giving evidence to your Committee, this is a false economy, resulting in heavier demand for later interventions from a range of services that end up being more expensive in human as well as financial terms. There is a desperate need for longer term strategic planning, which would be best achieved with cross-party support.

TACTYC, together with the British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group, drew up policy proposals towards the end of the Coalition government (TACTYC/BERA 2014). The Early Childhood Forum and other agencies have also put forward well-evidenced proposals for effective investment in the early years, with disappointingly little impact on policy and thus ultimately, on practice.

It was both surprising and concerning to hear that Sam Gyimah, the recently appointed Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, who was previously Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Childcare and Education, declined your recent invitation to appear before your Committee, because he considers your inquiry to be beyond his remit. As your Chair is on record as saying:

*“[The Minister] tells us that the detail of how Government-funded research is undertaken, and its standards and integrity, is not a matter for him. This risks pre-judging our questions, including on the scope and appetite for a different regulatory approach in this area…The minister’s non-attendance risks the research community concluding that this important area is not a ministerial priority.”*

Despite continuing lobbying based on strong evidence, rooted in reflection and experience as well as research, we are witnessing a decline in effective early years provision, and wish to draw to your attention the particular problems associated with recent policies introduced by the current Schools Minister which conflict with what we know about learning in the early years, and which are resulting in damaging downward pressures on children as they start school. We are aware that your Committee’s focus is on trends in research fraud, misconduct and mistakes in research, and think therefore that you may wish to consider the misunderstanding, and indeed misuse, of evidence from research by the Schools Minister.

Baseline assessment, which had been withdrawn as unworkable in 2002, five years after its introduction by the then Labour government, and again by this government in 2016, when it was found to be impossible to compare the results from three different systems, is to be re-imposed shortly. The reasoned arguments against this can be seen at More Than a Score (2017). The first priority for schools must be to enable the large groups of children who are admitted in September, some of whom are only just four, to settle in to their new class before they can be expected to gain the confidence to show what they can do in an unfamiliar context. No account is taken of the age difference within classes, which amounts to 20% of life experience between the oldest and youngest in the group, let alone the impact of different levels of family support, and the wide range of cultural difference and fluency in speaking English encountered by teachers in many of our schools. Demands for external accountability at the cost of the prime needs of young children at a crucial stage in their education cannot be justified, particularly as the results are likely to be unreliable and invalid. Any claim that results provide a useful starting point for measuring progress as a marker for school effectiveness is undermined by the fact that up to 40% of pupils move schools at least once during their primary years, and of course there are staff changes too. It is worth noting that only a third of respondents to the consultation on baseline assessment in 2013 agreed that it would be useful.

There is plenty of evidence of schools gaming results of existing tests; where the focus is on progress, it is in their interest to mark down results from entry tests, which are in any case unable to give an accurate picture of what children can do. As you will be aware, the House of Commons Education Committee (2017) recently made the following recommendations in relation to baseline assessment:

“*We welcome the increased focus on progress in performance measures and the Government’s commitment to introduce an improved baseline measure. However, in its consultation document, the Government fails to appreciate potential harmful consequences of introducing a baseline measure used for school accountability in reception (Paragraph 76)*

“*The Government must conduct a thorough evaluation of potentially harmful consequences of introducing any baseline measure, involving early years experts and practitioners, including impacts on pupil wellbeing and teaching and learning. The primary purpose of a measure of children at age 4 should be a diagnostic tool to help early years practitioners identify individual needs of pupils and should only be carried out through teacher assessment. We welcome the Government’s commitment that no data from a baseline will be used to judge individual pupils or schools.”* (Paragraph 77).

In view of the current accountability agenda, the final sentence of the latter paragraph can no longer apply to data gained from baseline assessments, as they are explicitly to be used in an attempt to measure school performance. The expectation is that the assessments will be electronically recorded,*,* which raises questions about privacy as well as accuracy of the data gathered.

A review of assessment commissioned by the education business Pearson has produced an interim report which casts further doubt on the primary assessment system. The report, *Testing the Water,* which is noted on the More Than a Score website, states:

* *Teachers do not feel their professional judgment is valued highly enough and they are concerned about the impact assessment is having on the curriculum.*
* *Children with SEND are put at a disadvantage by an assessment system which does not recognise their capacities and needs.*
* *Teachers are concerned about the dominance of assessment-for-accountability.*
* *Teachers, parents, governors and pupils all feel anxiety over the impact of high stakes tests.*
* *The concerns of government are prioritised over and above the needs of teachers and pupils.* <https://morethanascore.co.uk/>

A further serious concern relates to the insistence on systematic synthetic phonics as the sole way of teaching early reading. This is not supported by rigorous evidence (Clark, 2016, 2017), including the importance of reading for pleasure, which reinforces children’s disposition to read as well as widening their vocabulary and expressive skills. The phonics check in Year 1 is resulting in a range of avoidable difficulties, extending down into the Early Years Foundation Stage, to reception classes and nurseries. Although this approach depends on limited research which is increasingly open to doubt, it has the unquestioning support of the Schools Minister, who, when our President tried to explain the well-evidenced need for a wider approach, put his hands over his ears and said “I’m not listening”. His views appear to be endorsed in a recent Ofsted publication based on a small survey of selected schools (Ofsted 2017). There are examples of Ofsted insisting that books written by reputable academics who take a broader approach to early literacy should be removed from University library shelves, and there is at least one instance of a lecturer who was forced to leave his post as he was not teaching to the required agenda, and of research studies that remain unpublished because they do not accord with government priorities. (See Clark, 2018).

Mark Cavey, Deputy Director, Assessment Strategy Policy and Communications at the Standards and Testing Agency, was asked recently why there was no question about the Year 1 phonics check in the recent consultation on assessment.  In reply, he said:

*“The consultation document was developed within the parameters of Government policy and Government policy is that it`s very firmly committed to phonics as a mode of teaching reading and is very firmly committed to the continuation of the phonics screening check. So I don`t think it would have been helpful to set up a false debate about something which the Government wasn`t going to change. And ministers weren`t going to change, and you know Minister Gibb has very strong views on phonics and the phonics screening check. As you`ll know, we’ve had the publication of some international comparison data around reading this week, which the Government would interpret as being an endorsement or a validation of the approaches that it’s taken to the teaching of reading over the past few years, its commitment to phonics as a mode of teaching and the phonics screening check. So we didn`t ask a question about it and consequently we didn`t have many responses on whether it should continue in the future. I know that there are differing views but the Government policy on this is what it is.”* (Westminster Education Forum 2017)

This, coupled with the fact that during school inspections, Ofsted now checks that students are introduced to a single way of teaching reading is of concern.  You may be aware that the recent Bold Beginnings report (Ofsted 2017) will make it very difficult for reception class teachers and heads to work in the way required by the principles underpinning the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage. The appendices to the report, published following Freedom of Information questions, reveal that few of the inspectors involved had early years teaching experience, and were required to ask leading questions set in the detailed framework they were expected to follow. For example, they were explicitly instructed to *“ensure that children are clearly and consistently taught to apply phonic knowledge and skill as the route to decoding words; strenuously avoid multicueing for word reading at all times”* (Ofsted 2018).

Jarvis and Whitebread (2018) provide a convincing critique of Bold Beginnings, along the lines suggested by Scott (Chapter 12 in Clark, 2018). For your information, we are sending a copy of “Teaching Initial Literacy”, Clark’s recently published book, which reports on significant aspects of effective approaches to early reading (which have always included appropriate use of phonics) together with a relevant assessment of the current situation. This includes comment on the dubious claims made by the Schools Minister as to the cause of England’s small rise in the recent PISA results, which he attributes to the effectiveness of phonics teaching. Andreas Schleicher, Division Head and coordinator of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has remarked that:

*“English policymakers are reacting to [these] test results in a different way to other nations. In other countries, policymakers are trying to improve performance by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.”*

As you will know, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was given a founding grant of £125 million by the DfE to support its work in scrutinising and commissioning relevant educational research. Its reports on phonics and comprehension skills do not support the Schools Minister’s insistence on systematic synthetic phonics, “first fast and only”. Their specific inquiry into early literacy is expected in the Spring of 2018. Meanwhile, it is worth quoting directly from existing sections on phonics and reading comprehension:

*“Speaking and listening skills are at the heart of language, not only as foundations for reading and writing, but also as essential skills for thinking and communication. A focus on developing oral language skills is important for pupils in this (5 – 7) age group.*

*“Phonics can be an important component in the development of early reading skills, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it is also important that children are successful in making progress in all aspects of reading including vocabulary development, comprehension and spelling, which should be taught separately and explicitly.*

*“The evidence for including a combination of both decoding and comprehension-led approaches in teaching reading is extensive. There is little evidence regarding precisely how these approaches should be integrated, or exactly which skills should be taught and when.*

*“There is a broad consensus, supported by research evidence, that reading requires both decoding (the ability to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language) and comprehension (an understanding of the language being read). Comprehension is a complex skill, composed of many parts.*

*“Both decoding and comprehension are necessary, but not sufficient, to develop confident and competent readers. It is also important to remember that progress in literacy requires motivation and engagement, both of which help children to develop persistence and resilience as well as enjoyment and satisfaction in their reading. If pupils are not making expected progress it may be that they are not engaged in the process, and require a different approach that motivates them to practise and improve.*

*“Children also need a wide range of language and literacy experiences to develop their understanding of written text in all its forms. This should include active engagement with different media and genres of texts and a wide range of content topics. Pupils should read both narrative (e.g. fictional stories and poetry) and informative texts (e.g. news articles and speeches). Introducing children to a range of texts and reading experiences could support the development of pupils’ reading comprehension, and their inference skills in particular.*

*“Are some types of phonics teaching better than others?*

*…Only a few studies have compared synthetic and analytic phonics, and there is not yet enough evidence to make a confident recommendation to use one approach rather than the other. Many phonics programmes combine both approaches.*

*“Extensive evidence from eight meta-analyses has consistently demonstrated the impact of teaching metacognitive strategies for reading comprehension. These include more studies of older pupils, but also include studies of 5-7 year old pupils. Reading comprehension can be improved by teaching pupils specific strategies that they can apply both to monitor and overcome barriers to comprehension. A number of different strategies exist and some overlap.*

*These strategies are:*

* ***Prediction***

*pupils predict what might happen as a text is read. This causes them to pay close attention to the text, which means they can closely monitor their own comprehension.*

* ***Questioning***

*pupils generate their own questions about a text in order to check their comprehension.*

* ***Clarifying***

*pupils identify areas of uncertainty, which may be individual words or phrases, and seek information to clarify meaning.*

* ***Summarising***

*pupils succinctly describe the meaning of sections of the text. This causes pupils to focus on the key content, which in turn supports comprehension monitoring. This can be attempted using graphic organisers that illustrate concepts and the relationships between them using diagrams.*

* ***Inference***

*pupils infer the meaning of sentences from their context, and the meaning of words from spelling patterns.*

* ***Activating prior knowledge***

*pupils think about what they already know about a topic, from reading or other experiences, and try to make links. This helps pupils to infer and elaborate, fill in missing or incomplete information and use existing mental structures to support recall.*

*“The potential impact of these approaches is very high, but can be difficult to achieve, as they require pupils to take greater responsibility for their own learning. The strategies should be modelled and practised to ensure that they become embedded and fluent. For example, a teacher could model how they would attempt to understand a text using questioning. Children could then practise these skills in collaborative groups with support and feedback from their teacher decreasing as pupils become increasingly effective at using each strategy.*

*“The strategies can be introduced individually, but pupils should also be taught how to combine strategies.* ***The effectiveness of teaching pupils to integrate multiple strategies is well-supported by research evidence, and is likely to be more effective than relying on single strategies in isolation****.”*

Contrary to the evidence on the effectiveness of integrating multiple strategies and the importance of focusing on comprehension alongside decoding strategies, the recent Ofsted report *Bold Beginnings* champions synthetic phonics as the sole approach to beginning reading, and suggests attention to thinking about the story and discussing the context of a text should apply only once children had mastered decoding. It is concerning that the report recommends that these views, which are unsupported by the evidence, should ‘help shape the new education inspection framework for September 2019’.

Members of your Committee will be aware that Paul Drechsler, President of the CBI, has called on policy makers to ***“make education in England about more than results and rote learning and prioritise teaching that encourages thoughts, questions, creativity and teamworking”***

It would be very helpful if your Inquiry could challenge the ill-advised and counter-productive insistence on ways of working that are not consistent with what we know about early learning, as expressed in the Rumbold Report a generation ago. Current demands conflict with the principles underpinning the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which is the statutory framework for the curriculum for children up to the start of Year 1 (see Appendix 1). The long list of references included in this note, which is by no means exhaustive, guided the introduction and subsequent review of the EYFS, ensuring that this statutory framework is grounded in established knowledge about child development and learning.

It is very regrettable that some current policy developments in England do not pay sufficient attention to these significant foundations. Specifically, the Year 1 Phonics Check and current proposals for baseline assessment when children enter their reception class are counter to what is known about early literacy learning and the effective assessment of young children.

Ministerial insistence on these approaches in the face of contrary evidence and strong objections from teachers, parents and academics, and also relevant recommendations made by the House of Commons Education Committee (2017) and the EEF, show a disregard for academic evidence and professional judgement. This persistent misunderstanding and misuse of research is the focus of our submission. We hope that the Select Committee for Science and Technology will take account of our views and raise them at the highest level.

**APPENDIX 1**

The Principles underpinning the EYFS state the following:

***A Unique Child****: every child is a competent learner from birth, who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured*

***Positive Relationships****: children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person*

***Enabling Environments:*** *the environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children’s development and learning*

***Learning and Development****: children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of learning and development are equally important and interconnected.*

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