

A Response to Ofsted's (2017) report, [Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools](#) by TACTYC (Association for Professional Development in Early Years). December 2017

Although welcoming some aspects of *Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools*, [TACTYC](#) has serious reservations about Ofsted's latest report and the uncritical interpretation by sections of the mass media, whose sensationalist responses have included berating Reception teachers as '[failing one third of five-year-olds](#)' (Daily Telegraph, 30.11.2017).

Such guidance from Ofsted is likely to play a powerful role in distorting the balance of the curriculum, early years teaching and young children's learning and development in their first year at school. This is particularly so in statements such as that on p.4 where it is stated '...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.' It has been acknowledged since its advent that the EYFS represents a distinct curriculum and pedagogy that supports all that is known about children's early learning and development. TACTYC strongly agrees with Ofsted's assertion that the Reception year is 'unique': consequently, it is not a context for a watered down version of the Key Stage 1 curriculum. TACTYC also concurs that the Reception year is 'important' and therefore requires that teachers are well trained and supported in suitable curriculum strategies and pedagogies that are appropriate for the early years, which arguably extend beyond the Reception year, particularly for summer-born children.

It is clear to TACTYC that adherence to the report's recommendations will cause long-term, detrimental effects on young children's confidence, motivation and disposition to learn, as well as on their parents' attitudes and early years teachers' professional integrity. Therefore, this paper outlines TACTYC's concerns regarding aspects of the Report and, using the breadth and depth of knowledge of many senior early years experts, makes considered analyses, observations and recommendations for Reception class curriculum and pedagogy.

TACTYC is concerned that the **fifteen recommendations for action** (p.7) focus primarily on emphasising reading, writing and mathematics (8 out of 15) as well as 'streamlining' the *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* and *EYFS Profile (EYFSP)* (4 of the 15). These recommendations are based on limited evidence derived from a questionable methodology without recourse to well-researched, established international evidence about young children's learning and early years pedagogy, including evidence pertaining specifically to the teaching of maths and literacy. Furthermore, TACTYC is concerned that the report derives its data from schools that it has judged to be good and outstanding, giving rise to speculations about the basis on which those judgements have been made: strongly data-led inspections could well undervalue aspects of children's learning such as motivation, creativity and well-being which are also markers of effective education.

TACTYC concurs with Elkind (2001) who uses evidence from two studies examining different pre-school programmes to argue that children who are introduced to formal learning at the age of four or five do not benefit from a long-lasting advantage. In addition, earlier exposure to formal learning suggested higher anxiety levels, lower-self esteem and less motivation to learn.

TACTYC agrees that 'Listening to stories, poems and rhymes' helps to feed children's imagination, can enhance their vocabulary and support their developing comprehension. But literacy experiences are all the more enticing and effective when they are part of a rich and varied curriculum experience that allows for playful learning, accompanied by teaching that skilfully extends children's motivations, capabilities and interests. Evangelou, et al. (2009) review the debate on when best to start phonics instruction and conclude that variation in home learning environments, as well as the ages of children when they join Reception classes, point to personalisation as the only sound policy on phonics readiness. They argue that oral language skills such as vocabulary and letter knowledge are a necessary pre-requisite of phonic skills, and that practitioners must ensure that this earlier skill stage is in place before introducing phonics.

TACTYC acknowledges the work of Evangelou, et.al. (2009: 64) who used evidence given to the Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families (2009) to suggest that, in practice, 'phonics are being "instructed" to almost all children in the Reception, with few practitioners using their "professional judgement" to withhold phonics from children not yet ready'. They also argue that oral language skills such as vocabulary and letter knowledge are a necessary pre-requisite of phonic skills, and that practitioners must ensure that this earlier skill stage is in place before introducing phonics.

TACTYC supports Ofsted's assertion that schools should give sufficient time for mathematics each day, but argues that this should include opportunities for children to have extended periods of genuinely free (and high quality) play and adult-led small group sessions in which mathematical concepts, resources and collaborative dialogue allow the children to explore their mathematical understandings. But TACTYC also supports Gilmore et.al.'s (2007) finding that the use of mathematical problem-solving across a range of activities is more effective than the early introduction of symbolic representation of number to the curriculum. Evangelou et.al. (2009) advocate better links between informal early maths and formal 'school' maths. Additionally, Diaz (2008) found a need for staff development to encourage recognising and responding to maths in play situations.

TACTYC believes that the Department for Education, Ofsted, initial teacher education providers, primary schools, local authorities and early years and parent-teacher organisations have a collective role in assuring the content and quality of initial and continuing education, advice and support, in order to ensure that all early years teachers are 'competent and confident' to fulfil their professional responsibilities. All reception teachers need robust, research-informed understanding of child development, curriculum and pedagogy appropriate to young children. In particular, an understanding of the role and development of executive functioning is vital, something not mentioned in this Report.

TACTYC agrees that more could be done, including but not exclusively through initial and continuing professional education, to equip teachers with the understanding and critical appreciation of diverse

learning and developmental theories, as well as specialist subject and pedagogical knowledge to engender the confidence and capabilities to respond to young children's curiosity and wide-ranging questions in their thirst for learning. However, the tensions that exist between the research base and the policy agenda need to be addressed if young children's learning is not to be jeopardised. This means that policy- and decision-makers must make systematically derived judgements about curriculum developments. These should be made on the basis of a methodical, critical and rigorous review of all the available evidence, rather than being ideologically driven and rationalised with selectively presented evidence (see for example Wyse and Torgersen, 2017 on literacy policy and research evidence).

For this reason, TACTYC is also concerned that the Report's claims are used to give credence to speculation about the quality of teacher education, the rigour or reliability of the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)* and, implicitly, the knowledge and understanding of colleagues who are teaching in the Reception year. For example, it is argued that, '*Many headteachers expressed considerable concern that simply to meet the early learning goals (ELGs) was insufficient preparation for children's learning in Year 1 and beyond. They therefore designed their Reception curriculum to give children the necessary foundations for the rest of their schooling*' (2017: 5). This finding and others associated with, for example, the 'burdensome' nature of assessment requirements, orientate the conclusions towards a negative perception of teaching and learning in the Reception year and the suitability of the *EYFS*. In contrast, **TACTYC argues that learning in Year 1 should extend from the EYFS and sustain its breadth and depth.**

The report's methodological obscurity leads to conclusions that are tenuous or unreliable and TACTYC notes that the report also:

- a) Lacks a deep or broad conceptualisation of how young children learn and how early years teachers facilitate that learning.** The Report argues that some unspecified headteachers held the un-evidenced view that ITE tutors had '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' (p.29).

This statement demonstrates the failure to recognise

- (i) complex theories of child development and the multiple modes through which children learn and their relevance for pedagogy (see Siraj, 2017);
- (ii) the nature and value of play and playfulness in learning, including developing and consolidating learning in maths and literacy -- both reading and writing -- as well as developing the dispositions and skills to underpin that learning, such as self-regulation (see e.g. Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010; Moyles, 2015; Rogers, 2011; and Whitebread and Bingham 2014)
- (iii) that effective pedagogy in the early years involves 'the understanding of how children learn and develop, and the practices through which we can enhance that process. It is rooted in values and beliefs about what we want for children, and supported by knowledge, theory and experience' (Stewart and Pugh, 2007).

b) Ignores child development evidence and ill-advisedly encourages a narrowing of the curriculum. The report reduces the Reception year to a means for schools to meet ‘now-increased expectations of the national curriculum’ (p.4), with headteachers stating that ‘Reception Year was fundamental to their school’s success’ (p.5). It promotes ‘the teaching of reading’ as ‘the core purpose of the Reception Year’ (p.7), alongside a premature emphasis on formal writing and mathematics.

Rather, it should focus on the overwhelming evidence that young children aged four- and five-years need a broad-based curriculum that encourages foundational learning and development across all domains, but with particular emphasis on physical, social and emotional, and language and communication development (Heckman 2006; Center on the Developing Child 2007; Goswami 2015; Tickell 2011). All of these make positive contributions to the learning of subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics (Goddard Blythe, 2017), which are not adequately supported through an approach limited to premature formal reading, writing and mathematics. Established evidence on the role of self-regulation and executive function in forming strong dispositions for later learning and successful lives, and how to encourage those, is ignored. (Whitebread and Bingham, 2014; Diamond et. al., 2007; Diamond, 2013).

In mandating a central approach prioritising teaching reading through synthetic phonics along with a similar emphasis on mathematics, the Report ignores the considerable evidence that although such approaches can deliver short-term measurable gains, they do not support children’s academic or social progress in the longer term. (McGuinness, et al., 2014; Chambers, et al., 2010). Moreover, an overly formal and abstract approach is likely to promote anxiety, lack of confidence, lowered self-esteem and poor motivation all of which have a negative effect on later learning.

Early years curricula and pedagogies rightly recognise the broad, long-term implications of encouraging agency, volition, self-motivation and self-esteem alongside understanding the needs of others in a community, in an environment that appreciates and values individual strengths while also recognising needs. These are crucial underpinnings of good mental health, which is currently of concern across the education system (See *Children and Young People’s mental health – the role of education*, 2017, online at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhealth/849/849.pdf>).

Additionally, 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 may be working at earlier levels of development for a range of reasons and a premature focus on reading, phonics and formal maths will lead to a great number of children being identified as SEND, as is already evidenced by the number of summer-born children who are thus identified (Humphrey et.al., 2012).

TACTYC agrees that the profile of early years mathematics teaching should be raised. However the emphasis on ‘appropriate schemes and resources’ (p.7) is misguided. What is needed is a deepening 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 knowledge of the communicative and graphical language aspects (not a narrow list of mathematical vocabulary) of the 'written' nature of mathematics, ways in which young children acquire their understanding of the abstract language of mathematics and how this can best be supported in Reception classes. These recommendations extend to initial teacher education so that all those involved in early childhood mathematics 'have sufficient ambition and high expectations for all children' based on evidence from research' (p.10).

- c) Presents a conflicting argument.** It is argued that the reception year is 'not compulsory' (p.8) but that the teaching of particular knowledge and skills are vital if children are not to be 'exposed to all the painful and unnecessary consequences of falling behind their peers' (p.4) irretrievably in Key Stage 1 and beyond (p.9).

The report also contradicts previous Ofsted reports such as *Teaching and play in the early years: a balancing act?* (2015) which did not find any difficulty in promoting learning through playful pedagogy. That report states, '**Leaders did not think of teaching and play as separate endeavours.** In every playful encounter we observed, adults, consciously or otherwise, were teaching.' It also notes, '**We found approaches to early reading to be viewed as the most formal approach to learning.** All schools and settings we visited ensured dedicated time each day to teaching communication, language and literacy. We saw that short, sharply focused teaching sessions, together with frequent opportunity to apply learning across all other activities, allowed the rapid development of literacy skills' (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-a-balancing-act>).

- d) Misuses evidence from the EPPSE study in an attempt to strengthen its line of argument.** Claims about the significance of 'quality' in the Reception year are important, but the Report conflates 'early education' (p.8), which encompasses a range of provider types, with the Reception year. The [EPPSE study](#) refers to pre-schools' influence on later attainment at GCSE, but did not use data from the Reception year. Hence the argument cannot be made that the quality of teaching in the Reception year (per se) can be correlated with better GCSE attainment.
- e) Unquestioningly accepts descriptive data.** The Report accepts the descriptive data from the aggregated results of the *EYFSP* to argue uncritically that 'In 2016, around one third of children did not have the essential knowledge and understanding they needed to reach a good level of development'. This labels young children as deficient without acknowledging the significant effects of age difference across the year, and that there have been criticisms from experienced teachers and early years practitioners across the sector that the expected levels of development are unrealistic and too demanding (e.g. Brooker, et.al., 2010; Murray, 2010; Dubiel, 2014).
- f) Is conceptually confused.** The Report presents the Reception year as 'unique' and 'a beginning and an end' while simultaneously arguing that the Reception year (as part of the EYFS) is intended to be a foundation and a preparation for KS1. This is compounded by the

implicit praise for schools that have derived their maths teaching in the reception year from National Curriculum expectations for KS1.

- g) Has an underlying agenda of downward pressure from KS1 to narrow the early years curriculum.** The Report reveals an underlying agenda favouring direct instruction. In spite of statements about the desirability of 'deepening children's understanding of core mathematical concepts rather than moving them on too quickly to formal calculations and written algorithms' and 'securing children's personal, social and emotional readiness to learn, including resilience, perseverance, concentration, the ability to listen, to take turns and to cooperate', it argues that compared with literacy, insufficient attention is being paid to the direct teaching of early maths – principally conceptualised as 'counting, numeral recognition and the additive composition of number' (p.24). It suggests that in schools that perform better, the early years maths curriculum is derived from KS1. This demonstrates a limited and limiting understanding of the development of mathematical concepts, implying that maths teaching is only validated where it conforms to simplistic preparation for the KS1 maths curriculum rather than recognising young children's need for a broad and richly supported experiential introduction to mathematical concepts.

Additionally, the Report claims that 'Most of the schools had designed their own mathematics curriculum, based on the Year 1 national curriculum programme of study. This provided a strong basis for more complex learning later'. However, the evidence is not clear that this leads to complex *understandings* later in the primary school: many children appear to remain highly reliant on teachers to explain formulae and reinforce strategies to use, rather than children drawing on and developing personal strategies that combine their own models as well as those introduced by teachers (Worthington and Carruthers, 2011).

- h) Makes un-evidenced judgements about initial teacher education.** The report makes unjustified assertions (pp.7; 29) about the way in which initial teacher education prepares students for teaching Reception children, without any acknowledgement or consideration of the specialist route to Early Years Teacher training, EYITT, and what it can offer. As part of the EYFS, the Reception year would appropriately be led by teachers trained specifically in early childhood education, including child development. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for a school to move teachers whose training and experience centre on later phases of education into Reception classes.
- i) Presents uncritically the views of individual headteachers.** The Report appears to express inspectors' personal irritation with practices that have not been considered in any depth. For example, one headteacher expressed concern at a growing tendency to place words, numbers or mathematics resources in the sand or water areas, as if this somehow validated the importance of these areas as resources for learning in language and mathematics. In the view of this headteacher, children were at risk during these times of losing the value of each different and unique play experience.

This reinforces the underlying message from the Report that there are limited acceptable ways of teaching. Introducing new teaching methods to see if they would work better is discouraged. There is no evidence provided for the adoption of this position, which is not

helpful for those new to the profession who are learning how to enthuse, involve and support all children, rather than follow the Ofsted-driven preferences of their headteachers.

In contrast, a much more thorough review of practice in Reception classes (see Dubiel and Kilner, 2017; *Teaching Four and Five Year Olds: The Hundred Review of the Reception Year in England*) which involved over 4000 survey responses, 44 school visits and focus groups, and reached very different conclusions regarding the importance of the prime areas of learning, self-regulation, effective approaches to teaching literacy and mathematics and the need to review the current level of expectations in literacy and mathematics.

TACTYC recommends that:

- ✓ 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. Statutory schooling in England starts in the term after children reach their fifth birthday, which is earlier than almost all other countries internationally. *The Children Act (1989)* defined Early Years as birth-to-eight-years curriculum, taking account of individual children's different starting points. The main goal of early years education should be the development of executive functions that are strongly indicative of school success (Kangas, et.al., 2015).
- ✓ There should be a reiteration of the inter-connected nature of young children's development and learning, particularly the fundamental importance of physical, social, emotional and communicative development and executive function, in line with international evidence. The ways in which young children learn are as important as what they learn; as the Center on the Developing Child (2017), reminds us:

'it is important for children to exercise their developing skills through activities that foster creative play and social connection, teach them how to cope with stress, involve vigorous exercise and, over time, provide opportunities for directing their own actions with decreasing adult supervision.'

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. Arguably, children should be assessed when they reach statutory school age, which is the first term of Year 1 for summer born children. Many with special needs, together with those in the early stages of learning English, would benefit from this way of working well into Year 1.

- ✓ A rich and varied curriculum, indoors and out, must be provided for Reception children. The Report rightly acknowledges the importance of feeding children's vocabulary, imagination and comprehension through stories, rhymes and poems. Plentiful opportunities for meaningful conversations based on authentic experiences are also valuable. Reading develops through these activities and is but one of the vital aspects of learning in the Reception year. Curriculum and pedagogies that also fully promote the foundations for future social, physical, mental and economic well-being are vital.

- ✓ 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 intellectual rather than premature academic achievement (Katz, 2010). Ofsted would do well to look to the training and standards pertinent to Early Years Initial Teacher Training to this end.
- ✓ Ofsted inspectors should be required to have full and in-depth knowledge of child development together with early years curriculum and pedagogies in order that data and subsequent reports can be used and reported effectively and with understanding.

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