
POLICY BRIEF

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Rescuing early years education

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A ‘good childhood’ matters for education

Sue Palmer

UNESCO defines early childhood as birth to eight – “a period of rapid growth when brain development is at its peak” – and recommends that care/education during this period should aim at “the holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being”.

Throughout the millennia, the two key ingredients of a ‘good childhood’ have been the loving care of adults and, from the age of about three, the freedom to play, especially outdoors with other children. Until the Industrial Revolution this was the experience of lucky children in every culture and every country throughout the world.

From around the age of eight they’d be competent enough to help out with the family business – minding the beasts, perhaps, or helping with the cooking. But until then, through love and play, they were developing the foundational skills and capacities needed for life in general.

Not surprisingly, therefore, these skills and capacities – such as self-regulation

skills, emotional resilience, social competence, communication skills, the capacity to focus attention and the motivation to learn – have always been taken for granted. But ever since the end of the twentieth century, when the ingredients of a good childhood (loving care in the family, the freedom to play outdoors) began to disappear, we’ve seen

startling increases in children’s mental health problems, developmental disorders and a growing gap in the educational achievement of disadvantaged children.

These changes are partly due to the commercial forces, changing family and community structures, increases in traffic and other aspects of modern life. But in the UK,

they are exacerbated by our very early start on formal education.

Ever since international comparisons began, countries with an early start on formal schooling have performed less well than those with a later start. Worldwide, only 12% of countries (mainly Britain and its former colonies) start school at age four/five, while 66% start at six and 22% at seven.

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Every three years, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) assesses the performance of fifteen-year-olds in literacy, maths and science. In 2022, the best performing countries were (in descending order): *China*, Singapore, *Estonia*, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Taiwan, *Finland*, *Poland*, Ireland. Of these, the four countries highlighted in italics have a school starting age of seven, the rest begin formal education at six.

China, which usually leads the PISA tables, has a kindergarten stage for three- to seven-year-olds. When, in 2018, some were 'schoolifying' their practice, the Chinese government issued an edict that kindergarten children should be learning through play, outdoor activities and games, painting, singing and sports. It also banned testing before the age of seven. Singapore, currently second in the tables, has a school starting age of six and a very well-regarded, play-based kindergarten curriculum for younger children. In 2018, they too decreed there should be no national standardised assessment of children until at least eight years of age.

Estonia, which in 2006 came bottom in UNESCO's survey of child wellbeing in the developed world, based its recovery on Finland's educational system (with a play-based kindergarten stage for three- to seven-year-olds) and subsequently rose in both the educational and well-being charts.

From the UK's perspective, Ireland is a particularly interesting case. Its compulsory attendance at school started

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at age of five. However, in 2009 the Irish government introduced *Aistear*, a developmentally-informed early years curriculum covering ages three to six. *Formal* schooling therefore now begins at age six and, as children benefiting from the *Aistear* curriculum have reached the age of fifteen, Ireland's educational performance has improved significantly.

It's time UK politicians recognised, that rather than rushing children into a formal school setting half-way through their early childhood, we should support their potential for life-long learning and well-being with a developmentally-appropriate, play-based kindergarten stage for three- to seven-year-olds.

Sue Palmer, a former primary headteacher in Scotland, is a literacy specialist, writer, presenter and 'childhood campaigner'. Her books on child development include 'Toxic Childhood' and 'Upstart: the case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens really need'. Sue chaired the Scottish Play Commission, served on the Scottish Government's Early Years Task Force.

We aren't little people, we're children

Sue Allingham

THE headline of this piece is a quote from a Reception aged child. It was said to me when I was visiting his large, five form entry school. I saw all the children coming back from lunch and commented on the long line of 'little people' coming towards me. A little boy left the line and came over to me. I bent to listen to what he was saying and what he said has left an impression on me, and influenced my work, to this day. He was not being rude or cheeky, but the point he made was significant and said something about the ethos of the school.

It was a significant point because this four-year-old child had eloquently pointed out, and summed up, to me something that was so obvious. But something that I suddenly realised is so often overlooked in a policy culture that assumes a 'one size fits all' agenda in which our youngest children are seen as 'pre-school', at 'playgroup' or being prepared to be 'school ready'. These labels suggest that the children are not yet complete and that this will only happen when they enter Key Stage One when there is a perception that real 'school' starts.

So why is this the situation in which we find ourselves? In my work with teachers around the country I always ask three core questions –

- What is your role as 'teacher'?
- What is the role of the child?
- Whose agenda is it?

All of these were triggered by the little boy and his observation to me all those years ago. Too often we, often unconsciously, create a culture in the classroom where

children develop 'learned helplessness'. By this I mean that we make the assumption that the children are not capable of developing new skills and learning unless an adult tells them what to do. Gradually the child feels that they cannot do something without asking first. The adult agenda becomes the rule. I would argue that this is true throughout the education system, but it commonly starts in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Why is this? Why is it assumed that anything that happens before Key Stage One is about adults preparing and forming children to be 'school ready'. Because, until that is done, they are seen to be as a friend of mine says 'becomings not beings'

What are we missing? How did we get here?

What we are missing is an informed viewpoint of the child. The child that is a fully formed being with opinions, views, agency, ideas, knowledge and understanding. Often bringing with them funds of knowledge about subjects and questions that we have never considered.

Despite the large amount of peer reviewed research and well-respected books currently available, anecdotal experience suggest that teachers in Early Childhood Education and Care are now split into two camps. This was well summed up by Loris Malaguzzi in a paper –

*"The environment you construct around you and the children also reflects this image you have about the child. There's a difference between the environment that you are able to build based on a **preconceived image of the***

child and the environment that you can build that is based on the child you see in front of you – the relationship you build with the child, the games you play.”¹

It is this ‘preconceived image’ of the child that has become increasingly prominent with the rise of social media and ‘off the peg’ schemes and curricula. With these influences on our practice and provision, informed research and thinking is often lost or worse, dismissed.

In 1967 a seminal document was published – *Children and their Primary Schools. A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*. This is more commonly known as The Plowden Report.

Although now over fifty years old, this document is the best starting point to reflect on the relationship between policy and practice, what is missing, and how we got to where we are now. This is for two reasons;

- It is a policy document that reflected children’s needs and how schools should respond to them;
- Many more recent initiatives – most notably the development of the National Curriculum, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and the Reception Baseline Assessment – have been as a direct result of what could be seen as misinterpretation of the recommendations of Plowden (CACE 1967).

The Plowden report begins with a section on the importance of understanding child development before we make ill-informed assumptions about a group of children and their capabilities. Teachers must be “adaptable in their approach to individuals”.²

An importance is put on how beneficial all types of early learning are considered to be,



and how these should be organised to maximise the potential of all children, “The child must come first”³. It is important to note here that appropriate education in the early years is seen as crucial to later life. The Plowden committee was very concerned that play and creative work was not “sacrificed” to “formal work”⁴.

This is interesting as since then it is the play and creative work that is/has been chipped away through subsequent years and policy. We are now in a place where we have a document – *Early years foundation stage statutory framework For group and school-based providers Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five* (14 July 2025 and effective from 1 September 2025) – which reads:

“The EYFS sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children’s ‘school readiness’ and gives children the right foundation for good

future progress through school and life.” (my emphasis)

We have arrived at this agenda of ‘school readiness’ via years of change to the education system that have focussed on developing a national curriculum from Year One. This has gradually seen Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) isolated and suffering from a ‘top down’ approach. The recent *Curriculum and Assessment Final Review (November 2025)* has continued this trend by reviewing the National Curriculum and that for 16- to 19-year-olds without reflecting on how Early Childhood Education and Care underpins it all. This is an error of judgement which will be reflected upon in this piece.

The Education Reform Act (1988) irrevocably changed the way education is viewed in England. Although it did not specifically mention education in the Early Years, it is of importance in this context because it

proposed the new National Curriculum which was to start at the age of five.

I was a Reception class teacher at the time, and I along with many others felt unsure about the place of four-year-olds in the National Curriculum. They were not mentioned – yet there were implications for them and what and how they were taught. I recollect that many Early Years teams in schools tried to interpret the new National Curriculum documents in order to make them work in Reception classes where four-year-olds and five-year-olds were taught together.

The subsequent publication of *Starting with Quality* (The Rumbold Report, DES) in 1990 emphasised the importance of the experiences in the early years –

“What is of prime importance is that the curriculum should be coherent in terms of the child’s existing knowledge, understanding and skills, and that it should be experienced in an environment which fosters the development of social relationships and positive attitudes to learning and behaviour.”⁵

But to no avail. This important message has been constantly sidelined. We have now been through the literacy and numeracy strategies, the introduction of ‘synthetic phonics’ programmes, commercially produced maths schemes, commercially produced curricula, several iterations of our Statutory Framework, and all sorts of shiny social media posts and pictures. Much of this was, and is, not statutory but

has had a massive and lasting impact on what has happened for children between birth and age seven. What is missing is that the profession has fallen into the role of being implementers of

policy rather than leaders of change. More recently we have seen Ofsted and DfE publishing ‘guidance’ documents which many take to be policy and the influence on practice and provision is instant. For example, *Bold Beginnings* (2017) began to influence how schools saw the importance of play. And more recently (2025) we have the publication of *The Writing Framework* which, although only guidance, is having a major impact on how leaders are expecting to see the skill of writing taught in Reception classes. Teachers of children in Early Childhood Education and Care feel powerless as Senior Leads begin to require types of practice that do not fit with knowledge of child development and neuroscience.

The Plowden committee was very concerned that play and creative work was not “sacrificed” to “formal work”



There are many reasons for this. Some can be related to lack of experience, qualifications and training, and some to leaders in schools not valuing Nursery and Reception Classes in the same way as Year Six. Much of this is related to how successive governments have viewed Early Childhood Education and Care.

So what can we do?

The answers here sound easy, and as I write I wonder at the fact that we are still having this conversation. I am a member of two national organisations who have been engaged in this conversation for a lifetime. Change is still slow to happen, but it is out there, and children are achieving remarkable results from being enabled to learn in developmentally informed practice and provision. And none of this is in breach of the 2025 Statutory Framework. Which has its faults but, if read thoroughly and reflected upon, will support a much more informed approach.

However, not unsurprisingly, teachers feel trapped into implementing regimented phonics and maths schemes. They cost a lot of money to buy in, come with a huge amount of training, resources and presentations and promise the world. So there is an obligation to use them when the school has splashed out. But these schemes rely on a ‘one size fits all approach’, and none of this is statutory.

Of course we must teach children to be literate and numerate, but these schemes often artificially limit what is learnt. As far back as 1912 Maria Montessori noted how a rigid curriculum has an impact on behaviour —

We know only too well the sorry spectacle of the teacher who, in the ordinary schoolroom, must pour certain cut and dried facts into the heads of the scholars. In order to succeed in this barren task, she finds it necessary to discipline her pupils into immobility and to force their attention. Prizes and punishments are every-ready and efficient aids to the master who must

force into a given attitude of mind and body those who are condemned to be his listeners.”⁶

And this concern was reflected in the 1990 Rumbold Report mentioned earlier. The overriding concern of that report was the issue of quality of provision for young children, with the stress being on the content of the learning and the way in which learning experiences were offered to children.⁷

We can rebalance this. Schools around the country are realising — remembering? — that phonics and maths can be taught very successfully without recourse to expensive and rigid systems. And where these systems are in place then they can be used as a starting point and developed for the children, so avoiding the ‘keep up, not catch up’ mantra.

It is vital to remember that some children start school when they are only just four years old, while others are already five. At this point in life that is a huge difference of life experience. And stages of development both physically and emotionally. Whilst we cannot, and should not, generalise about summer-born children we must take into account that all children bring different experiences and funds of knowledge with them. Thus their starting points are all different. Many come to school already able to read, and/ or confident with numbers. Many do not. Our Statutory Framework actually allows for this with its emphasis on the ‘Unique Child’.

And this is where the problem lies. The *Bold Beginnings* (2017) document mentioned above contains these interesting statements —

“Reception is commonly referred to as the first year of school but, unlike other school years, it is not compulsory. In England, formal schooling does not start until the school term following a child’s fifth birthday. Despite this, nearly all parents decide to send their child to Reception.

Nearly 95% of the school staff who responded to Ofsted’s survey questionnaire believed that Nursery and/or Reception signalled the start of school. Leaders clearly believe that the moment a child starts attending their school, in whatever capacity, their educational journey has begun. While Year 1 may be the official start, it is clear that the Reception Year is more commonly recognised as the beginning of a child’s formal education.

The term ‘Reception’ refers to leaders and staff ‘receiving’ children into their school. While many children will have already had some form of preschool provision, the Reception Year is often their first experience of full-time education. It is a time when leaders and staff establish the rules, routines and expectations of learning that will serve children well and follow them through the rest of their formal schooling.”⁸

Notice the emphasis on how the Reception year is not seen as the start of ‘formal schooling’. Whilst it is true that, in England, children are legally expected to start school the term after their fifth birthday, many now start much earlier. And this is where the tension lies — in the lack of understanding that an informed knowledge of child development is vital to work with children from birth to seven. As children grow this understanding is less significant as they are more resilient and have more knowledge of the world. Physically they are further on in their development, meaning that skills, such as holding a pencil, have become more manageable.

Those in charge of policy and guidance must start to recognise this. If younger and younger children continue to start in school settings, then ‘school’ must be seen to be one coherent experience. And the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework must be seen as the first Key Stage that underpins Key Stage One.

For this to happen there must be an urgent review of the terminology used to describe those working with the youngest children – in whatever setting. This is set out well in a report from Early Education in November 2025:

“These terminological inconsistencies have far-reaching implications. The use of the term ‘childcare’ often diminishes professional recognition, associating the work with low qualifications and ascribing lower status to caregiving than education. Funding disparities between school-based and PVI settings exacerbate sectoral inequities, while differing professional requirements, inspection models, and curricula across the UK create a fragmented system. Most critically, early years has often been a lower government priority compared to primary and secondary education, stalling long-term investment in workforce development and professionalisation, notwithstanding that in Scotland there has been a strong early years policy focus since 2008.”⁹

Primarily this report is about workforce strategies, but the implications for policy are clear, policymakers must acknowledge that piecemeal reforms and underfunded initiatives have failed to deliver lasting change. If we are to rebalance the system, then the emphasis must be on all those working with the youngest children having an informed grounding in child development. This means that Headteachers and Senior Leaders in schools, who may not have this knowledge themselves, must be sure that those they appoint for Nursery, Reception and even Year One roles are appropriately informed. And good continuous professional development must be available so that these teachers are kept up to date with the latest knowledge of neuroscience and physical development. This will mean that Early Childhood Education and Care must be seen as a specialist area rather than one

where a perceived weaker teacher can be moved to as they ‘will do less damage there’.

These are conversations that need to be held. It is not only the children that deserve, and are capable of, agency and empowerment. It is the professionals who teach them too.

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Endnotes

1. *Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins*, Loris Malaguzzi, 1994: <https://sightlines-initiative.com/>
2. *Children and their Primary Schools. A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*, 1967, p. 10.
3. *Ibid*, p. 138.
4. *Ibid*, 1967, p. 139.
5. *Starting with Quality*, 1990, p. 9.
6. Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method*, Chapter 1, p.21, Schocken Books, Inc., 1964.
7. *Starting with Quality*, 1990, p. 9.
8. *Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools*, Ofsted, 2017, p. 8.
9. ‘*It is rocket science: professionalising the early childhood workforce in the UK: Final report from the Comparative analysis of early years workforce policy in the four UK nations (EYW4N) project*’, p. 8.

High-quality play in reception year leads to improved outcomes for all

Kym Scott, Early years play consultant

THE Reception year in schools in England is entering a period of intense scrutiny and heightened expectation. Early childhood now sits at the heart of the government's Opportunity Mission, including a focus on improving outcomes at the end of Reception. This renewed attention is encouraging, acknowledging that the early years are fundamental in laying down foundations for lifelong learning. However, alongside that recognition comes a rise in pressure on schools.

Local authorities have been issued with statutory Good Level of Development (GLD) targets¹ requiring the national level to increase outcomes by around seven percentage points by 2028² – an expected improvement rate double that achieved between 2021 and 2025. There are wide regional and local authority variations in the achievement of the GLD. To support the higher GLD target, the government's *Best Start in Life* strategy has made Reception a national priority³, and is introducing and extending tools and improvement programmes to help achieve this. These include support to improve Reception teaching through the new Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams⁴, enhanced Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data and training, strengthened literacy and maths support via English and Maths Hubs, intensive specialist engagement with the Nuffield Early Language Intervention

(NELI) programme, and new guidance for Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) assessment⁵. This support package creates an important opportunity but also a huge challenge: how to raise outcomes significantly without allowing accountability pressures to erode the developmentally-informed, play-based pedagogy that Reception-aged children still need.

Reception class in England has always been firmly and rightly situated within the EYFS, a unique stage in education that runs from birth, with its own statutory requirements. This feature of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has been the envy of other countries and yet for some years now, Reception teachers have been reporting a growing tension. Government policy direction has meant school-based practice has drifted further towards that of Key Stage 1. This pressure to accelerate formal learning decreases the value of play, introduces one-size-fits-all schemes, and encourages ways of teaching that centre adult-led learning at a time when children's developmental levels upon entering school are moving in the opposite direction.

Children are arriving in Reception with increasingly diverse developmental profiles and with higher levels of need than ever before. This includes language delays, earlier levels of emotional and social development, gaps in early executive functioning and a huge increase in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).



The result is a landscape where practice is increasingly at war with policy and where teachers are being asked to solve an impossible equation – improve educational outcomes whilst also catering for children’s current levels of development.

Without explicit protection of high-quality play-based pedagogy in Reception, there is a continuing danger that many schools’ well-meaning attempts to improve outcomes are leading to approaches that work against what we know about the way young children learn. This can end up having unintended negative consequences:

- Practitioners feel pressured to drive learning forward in ways that conflict with what they feel children need and teaching becomes too formal too soon;
- Children spend more time in adult-led teaching and less time experiencing high quality play;
- Vulnerable children, who benefit hugely from play-based approaches

supported by attuned adults, lose access to the very experiences that drive their development.

During my fifteen years working alongside schools and early years settings in Lewisham, as a school improvement officer and later as strategic lead, one of my central responsibilities was supporting teachers and leaders to strengthen the quality of provision and improve outcomes in Reception classes. Lewisham is an inner London authority with high levels of deprivation, and many children enter school significantly below age-related expectations. Yet the borough achieved exceptional improvements by working alongside both school leaders and Reception year practitioners to maintain a sustained commitment to high-quality, play-based pedagogy rooted in equity, inclusion and strong outcomes for all learners. By 2016 Lewisham became consistently one of the very highest-performing local authorities in England, averaging 10 percentage points above the

national Good Level of Development (GLD) rate. Lewisham also became one of the authorities where children eligible for free school meals (the main measure used to define those at risk of educational disadvantage) did better than anywhere else nationally. The targets for GLD that are currently being set for local authorities were exceeded by Lewisham at that time. John Goodey, an Executive Head Teacher in the borough at the time recalls:

“When I look back at my time as a Lewisham Head, I remember an Early Years community of practice that was diligently built up across the borough over a number of years. The Local Authority Early Years team of highly qualified experts helped our settings become centres of excellence that enabled young children to thrive. Children learned well because they had agency in making decisions, they were engaged in stimulating play and they were supported through dialogue with a well-trained practitioner. Importantly, they also learned how to connect and relate well with others; building strong bonds with their teachers who coached them to manage their emotions and feelings and understand those of others. Our GLD scores were high because we trusted our Early Years team

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and protected their pedagogy. The outcomes then followed!”

What we discovered as a learning community was that:

1. Developmentally-appropriate practice accelerates progress;
2. Vulnerable children benefit the most from this approach, but overall outcomes are improved too;
3. Success grows from trusting and supporting schools to use professional judgement in teaching children the way they learn best.

What follows is a summary of the principles and practices that shaped our work during those years supporting schools in Lewisham – principles that continue to underpin my work nationally and internationally with school leaders and Reception teams.

Much of this approach was informed by the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE)⁶, a landmark longitudinal study led by the Institute of Education and funded by the Department for Education. EPPSE demonstrated that high-quality early education has a measurable impact on young people’s academic attainment and pro-social outcomes well into adolescence. Crucially, the study identified the key features of high-quality practice in pre-school and Reception provision, through the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years report (REPEY)⁷. This highlighted the importance of:

- Strong parental partnership which impacts on the home learning environment;
- High-quality, well-organised learning environments;
- A balance between adult-led and child-initiated learning;
- Rich, sustained interaction, especially in play (known as ‘sustained shared thinking’);



- Adults supporting children to talk through conflicts and develop self-regulation;
- Formative assessment to meet children's particular needs, particularly formative feedback during activities.

The report also argues that 'where young children have freely chosen to play within an instructive learning environment, adult interventions may be especially effective' and that 'any heavy emphasis upon direct teaching and programmed instruction should be avoided in the early years.'⁸

These principles shaped the foundations of our work in Lewisham and remain just as relevant and necessary in the current policy landscape.

What children need in Reception: a model for learning that lasts

If the aim is to close gaps and improve overall outcomes in all areas of learning

and development, then Reception provision must be rooted in what we know enables young children to thrive. The following model highlights four requirements for learning that must be in place for young children to learn deeply, securely and with joy.

Requirements of Learning

Emotional Safety: Children learn best when emotional wellbeing is high, and they feel secure, regulated, and connected to those around them. This is enabled by warm relationships, predictable routines, emotional, physical and sensory wellbeing, and adults' belief in children as capable and confident learners. As the OECD points out, '*Early learning occurs in the context of relationships*'.⁹

Engagement: Children learn best when they are in high engagement states. Play, curiosity, agency, experiencing success and quality interaction with others feed these high levels of involvement in which deep and lasting learning occurs. In the words of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: '*The brain circuits underlying motivation are critical for attention, learning, and decision-making*'.¹⁰ Or to put it simply, as the world-renowned education theorist Sugata Mitra notes: '*If children are interested, then education happens*'.¹¹

New Knowledge: Children need access to ideas, information, skills, experiences, and concepts they have not yet mastered. This happens through both intentional and responsive teaching from adults, children observing and learning alongside others, and through their own self-directed play and exploration. As the DFE recognises in its current EYFS statutory framework: '*Children learn through play, by adults modelling, by observing each other and through adult-guided learning*'.¹²

“Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills’ (UNICEF)”

Consolidation: Children need repeated opportunities to revisit, practise and apply new knowledge if learning is to become secure. While some consolidation can occur through brief adult-led input, it is most powerfully strengthened through high-quality play and meaningful real-world experiences. When continuous provision enables children to return voluntarily to ideas that matter to them, testing their own working theories and refining skills, learning is more deeply embedded. These high-engagement moments are enriched even further when attuned adults are present to notice, scaffold and extend the child’s thinking.

‘Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills’ (UNICEF)¹³.

Whilst hard to quantify the learning impact in exact terms, the Education Endowment Foundation’s ‘Early Years Toolkit’ states that: ‘Play-based learning approaches improve learning outcomes by approximately four additional months.’¹⁴

Recommendations for policy changes

Any future policy for Reception year should be firmly grounded in research-based evidence regarding how young children learn best. Developmentally-appropriate play-based pedagogy is not a barrier to improved outcomes; rather, it is one of the most powerful routes to achieving them, while also safeguarding children’s

wellbeing, motivation and long-term engagement with learning.

The enablers of learning outlined below represent core pedagogical principles that make the Requirements of Learning possible in practice. These enablers should be embedded in policy and reflected consistently across all Department for Education (DfE) documentation relating to Reception year practice. They should run through all DfE funded professional development, and training and guidance provided to inspectors. Any programme, scheme, framework or support promoted or funded by the DfE should actively align with these enablers and should not introduce recommendations that contradict or undermine them.

Policy should make clear that where schools face a choice between implementing a strategy or preserving an enabler of learning, the enabler should take precedence. Protecting these pedagogical conditions is essential if Reception classes are to be places where all children, especially those with the lowest starting points, can thrive, learn deeply, and achieve well.

Enablers of learning in Reception classes:

- Skilled, knowledgeable and confident practitioners, who understand child development and effective play pedagogy, and the importance of executive functioning and self-regulation, alongside secure understanding of the EYFS curriculum;
- Practitioners who feel empowered and supported to use their professional judgement to make decisions and adaptations to meet individual developmental, sensory and emotional needs, ensuring practice is responsive rather than uniformly applied;

- Strong reciprocal partnerships with parents and carers, ensuring a two-way exchange of information that enriches the home learning environment and strengthens continuity for the child;
- A culture of belonging, where each child is deeply known, respected, valued and represented and where emotional safety, identity, relationships and respect are prioritised to enable children to feel secure, confident and able to embed new learning;
- An ambitious and responsive curriculum, shaped by children's starting points, interests and motivations rather than by external pressures or overly prescriptive schemes;
- Thoughtfully planned, rich indoor and outdoor learning environments that enable exploration, deep engagement, collaboration, and challenge;
- A timetable which blends short bursts of adult-led and adult-initiated learning with long periods of self-directed learning (play) indoors and out, allowing children the time and agency they need to practise, repeat, consolidate and extend their learning;
- Attuned adults who are available to join children in their play, and know how to interact in ways which boost language and deepen learning – building connection, modelling vocabulary, and encouraging creative and critical thinking through sustained shared thinking episodes;
- Adult-led teaching that is kept brief, engaging and introduces new knowledge and skills that children can revisit, consolidate and apply inde-



endently in their play, so that this learning becomes embedded;

- An approach to literacy and mathematics that balances short daily bursts of adult-led learning, with plentiful time for adults to help children to explore, rehearse and apply these skills within meaningful, self-directed play.

Recommendations for school leaders

Policy changes should also recognise and support the pivotal role of headteachers and senior leaders. To ensure that high quality play-based, practice can flourish in Reception year, strong leadership in the early years should involve:

- A clear understanding by both leaders and practitioners of early child development and play-based pedagogy, and how these shape children's progress across all areas of learning;
- Establishing clear processes to evaluate and improve play-based practice, drawing on internal evaluation, practitioner expertise and, where appropriate, external support and

“Policy should make clear that where schools face a choice between implementing a strategy or preserving an enabler of learning, the enabler should take precedence.”

challenge. The focus should be on the quality of learning rather than compliance with a particular approach. Leaders should be confident in identifying what high-quality, developmentally-appropriate practice looks like or should draw on external expertise to support their own expertise in this;

- Ensuring that decisions remain rooted in statutory EYFS requirements, including the educational programmes, the Characteristics of Effective Learning and the intended purpose of the Early Learning Goals, as an assessment checkpoint, not a curriculum. Non-statutory schemes and guidance should not override these statutory elements;
- Articulating and sustaining a coherent pedagogical vision for Reception that places children's progress, wellbeing and equity at its core, and is grounded

in the enablers of learning set out above;

- Exercising professional judgement with confidence, such as deciding to adapt, or replace initiatives, schemes or programmes that do not align with the enablers of learning, or the needs of the current cohort;
- Recruiting practitioners with strong early-years expertise or implementing a professional development programme to build this expertise consistently across the team;
 - Investing in professional development that is responsive to the school's particular needs and incorporates the enablers of learning outlined above. This should include focused training on high-quality interactions and learning environments, supporting early mathematical and literacy development through meaningful and engaging experiences (including play), strengthening practice in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development, language and communication, and physical development), inclusive practice and developing confident, knowledgeable early years leadership;
- Creating a culture in which practitioners feel trusted and supported to respond to children's individual developmental, sensory and emotional needs, drawing on their professional knowledge rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model to all children;
- Investing where it makes the biggest difference. Funding decisions should prioritise the conditions Reception children need in order to learn well, including high quality professional development, adequate staffing levels that allow time for sustained interaction, and high-quality indoor and outdoor play spaces;



- Designing timetables that allow adults to spend substantial time engaging in sustained shared thinking with children during play, ensuring that adult-led input does not erode the long, uninterrupted periods of play that young children need.

What is currently getting in the way?

Well, as Rudy aged 4 talking about his day in Reception Class put it: *“All we do is sit on the carpet and line up”*. As his Mum, Elly put it:

“Rudy really struggled in his first Reception class. He was a bright, curious and very capable boy, but at just 57 months old he simply couldn’t cope with the formality and lack of active learning. The long whole class teaching sessions, day after day were just too much for him. His little brain just couldn’t stay engaged or focused for that length of time, and we could see the joy draining out of him. He started getting

really upset about going to school, eventually refusing to go to in completely. When we raised our concerns, the Head explained that the amount of time spent on the carpet wasn’t optional and that the Multi-Academy Trust was part of a DfE-recommended phonics scheme which had to be followed to the letter.

In the end, we made the difficult decision to move him and found another Reception class which was much more play-based with short phonics sessions of around 15-20 minutes and lots of child-led play throughout the day. Rudy settled immediately, was happy going and is now doing really well in reading and writing. Why can’t all Reception classes be like this?”

The DfE’s current focus on Reception rightly centres on the importance of early development, language and high-quality pedagogy, but several aspects of the current national improvement agenda risk unintentionally constraining practice.

In my work with hundreds of Reception teachers each year, a consistent message emerges: expectations, recommendations and programmes are increasingly crowding the Reception day and limiting the conditions in which young children learn best. Policy-makers should therefore take the following points into account:

- A growing accumulation of adult-led requirements (such as lengthy phonics and maths sessions, daily handwriting recommendations and multiple intervention programmes) create over-

**“Expectations,
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crowded timetables and reduce the time available for sustained play and rich interactions;

- An over-emphasis on adult-led teaching restricts adults’ availability to join children’s play, when evidence from the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE) shows that children’s deepest thinking, language growth and problem-solving flourish in child-initiated contexts supported by high quality adult interactions;
- Despite strong evidence that motivation, agency and meaning-making are key drivers of early literacy, dictation is often recommended as a core way of supporting writing,

thus limiting children’s own attempts at generating their own writing;

- Highly prescriptive expectations from some phonics programmes and literacy hubs can prevent teachers using alternative approaches that might better meet the needs of their children;
- Commercial schemes for mathematics that are not written with the school’s specific children in mind, allow limited flexibility for personalisation and often fail to align with children’s developmental stages or real-world understanding;
- The statutory on-entry baseline assessment provides no formative assessment value, yet still absorbs time at the point when adults most need to be observing children naturally and building relationships;
- Ofsted inspectors’ understanding of early years pedagogy is often inconsistent, particularly in those inspectors with strong pedagogical steers that are not rooted in child development principles or EYFS statutory expectations.

Teacher’s concerns are heightened by the increasing numbers of children entering Reception with significantly delayed developmental profiles, alongside insufficient support for meeting rising levels of SEND. Taken together, the pressures listed in this section risk pulling Reception provision further away from the play-based, relational and developmentally-informed pedagogy that research consistently identifies as most effective. The growing pressure to raise Good Levels of Development (GLD) outcomes intensifies this, with many schools likely to feel compelled to teach more directly to the Early Learning Goals that make up the GLD, even though they were never designed to operate as a curriculum. This shift risks narrowing learning and undermining the essential dispositions that underpin long-

term success, particularly for children at the lowest starting points.

The Reception teachers I meet are certainly not resisting improvement. On the contrary, they are deeply ambitious for their children's outcomes and what they need is the professional space to make improvements in ways that are genuinely responsive to the children in front of them.

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1. Children are defined as having reached a good level of development (GLD) at the end of the EYFS, if they have achieved the expected level for the ELGs in 12 areas: the prime areas of learning, of which there are seven under the areas of personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; physical development (gross and fine motor skills) and five under the specific areas of mathematics and literacy. Source: 'Early years foundation stage profile handbook', DfE, (updated 9 September 2025). Their main purpose is to support transition to year 1.
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Building a quality early childhood education workforce

Professor Verity Campbell-Barr

INTERNATIONALLY, the quality of the early childhood education and care workforce has been established as central to the quality of early childhood education¹, with high-quality early childhood education being pivotal in laying the foundations to children's lifelong learning. Across nations, the initial training of those working in early childhood education is based on courses that seek to combine a combination of taught (theoretical) elements and time in practice to gain hands on experiences. Predominantly the international landscape has the initial qualification level for those working in early childhood education set at degree level, although in some instances the degree level is set for those leading practice, with other staff having lower qualifications². Inevitably, the international qualification landscape is somewhat complicated, but this complicated landscape is being replicated across the UK's four nations, while also showing the UK as lagging behind in the commitment to a high-quality early childhood education workforce.

Across the UK there are different qualification requirements for working in early childhood education, dependent on

nation and type of provision. Focussing primarily on the private, voluntary and independent early childhood education providers, there is something of a fragmented and confusing array of qualifications³. In England, no qualification is legally required to start working in early childhood education, but to be counted in the staff:child ratio requirement, a 'full and relevant' qualification must be held, with at least one Level 3 per room and at least 50% of remaining staff holding a minimum Level 2 qualification. In addition, an experience-based route has been introduced to allow experienced staff without formal qualifications to gain recognition, but the 'qualification' is not transportable between settings.

In Scotland, most early years roles require registration with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Staff can begin work without a qualification but must achieve one within a specified timeframe.

Support Workers require

a Level 6, practitioners a Level 7, and Lead Practitioners/Managers a Level 9 qualification, such as a BA Childhood Practice or equivalent. (Note that a Level 6 in Scotland is equivalent to Level 3 in other UK nations and a Level 9 is equivalent to a

“Predominantly the international landscape has the initial qualification level for those working in early childhood education set at degree level.”



Level 6). In Wales there are no role-specific qualification requirements and staff can start unqualified but must achieve required qualifications within set timescales; this is a Level 2 or 3 for practitioners and a Level 4 or 5 for leaders and managers. Qualifications must be listed on the Social Care Wales Qualification Framework and aligned with Children's Care, Play, Learning and Development standards. In Northern Ireland managers and leaders must hold an approved early years qualification (e.g. Level 3 or above) and other staff may work towards qualifications while employed.

Given the international evidence of the importance of staff qualifications for the quality of early childhood education, it is alarming that three of the UK's nations allow staff with no qualification to work with children, with all but Scotland falling well below the international trend for degree qualified leadership. However, it is not just that qualification requirements fall below international standards and what the research evidence tells us is needed for the

quality of early childhood education, but also that there are concerns over the quality of the qualifications available⁴. In England, the qualification landscape has been described as the 'wild west' with the plethora of routes and number of qualification providers that have opened up⁵. Across nations, while there are clear qualification standards, it is evident that the sector has lost confidence in the quality of qualifications and no longer feel certain that an individual who has obtained a qualification will come equipped with the prerequisite knowledge and skills needed to work with young children⁶. With early education providers reporting challenges in recruiting staff, some admit that they now employ individuals that they would not have considered employing five years ago, indicating that quantifying the numbers of staff at a given qualification level is not the same as ensuring the quality of those staff. It is not that the qualification standards are necessarily being questioned, but that the implementation of qualification delivery is

flawed, and lacks sufficient quality checks in ensuring that qualification delivery secures quality in the professional knowledge and skills of those working with young children.

Research into the provision of early childhood education related degrees across England offers an illustrative example of the plethora of opportunities available for an individual who is willing to take up Higher Education in any part of the country. In 2020 there were over 300 possible degrees, but with no consistency in the subjects that would be covered over the duration of the degree, nor the number of practical placement hours that would be required. In some instances, it was unclear whether the content needed to fulfil the

“In England, the qualification landscape has been described as the ‘wild west’ with the plethora of routes and number of qualification providers that have opened up.”

legislative requirements of working in early childhood education would be covered⁷. The research demonstrates that if qualification delivery is not to become a wild west, there needs to be quality standards and that the delivery needs to be monitored to ensure that individuals are developing the professional knowledge and skills needed to provide quality early childhood education.

Internationally there are examples of where policy has been effective in not only introducing higher standards in the minimum qualification requirements of those who work in early childhood education but also developing an implementation process that secures

minimum expectations as to what will be included within the qualification. For example, The Republic of Ireland have committed to a degree-led workforce, but have also introduced Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for those delivering degrees, whereby degrees align to essential programme content, mapped onto professional knowledge, practices and values⁸. Experts in Ireland have been positive about both the commitment for a degree-led workforce, saying it provides professional status, but also that the strategy around the commitment was seen to be developed in collaboration with the sector⁹).

With the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines in place in Ireland, an employer in the Early Learning and Care Sector can be assured of how many hours a graduate will have spent working with children of different ages and that the taught aspects of the degree will cover necessary content that aligns with the broader curriculum requirements in early childhood education and care. The process of monitoring that degrees are aligned to the set professional knowledge, practices and values, illustrates that the implementation of qualification roll out is key, but does not have to be arduous, because it is the award providers who must demonstrate that they have met the criteria of the Qualifications Advisory Board. Research into early childhood education related degrees in England recommended that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for England should establish a national group to review the content and structure of degrees¹⁰ and, based on the example of Ireland, also monitor the degrees to make sure that the content of the degrees is delivered.

In recognising the contribution of a degree-led workforce to the quality of early childhood education, it is important to stress that this is not about any degree, and that degrees need to be relevant to working

with young children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, child development knowledge has been routinely demonstrated as pivotal to the content knowledge of any early childhood qualification, not just degrees¹¹. Equally, international evidence highlights that it is not just that the knowledge and skills required of those working with young children needs to be appropriate to the context, but also that appropriate values need to be developed within those who work with young children¹². Evidence from across the UK highlights that working in early childhood education is a relational role and that the attitudes and values of those working with young children is important¹³.

A Sustainable Workforce

However, even if steps are taken to rectify the complicated qualification landscape and concerns around the quality of qualifications, once in the workforce there are further challenges. The poor financial remuneration of those who work in early childhood education is well established, and seen to be in sharp contrast to the policy rhetoric that speaks of the importance of early education in laying the foundations to children's lifelong learning¹⁴. However, this is not just an issue of pay, it is also how early childhood education as a profession is being aligned (or not) with associated professions. Internationally, early childhood services are struggling to retain staff, and this is being felt across the UK¹⁵. Evidence demonstrates that a clear underlying problem is that early childhood education professions are not being aligned with teachers in later stages of education. As such, those in teaching professions will have better pay and working terms and conditions than those in early childhood education professions. This disparity is not solely down to the differing entry level qualifications required for working in early

“The poor financial remuneration of those who work in early childhood education is well established, and seen to be in sharp contrast to the policy rhetoric that speaks of the importance of early education in laying the foundations to children's lifelong learning.”

childhood education to primary education, whereby those in teaching must have a degree. One of the consequences of this disparity, is that people leave early childhood education in search of better working terms and conditions in primary education. While this is supportive of people developing their career trajectories and finding a work-life balance that meets their needs, it is also creating a scenario whereby early childhood education employers feel they are losing staff to primary education¹⁶. While it may appear that an obvious fix would be to pay more and adjust working conditions in early childhood education, it needs to be born in mind that the financial model in early childhood education is constrained by the rates of funding issued by the respective Departments for Education in the UK's four nations. Further, the business rates faced by private early childhood education providers demonstrates that the financial model does not operate in a way that allows for a simple increase in wages.

The lack of parity of the terms and conditions of the early childhood workforce also extends to expectations around mentoring and professional development. While in schools there is an expectation that newly qualified staff will



receive mentoring and that they will be entitled to professional development days, the same is not true in early childhood education. However, evidence from Canada has demonstrated that structured mentoring schemes significantly impacts retention, professional wellbeing and practice quality¹⁷. Monthly meetings, bringing together newly qualified and experienced professionals as a recognised form of professional development, has been shown to impact on early childhood education professionals' sense of value and offers a model that could be adopted in the UK. Further evidence from Estonia also shows how the equivalent to local authorities, working with local universities can provide a model whereby there can be localised responses to professional development needs¹⁸. Given that there is evidence that those working in early childhood education tend to come from the local community of a university or college and go back to work in that community on completing their qualification¹⁹, localised,

place-based approaches to professional development and mentoring would appear to be an effective model. However, the example of Scotland illustrates that while localised approaches can be beneficial, this should not result in fragmentation, whereby a common core as to the professional development offer is needed²⁰.

Enabling an Early Years Workforce Strategy

It is important to stress that there are thousands of high-quality professionals working in early childhood education, who provide enriching early learning experiences for the youngest members of our society. However, the early childhood education and care sector has been assessed as facing a recruitment and retention crisis, threatening to undermine the provision of the free hours of early education and childcare entitlements available across the UK. The use of the word 'crisis' does a disservice to those who are working hard in the sector to provide high-

quality educational experiences for our youngest children. The use of the word ‘crisis’ does little to support making early childhood education look like an appealing profession, but there are undoubtedly challenges in the qualification landscape across the UK, alongside a lack of in-work support once an individual has obtained their initial qualification.

Based on evidence, it is possible to develop an early years’ workforce strategy that will strengthen the quality of the early childhood education profession and bring reassurances to both the quality of initial training and the professional development of those working in early childhood education. It is clear that consulting with those who work in early childhood education is important, with the example of how Wales developed their Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care plan being seen as a collaborative process, while the Early Years Specialist role in Northern Ireland has been identified as successful for bringing different sectors (public, private and voluntary) together²¹. Therefore, any workforce development plan needs to be a collaborative effort, ultimately consulting with those who work with young children on what a quality qualification looks like.

Developing a quality qualification is not sufficient alone to ensure the quality of qualifications, with evidence already discussed that there is a need to have a process in place to review the implementation of qualifications and monitor delivery to mitigate against criticisms of a wild west of delivery models and quality. However, an initial qualification is just the first stage of professional development, and there needs to be effective mentoring in place to support both those new to the profession and those at other stages of their career. Localised mentoring models offer the opportunity to provide rich opportunities for sharing and developing quality early

childhood education provision and can be achieved through collaboration between local authorities and colleges and universities.

In line with international standards, and broader research evidence, there must also be a move to ensure that the workforce is graduate led. Evidence from across the UK suggests that a commitment to graduate leadership is achievable. For example, Scotland reports 80 per cent graduates and England 44 per cent, suggesting an ambition of 100 per cent graduate led in Scotland and 50 per cent in England is achievable²². Northern Ireland and Wales have a greater distance to travel, but this should not be equated with not adopting

“Developing a quality qualification is not sufficient to ensure the quality of qualifications; there is a need to have a process in place to review the implementation of qualifications and monitor delivery to mitigate against criticisms of a wild west of delivery models and quality.”

the ambition for graduate led.

It is also clear that there needs to be a move away from unqualified staff working in early childhood education. Having unqualified professionals working with young children would not be accepted in other professions such as teaching or those in health professions, so when it is known that early childhood education is so pivotal in laying the foundations to children’s lifelong learning, why accept unqualified

staff working in these services. The examples of Scotland and Wales where staff can register on a qualification but set out a period in which it is to be completed, would shift things from unqualified, to 'working towards' and provide a trajectory of moving to a fully qualified workforce. The policy rhetoric is clear in citing the importance of early childhood education for children's learning journeys, and across the nations there are clear ambitions to ensure that every child is given strong foundations to their lifelong learning. For those ambitions to be fully realised, there needs to be a high-quality workforce. This workforce needs to be graduate-led and needs to stop unqualified people from working with young children, instead providing quality initial qualifications and localised mentoring in support of a sustainable workforce strategy.

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Early Learning for Heads

Phil Armstrong

PRIMARY school leadership and its evolving nature has been the subject of much scrutiny, research, and debate; with reflections on what makes a successful leader, and what their role is in developing high quality, impactful teaching and learning. A significant challenge for those taking on the role of head teacher is that their own teaching and early leadership experiences may not have encompassed the whole Primary School cohort, which in England could potentially include children aged from nine months to eleven years old.

It is widely recognised that the Early Years (EY) component of the education sector in England plays a critical role in providing quality care and provision for children

aged 0–5 years. There are two large-scale longitudinal studies that have had a strong influence on government Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy since 2000. These are the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project¹ (EPPE, later EPPSE) and the National Evaluation of Sure Start impact study² (NESS).

More recently there has been an increasing amount of evidence being generated which examines Early Years practice and suggests which strategies or interventions may be more effective to improve outcomes. A significant source of this guidance for schools in England is the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Producing a range of evidence pertaining to the likely success of interventions or

“This spotlight on Good Level of Development represents a significant shift in what the purpose of assessment at the end of the Reception year is for. The Early Years Foundation Stage states that its purpose is to inform the parents and the child’s next teacher, not – as it appears increasingly to be used for – as an accountability measure for schools and school leaders.”

activities, the EEF stresses that these should be used strategically alongside the experience and expertise of those working in schools, as well as considering the context of the school. If the head teacher has limited experience of Early Years, there is a potential risk that they may choose poorly.

At the time of writing there was currently no data set available to identify how many primary school leaders in England have had significant teaching and leadership experience in the Early Years. However, my current research suggests that the pattern is very mixed, alongside their understanding of Early Years.

The National Headteachers Standards established by the DfE set out clear expectations regarding quality of teaching, assessment, and curriculum. These require that those in a school leadership position ensure that these are monitored, developed, embedded, and sustained. It is implied therefore, that to fulfil these requirements successfully a level of knowledge and expertise that encompasses all range of ages within a school setting is needed.

Although schools may use a distributed leadership model, with the responsibility for day-to-day leadership and management of early years delegated to another, the Headteacher Standards act as a salient reminder that those in that position retain overall responsibility and accountability.

Therefore, knowing what to look for in terms of quality practice, understanding how a curriculum appropriate for younger children may be designed, and arguably knowing what questions to ask to ensure the above is in place, all require an informed knowledge base.

Government Focus on the Early Years and Impact on Leaders

At a government level in England there is a persistent push to raise the quality and status of Early Years practice and provision, which has seen additional funding since the COVID pandemic in the form of the Early Years Education Recovery Programme. During 2025 the DfE further raised the focus on outcomes at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) by setting a highly ambitious national attainment target of 75% of Reception aged children reaching a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028. This is a significant increase on the current results, with local authorities being set targets of 9% above outcomes achieved in 2023/24.

As reported by Professor Catherine Davies at the Education Committee, ‘Inquiry into Early Years: Improving support for children and parents’³; achieving this ambitious target requires that 40,000-45,000 more children reach a Good Level of Development.

Amongst the recommendations to achieve this were:

- Sustain investment and attention throughout nursery and reception years to reinforce learning gains;
- Promote early education as critical to children's development and a key mechanism to narrow attainment gaps;

Since this new focus on the Reception year in England and the drive to raise standards, the DfE, in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation and selected school leaders, has provided continuing professional development for head teachers in the form of face to face-to-face events and online webinars. These have included a range of themes, such as early writing, mathematics, adult interactions with children, and attendance. Although encouraged, accessing such training is not a statutory requirement for head teachers. What should also be noted is that this spotlight on Good Level of Development represents a significant shift in what the purpose of assessment at the end of the Reception year is for. The Early Years Foundation Stage states that its purpose is to inform the parents and the child's next teacher, not – as it appears increasingly to be used for – as an accountability measure for schools and school leaders.

Significantly, as part of the new inspection toolkit for schools, to achieve the above expected standard (Strong Standard) for Early Years, it states that:

- Relevant leaders, including the head teacher, are highly knowledgeable about the early years. They make astute decisions about how the curriculum and teaching should adapt and evolve, based on their evidence and insight about how well children have learned what was intended;
- Leaders are highly effective in quality assuring the impact of education and care in the early

years, which allows them to make rapid and sustained improvements when necessary.

I would argue that crucial to making any progress on narrowing the attainment gap in the Early Years, using appropriate pedagogy, is ensuring that all school leaders have a deep understanding of this phase of education, with training and ongoing expert support related to which age groups their school includes.

Primary School Leadership Knowledge of Early Years Pedagogy

There is a growing body of literature exploring the relationship between what is perceived to be quality early years pedagogy, and the specific role school leadership has in facilitating this.

Research in the US, which was related to the expansion of Early Years provision in schools, found that less than 20% of elementary school leaders had any form of Early Childhood Education professional background. Furthermore, many were found to not have had any specific early year's pedagogical content as part of their teaching training programmes. Consequently, they may not have seen developmentally appropriate practice or understand what early years staff should know about child development, or know how to strengthen early childhood practices in their school⁴.

Such evidence raises significant concerns for all involved in school leadership given the critical role high quality early years practice has on learning outcomes, with the risk of poor practice potentially being introduced by leaders directly, or as an indirect consequence of the recruitment of early years staff.

In England the research picture pertaining to school leader knowledge and perceptions of the early years is currently less rich. However, some common themes relating to leadership knowledge do

appear, suggesting that those less confident when reviewing the early years practice within their schools, may be drawn towards a pedagogical model they find professionally more familiar based on their own teaching experience with older children, e.g. using a more structured adult-led approach, rather than play-based or child-initiated pedagogy⁵.

Research in the US found that less than 20% of elementary school leaders had any form of Early Childhood Education professional background and many did not have any specific early year's pedagogical content as part of their teaching training.

There is an increasingly large body of evidence supporting the vital role of play in children's learning and development. However, misunderstandings about play and cynicism as to its place in schools persist. Amongst these are that, as play lacks predefined outcomes, it is of lower status and that for learning to be of value it needs to be adult-led and goal driven; there are also those who argue against the use of play because it lowers standards. Evidence suggests the contrary, and such scepticism in school head teachers may be a reflection of their own lack of professional expertise in Early Years⁶.

Arguably, it may also be the case that the ever-evolving scrutiny on schools and attainment targets has, for many head teachers, resulted in school leaders being increasingly unsure as to whether they are doing enough or doing the right thing. A potential risk these factors create is that teachers working in the early years will continue to be susceptible to 'top-down' pressures which may further compromise the provision of appropriate practice.

This resonates with the national and international debate about the potential formalisation of early childhood education, which is part of the discourse surrounding the concept of 'school readiness' and the role primary school head teachers have in defining what this looks like in their school⁷). Within England, 'School Readiness' until recently was widely accepted as children being ready to start the National Curriculum as they leave the Early Years Foundation Stage; this was connected with children achieving Good Level of Development. However, more recently this has shifted to a concept of children being 'Reception Ready', with a range of guidance to support schools, early years settings and parents with unpicking what this means.

Pedagogical knowledge is critical when evaluating methodologies of classroom practice, but research shows that the pedagogical choices made by teachers in their schools are likely to have been influenced by leaders. It would appear that what shapes the different views of school leaders relating to pedagogy and the importance of Early Childhood Education is complex and fluid; with the evidence suggesting that their knowledge and perceptions of quality Early Childhood Education predominantly relate to personal experiences, education, and any specific training they may have had.

This is not to necessarily imply that leaders must have the same level of expertise or depth of pedagogical content knowledge as specialist early years teachers. An alternative perspective, and arguably more achievable, is the concept of ‘secure leadership pedagogical knowledge’⁸. This reduces the focus on leaders knowing curriculum content, and instead has at its core, a requirement for leaders to understand how all the children in their school learn and the best instructional methods to serve all those children’s needs. To conclude, given the increasingly recognised importance of learning in the early years on life-long outcomes and the ambitious expectations at a national level, the evidence strongly suggests primary school head teachers must have a clear understanding of developmentally appropriate teaching practices for the Early Years children in their school.

Recommendations to strengthen the quality of school leadership of the Early Years

- A thorough review of the current understanding of existing head teachers with regards to Early Years pedagogy and their understanding of quality practice and provision;
- A strategic approach to ongoing professional development which does not just focus on Good Level of Development, but more broadly on strengthening pedagogical understanding of Early Childhood Education;
- An examination of the current preparation for headship of prospective head teachers who may go on to lead schools which include Early Years departments.

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ENDNOTES

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